

The Challenge of Employing Ex-Offenders

By Steve Parese, Ed.D. 2010

Summary: This article discusses some of the challenges of placing former offenders in today's people centered jobs. It begins by examining the impact of offenders' thinking on their behavior, then explores employers' perspectives. It closes by offering intervention ideas from a cognitive-behavioral perspective.

For more detailed information, visit www.WorkinItOut.com, or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.



A nation behind bars.

Recent statistics from the Department of Justice indicates that one of every 31 adults in this country is currently in prison, jail, or on probation or parole. One in 15 people in America will serve a jail or prison term at some point during their lifetimes.

Of course, the vast majority will not stay in prison. In fact, in the next 10 years, 90% of those currently incarcerated in state or federal prisons will be released. But within 3 years of their release, 67% will be rearrested and many reincarcerated, continuing a destructive pattern which may last a lifetime.

This tragedy affects not only these individuals and their families, but costs our society up to \$40,000/person annually, totaling as much as \$1 million over the course of the lifetime of a chronic offender.

Everyone deserves a second chance, don't they?

A good job paying a living wage has proven to be a successful deterrent to recidivism, providing not just a steady paycheck, but a source of pride and purpose as well. Men and women who are able to find meaningful work with enjoyable coworkers earning a fair salary have a reason to stay away from crime. They develop a network of supportive friendships which may ultimately change their lifestyles.

But unfortunately, most ex-offenders have difficulty finding and keeping such jobs. Why is this? Part of the blame must be shouldered by a society heavily biased against people with records. Some can be laid upon a sluggish economy, one in which many more qualified people are unemployed.

But most of the responsibility for a failure to thrive in the world of work lies within, not

without. Many of those re-entering the community struggle with overwhelming barriers: lingering chemical addictions, limited work experience and academics, lack of reliable transportation -- all potentially crippling hurdles to success.

Negative thinking = negative behavior.

But the single greatest predictor of recidivism (rearrest/reincarceration) is not substance abuse or even poverty, but antisocial thinking. Surrounded by negative peers and situations which seem to normalize criminal behavior, many offenders naturally adopt criminal outlooks on life. They unconsciously distort ambiguous situations and others' intentions to justify their own angry, illegal or harmful behaviors, even when these choices result in negative consequences.

“The same perspectives which preserve offenders on the street or in the institution can also trap them there.”

One might argue that a criminal outlook is necessary to survival in a criminal world. If this is true, then the same perspectives which preserve them on the street or in the institution can also trap them there. These antisocial perspectives sabotage their chances at honest relationships and opportunities, especially within the workplace. It is their mindsets, not their records, that hold them back the most.

Two things employers really want.

When asked what is most important to workplace success, employers repeatedly state: “We’d rather have someone with a good attitude and no vocational skills, than someone with skills but a bad attitude.”

But what do employers mean by a “good attitude,” and how can we help job-seekers with criminal histories find one? Two aspects emerge:

1. First, Mr/s. Good Attitude has strong people skills, or soft skills as we call them in workforce development: self-control skills, communication skills, social skills, problem solving skills, etc.



2. Second, Mr/s. Good Attitude seems to intuitively understand their employer's common sense rules: show up everyday on time, don't argue with your supervisor, use personal time (not company time) for personal business, etc.

Some people were fortunate enough to grow up in homes with parents or caretakers who worked nearly every day of their adult lives. Perhaps the work wasn't glamorous and the conditions weren't pleasant, but day in and day out, sick or well, these parents went to work to pay the bills, to feed and clothe and provide for their families. Without realizing it, they indoctrinated their children into the American work ethic, taught them the soft skills and common sense rules that would someday make them desirable employees with “good attitudes.”

Individuals who have spent significant time in and out of the correctional system often lack this childhood experience. In its place, many of them learned the law of the jungle: be loyal to your friends no matter what; never admit a mistake; don't let anyone tell you what you can or can't do. Again, these beliefs may be necessary for survival on the street, but they often sabotage success anywhere else, especially in the workplace. When former offenders bring behaviors and beliefs like these to work with them, the result is often serious issues with co-workers, supervisors, and customers.

Cognitive-behavioral interventions.

When former offenders do the wrong things at work for what they truly believe to be the right reasons, harsh punishments often backfire. Reprimanding, firing, or even re-arresting them frequently reinforces their justifications, creating more resistance and resentment.

A far more effective strategy utilizes cognitive behavioral interventions (CBI), which teach ex-offenders new prosocial people skills while subtly challenging the antisocial thinking which justifies negative behavior. Meta-analyses on research over the past 30 years has suggested that CBI represents the only truly successful approach to offender rehabilitation, leading to a 30% - 50% reduction in recidivism when targeted properly and implemented systematically.

There are two basic CBI approaches:

Cognitive skills training, which teaches new behavioral skills such as anger management, decision making, dealing with criticism, etc. This approach is often successful with offenders who truly want to succeed, but just don't know how. Systematically teaching them essential self-control, communication, and problem

solving skills can prepare them for great interpersonal success in the workplace.

Cognitive Restructuring, which fosters new attitudes by benignly challenging the beliefs that offenders use to justify self-defeating behavior. This approach requires more subtlety, but can be effective for offenders mired in criminal thinking patterns.



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The "Makin' It Work" program for ex-offenders in transition represents an application of CBI strategies to workplace situations. Trained instructors have delivered the 10-lesson classroom-based soft skills curriculum to small groups of participants in various settings around the country: prisons, jails, federal and state probation, residential re-entry centers, community colleges, and community based organizations. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and evidence is being gathered which points to improved insights and stronger workplace skills, as seen by workers and by supervisors.