

Aerende

designing and creating
as empowerment

Aerende is an online homewares and interiors shop. It sells products that have been handcrafted in the UK by people who are facing barriers to employment. The organisation partners with charities and social enterprises through which the Aerende team engages with interested makers. They then work with the makers to co-design and create products that are “considered, thoughtful, and practical”.



Design to empower

Through these partnerships, Aerende's founder, Emily Mathieson, aims to empower makers both with a sense of autonomy and an opportunity to learn and hone new skills. These makers may be struggling to find other work: they include refugees, those recovering from mental health crises, and people with physical and learning disabilities, among others. This struggle, explains Mathieson, is down to a "culture of low expectation" around certain groups of people. This leads to injustices, inequities and discrimination. Overlooking these people not only harms them, but their productivity is also lost from society at large.

As the team sees it, there is a tendency to "problematise" people rather than adjust current working practices or patterns to include them. Aerende's business model serves to demonstrate that the creativity and flexibility of design work can be harnessed to make processes more inclusive. For the team, this means finding novel ways to approach the design and creation process to fit the different needs and skills of their makers.

Engaging people in meaningful work does so much more than improve people's sense of self-worth. For example, the process also helps to break through harmful assumptions that see some people as a 'burden'. And there are also many reported wellbeing and therapeutic benefits to designing and creating as forms of self-expression. Creative products are always unique to the creator, so this work brings a sense that the makers are vital to the process.

“What we're really doing is providing a platform to tell stories and creating an opportunity for the organisations to keep delivering during a difficult time.”

Productivity beyond profit

Aerende's business model has been designed to bring together various complementary sustainable practices.

Through engaging with marginalised people, Aerende works for greater equality, but the benefits go beyond this. Bringing new skills into the community helps to enhance the economy and reduce the burden on welfare. With around 16 per cent of working-age adults considered disabled under the Equality Act 2010, flexible and creative employment opportunities that allow more people to engage in work will greatly increase working-age productivity and enhance local and national economies.



“Consumers want to connect in with their communities. They want to buy local.”





Rob's story

Mathieson tells us how she began working with one of her makers, Rob: “I met a lady called Sarita and learned she was caring for her husband, Rob, who’d had a stroke. He was nonverbal at the time and was paralysed on one side of his body. She had taught him to communicate through drawing. We started talking and I told him I’d really love to create something from their story and his new way of expressing himself. We came up with the idea of British Botanicals prints. It was an incredibly rewarding back and forth discussion between the three of us in which we were working on equal terms.

Through the art, we had this very clear sense from Rob of that feeling of losing everything and then reimagining how life could look through creativity and art rather than being stuck in a hospital bed being, you know, sort of ‘written off’ as a stroke patient.”

“I think there is a huge value in being able to feel like you have a voice in anything,” Mathieson told us. “Listening to what someone has to say is an important part of making them feel valued, and that they have something to contribute, especially for people who are often told or are treated as if they don’t have something to contribute.”

“We have huge swathes of people around the country with skills, competency and inclination to make things and we know they can really benefit from the opportunity.”



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