

WHAT WORKS:

Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Ex-Offenders

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Statistics

Canadian admission rates to adult correctional services in 2007 to 2008	22.9% in provincial and territorial custody 41.8% in remand 1.4% in federal custody 22.0% on probation 0.4% on provincial parole 4.7% on conditional sentences ¹
Rate of ex-offenders who have received a pardon	11% ²
In 2008 to 2009, federal offenders who have identified themselves	66.6% as Caucasian 17.1% as Aboriginal ³
From 1999 to 2009, the rate of increase of the Aboriginal incarcerated population under federal jurisdiction	20.1% ⁴
In 2008 to 2009, the percentage of time served until parole	31% non-Aboriginal federal offenders 38% Aboriginal federal offenders ⁵
In 2008 to 2009, the percentage of time served by federal offenders until parole	28.1% female 32.35% male ⁶
Rate of federal offenders prescribed medication for psychiatric concerns at admission	11.0% in 1998–1999 21.3% in 2007–2008 ⁷

Context

A majority of offenders come from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Characteristics that may relate to ex-offenders' rehabilitation are

- emotional instability
- marginality
- lack of vocational skills
- lack of support systems
- negative or deviant self-concept and work attitudes

Offenders, particularly those in federal institutions, have the opportunity to participate in a number of programs. They may have access to programs that focus on employment and academic skills, substance abuse and psycho-educational concerns. Participation in such programs can help address behaviours and issues that may interfere with gaining and maintaining employment upon release.

Terminology and definitions

The following terminology and definitions relate to the involvement of ex-offenders with correctional systems.

At the federal government level

The federal correctional system normally provides correctional programs to convicted offenders who have been sentenced to incarceration for two years or longer.

- *Parole*. Offenders placed on parole are approved for release with a period of community supervision as part of their sentence.
- *Full parole*. Offenders are not required to report back regularly to a correctional facility.
- *Day parole*. Offenders are normally required to report back daily to a community residential facility, a halfway house or day release centre.

- *Statutory release.* Offenders are normally eligible for release under supervision on their statutory release date, the point at which they have served two-thirds of their sentence. Usually these are offenders who did not apply for parole or who were denied parole.
- *Penitentiaries.* Federal sentences are served in penitentiaries.

At the provincial government level

The provincial government provides correctional programs to those offenders sentenced to periods of less than two years. They also supervise offenders who received community sentences, such as fines, community service or probation.

- *Probation.* Probation is a disposition of the court, usually ordered in conjunction with a conditional discharge or a suspended sentence, where the offender is required to adhere to court-ordered conditions as part of the sentence. The conditions are set out in the probation order and may include the requirement to report to a probation officer.
- *Conditional sentence.* Conditional sentences are less than two years. The sentence is served in the community and can be subject to strict conditions. Upon breach of these conditions, the remainder of the sentence could be served in custody.
- *Young offenders.* The provincial correctional service administers all young offender sentences. Young offenders may serve terms longer than two years in provincial custody.
- *Remand centres, correctional centres and young offender centres.* Provincial sentences are served in these institutions.

Prisonization and recidivism

Being in prison

“Although there have not been very many studies conducted on the psychological effects of prison, there has always been an understanding of the sociological consequences that the atmosphere of a controlled isolated space can have on inmates.”⁸

Byron Harrison and Robert C. Schehr

Prisonization describes the ex-offender’s acceptance of criminals as the key reference group and acceptance of the institutional culture, which is a significant factor in understanding an ex-offender’s adjustment to release.

Recidivism is readmittance to a federal or provincial correctional facility. Readmittance includes not only those readmitted for new offences, but also those readmitted for technical violations of their release conditions.

Conditions of release

Some clients may be under mandated supervision, such as parole, and subject to conditions of release. Ex-offenders must comply with such conditions. Fulfilling them may interfere with or eliminate the option of full-time employment. Determining whether a client’s release is subject to conditions is extremely important.

An offender may be subject to one or several conditions of release, such as

- abstaining from intoxicants
- disclosing finances
- attending psychiatric counselling
- disclosing intimate relationships
- not being alone with individuals under the age of 18

Pardons

A *pardon* allows people who were convicted of a criminal offence, but have completed their sentence and demonstrated they are law-abiding citizens, to have their criminal record kept separate and apart from other criminal records. Pardons are issued by the federal government of Canada. If the ex-offender receives a pardon, any search of the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) will not show a history of a criminal record or the issuance of a pardon.⁹

An individual is eligible to apply for a pardon once they have completed the sentence ordered by the judge and have waited the necessary time period based on their charge. Waiting periods range from no waiting periods for not guilty dispositions to five years for convictions of serious offences.¹⁰

Employment readiness

“Employment is one of the most important vehicles for assisting re-entry.”¹¹ At the same time, rushing ex-offenders to search for immediate full-time employment may, in fact, be setting them up for further challenges, as these clients frequently have other needs that must be addressed before moving into full-time employment.

Practical challenges

Ex-offenders face a number of external and internal challenges to successful work search and employment.

- *Transportation.* The client may not have a driver’s licence due to suspension and/or outstanding fines. The client may also need funds to use public transportation.
- *Identification and documentation.* The client may not have a birth certificate or current driver’s licence. Birth certificates are needed for Alberta Health Care applications.
- *Work apparel and tools.* The client may not have clothing and tools required for work, such as steel-toed boots for construction work.
- *Shelter.* The client may not have adequate shelter or a permanent residence.

- *Communications.* The client may not have access to telephones, cellphones or Internet services.
- *Bank accounts.* The client may not be able to meet the requirement to open a bank account. Some employers require employees to have a bank account because the employer pays wages through direct deposit.

Literacy skills

Literacy as an essential skill

“Not only do offenders need adequate literacy skills to negotiate the legal system, they need them to survive the bureaucracy of the correctional system and to make the transition effectively to the world outside once their sentences are completed.”¹²

Denise Ryan
Vancouver Sun

Over one-third of prison inmates have not completed Grade 9. They are also four times as likely to have learning disabilities. According to the Correctional Service of Canada, the average education level of newly admitted offenders, serving two years or more, is Grade 7. These realities can contribute to a person’s chances of incarceration in the first place.¹³

Research has established that education is an important way to help offenders successfully prepare for their safe return to the community. The inability to read and write may not be a specific cause of criminal behaviour, but it can make daily life difficult and correctional programming less productive. Low literacy limits employment opportunities for this client population.

Correctional services' programs

Both the federal and provincial governments provide programs for ex-offenders to build employment skills. Programs in mental health, life skills and education are also available. It will be helpful to check with clients regarding any programs, training and employment they were enrolled in while they were in a federal or provincial correctional program.

Federal programs

CORCAN is a Correctional Service of Canada rehabilitation program that provides employment training and employability skills in federal correctional institutions. Offenders have the opportunity to be trained to industry standards in skills such as metalwork, carpentry and farming. CORCAN's plants produce a variety of products and services, including office and dormitory furniture, textiles and custom solutions for specialized needs. CORCAN also encourages partnerships with private industry.

CORCAN strives for a realistic work environment. Participants acquire marketable skills and learn the importance of commitment, punctuality, self-control and responsibility in the work environment.

Offenders can earn certifications in these areas:

- industrial first aid
- Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS)
- forklift operations
- construction safety
- safe food handling

Offenders in a CORCAN program may also have completed academic, substance abuse awareness and/or psycho-educational programs. CORCAN is a successful program: offenders who work in CORCAN for six months or more show a 25 per cent drop in recidivism compared to offenders who do not work in the program.¹⁴

Up to 20 per cent of the federal offender population is active in CORCAN training and there can be a long waiting list.¹⁵

Provincial programs

The Community Corrections and Release Program offers community-based programs to adult and youth offenders through a network of community corrections offices and attendance centers located in over 30 geographic locations in Alberta. Adult offenders may be involved in community-based programs, such as probation, conditional sentence supervision, temporary absence, pre-trial release, fine options and alternative measures. Offenders in these programs are supervised by staff.

Community-based programs are offered to young offenders, who may receive bail orders, probation, community service orders or other community sentences. Offenders under the supervision of the community corrections offices are offered the opportunity to participate on a referral basis in rehabilitative programs that promote positive and productive behaviours. These programs are delivered by agencies other than community corrections.

A variety of rehabilitative services are available. These include

- mental health
- specialized treatment programs
- education programs
- life skills training

Provincially funded agencies also offer programming for offenders convicted of various types of offences, including sexual offences and domestic/family violence.¹⁶

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

As trust is frequently an issue, relationship building with these clients takes time. However, by taking time to build such a relationship, counsellors can serve as a model for clients to use in building and maintaining other healthy relationships.

What do I wish I would have known when I first started working with persons who have been in conflict with the law?

“... how important it is to leave your biases at the door and deal with clients where they are today and not to focus on where they have come from, their offences and their violation of society. When you focus on the past, you’re keeping them in the past and getting in the way of them moving forward.”

Jackie Mah

Edmonton John Howard Society

Qualities of effective counsellors

Counsellors’ personal beliefs

Basic beliefs about persons who are ex-offenders influence how counsellors relate to clients. Reflect on your own values, beliefs and assumptions with respect to criminal convictions as an aspect of social identity.

Career counselling is likely to be effective when based on these ideas:

- Each person deserves to be treated as a unique individual.
- Labels should be avoided whenever possible.
- Each person has the potential to grow and change.
- Growth occurs in situations where clients feel trusted and empowered.

Counsellors need to be aware that their cultural background may, at times, result in their beliefs and world views impacting their ability to help their clients. The process of professional reflection supports the development of self-awareness, identified as an important competency in counselling. Counsellors may want to reflect on their own belief systems by

- examining their own assumptions on human behaviour, values, biases, preconceived notions and personal limitations
- becoming aware of how ex-offenders fit into their own world view
- examining how their own world view impacts their interactions with clients who are ex-offenders

Strength-based approach

Finding strengths

“In corrections work, it is easy to ignore the fact that every individual also possesses some strengths, no matter how tenuous. This means that you have to assume that the parolees know something and have learned from their life experiences. The parolees also need to believe that you respect them and think that they can build something out of their lives.”¹⁷

Rebecca Deguara

Correctional Service of Canada

Rebecca Deguara provides some valuable insights into using a strength-based approach with offenders. She advocates using a strength-based approach as well as continuing to address issues that may have led to the offence. For example, she incorporates relapse prevention techniques to help clients deal with substance abuse. She has found this strength-based approach to be “refreshingly positive” and has found that it “often opens the door to new possibilities.”¹⁸

The following types of interview questions help clients identify their strengths:

- *Survival questions.* Given what you have gone through in your life, how have you managed to survive so far?
- *Support questions.* What people have given you special understanding, support and guidance?
- *Possibility questions.* What are your hopes, visions and aspirations?
- *Esteem questions.* When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?
- *Exception questions.* When things were going well in your life, what was different?¹⁹

Using strength-based interview strategies leads to the following outcomes:

- establishes a client-focused, collaborative process with clients
- empowers clients by facilitating self-identification of strengths
- reinforces client autonomy

Strength-based strategies are most effective when they are woven throughout all interactions with clients. They are not stand-alone strategies but they are part of the larger whole of the career-building process.

Strategies for building life skills

During incarceration, the decisions that offenders are allowed to make are limited. The institutional model focuses on managing the population as a whole, as opposed to managing independent individuals. “Inmates are expected to be followers and make few decisions of their own.”²⁰

The transition from the institution to the community, including employment, challenges ex-offenders to assume control and take responsibility for themselves, their actions and the direction of their lives.

For clients who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills, participating in life skills training is a significant step forward that will build a stronger base for successful entry into employment. The following are important components of such life skills training:

- appropriate attitudes and behaviour, including punctuality and communication skills
- money management, including budgeting and opening and managing bank accounts
- time management
- practical problem-solving skills for independent living in the community²¹

Experienced counsellors emphasize the value of addressing the topics of communication, assertiveness and stress with clients who have been in conflict with the law. The following section outlines approaches and exercises designed specifically for ex-offenders. With your client’s agreement, you may wish to explore these areas and use some of these ideas.

Raising self-esteem

Incarceration can have a profound effect on self-esteem. The prison environment may promote unhealthy behaviours such as dependency and withdrawal and inhibit healthy behaviours such as expression of feelings. To encourage clients to address self-esteem issues, use these strategies:

- Help clients examine their sources of self-esteem from childhood, family and school experiences.
- Have clients write a list of their accomplishments.
- Assist clients to write letters of appreciation to themselves that recognize their positive qualities.
- Help clients write lists of positive affirmations that they can say aloud daily to raise self-esteem.
- Encourage clients to keep journals as a place in which to release feelings, solve problems and understand relationships. Clients may write or record their journals.
- For strategies that normally use writing, clients may express themselves creatively through drawing, sketching, designing collages or making sound recordings.

Building communication skills

Review the skills involved with effective listening and speaking:

- Teach clients how to use “I” messages.
- Show clients how to clarify and paraphrase.
- Discuss and demonstrate non-verbal communication.
- Encourage clients to practise new communication skills between counselling sessions.²²

Learning assertive behaviour

Discuss with clients what *being assertive* means to them.

- Demonstrate healthy and appropriate examples, such as
 - standing up for yourself
 - saying no without hurting others or putting them down
 - telling others how you feel without hurting them or putting them down
- Discuss the differences between assertive, aggressive, passive and passive-aggressive behaviour.
- Ask clients to record descriptions of their personal situations in which they were assertive, aggressive, passive and passive-aggressive. Help the client to analyze the outcomes of each situation.
- Role play these situations:
 - making and refusing requests
 - dealing with put-downs and criticism
 - giving and receiving compliments
- Ask clients to practise these situations between counselling visits.
- When working with a group of clients, have them draft an “Assertiveness Bill of Rights.”

Clients who require more in-depth assistance may benefit from assertiveness training programs.

Managing anger

In general, covering the following points with clients in regard to anger will be helpful:

- Anger is a normal and healthy emotion.
- Anger often covers up another underlying but critical emotion such as fear, frustration, sadness or guilt.
- Anger can be constructive when it signals us to take some action against injustice, abuse or annoyance.
- Anger is a problem if it is too frequent, lasts too long, leads to aggression or disturbs work or personal relationships.²³

Help clients consider strategies for managing anger in job search and employment situations. Demonstrate techniques for self-control. Clients who require more in-depth assistance may benefit from referral to an anger management program.

Managing stress

Counsellors can do the following:

- Help clients identify the sources or causes of stress.
- Help clients recognize the negative and positive effects of stress.
- Help clients assess the level of stress in their lives and recognize common responses to stress.
- Emphasize that dealing with stress involves three choices:
 - changing what causes the stress
 - changing responses to the stress
 - exploring strategies for managing stress
- Show clients relaxation exercises and encourage them to practise.
- Discuss how diet and exercise can positively affect stress levels.
- Draw up a stress reduction contract with clients. The contract could be general or specific. For example, the stress reduction contract might address a specific job search event, such as going for an interview.²⁴

Clients who require more in-depth assistance may benefit from a stress management program.

Making decisions

Help clients recognize that decision-making is an activity they are involved in every day. Making good decisions will improve their lives.

- Review with clients how they presently make decisions.
- Emphasize that effective decision-making is a skill that can be learned.
- Show how many different approaches can be used. Sound decision-making involves consideration of priorities, values and the consequences to self and others.
- Provide suggestions and opportunities to practise decision-making during the counselling process and in the course of normal activities.²⁵

Dealing with substance abuse

Being patient

“Dealing with addictions is a huge challenge. Change takes time, and I like to encourage my clients to be patient with themselves, to give themselves a break.”

Jackie Norman

Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

For clients dealing with substance abuse, a first step in moving forward involves making a commitment to address their addictions. “Drug treatment programs do work in easing the transition from prison to the community.”²⁶

Experts in the field offer the following information:

- Participation in a substance abuse treatment program may be a condition of release.
- Treatment programs may require full-time attendance, which precludes work search or maintaining full-time employment.

- For counsellors, familiarity with information related to substance abuse issues, the effects of specific substances and related community resources is very helpful.
- For clients not mandated to attend substance abuse treatment programs, counsellors can provide referrals, information and support, but the commitment to treatment programs must be by client choice.

Strategies for career planning

Counsellors may want to help clients in two stages by first addressing strategies for meeting their core needs and then using strategies that target more specific career planning.

Beginning a career-building plan

These strategies can become the first steps in clients’ career planning process:

- *Financial needs.* Clients may have very few financial resources. Help clients apply for income support and other community services where appropriate.
- *Temporary employment.* Clients may be referred to temporary employment agencies if there are no barriers to temporary employment, such as conditions of release.
- *Housing.* Securing appropriate housing can be very challenging for ex-offenders, particularly if recently released. They may have limited financial resources, which compounds the problem. Providing referral to any assistance programs or low-income housing will be helpful.
- *Training programs.* Some clients may require life skills training and work-related skill building before securing employment. Financial support or sponsorship in a training program will give them the time to gain the skills they require to enter or re-enter the workforce.
- *Support.* It will also be important to support clients in establishing new relationships in the community. Participating in training a program, even of a short-term nature, provides an effective place to start building new relationships.

- *Networking.* Brainstorm additional strategies to meet new people. Special interest clubs may provide another alternative.
- *Communication with case management or parole officers.* Establish contact with clients' case management or parole officers. Case management officers may help reintegrate the person into the community and co-ordinate a training plan. Federal offenders should be able to identify their case management officer or parole officer.

When exploring career options

"I question what is behind the client's choice. What is it that they like about that area? I don't want to dash their dreams. I want to help them explore options to get into that [preferred] area."

Jackie Mah

Edmonton John Howard Society

Continuing the career-building process

Once these core needs have been discussed or addressed with the client, be ready to move forward and work collaboratively with the client in the career-building process:

- *Preferred future.* Help clients identify their preferred futures and options related to those preferred futures.
- *Criminal record checks.* Help them become aware of education and training programs and on-the-job training opportunities that require criminal record checks. For example, criminal background checks are required for some public sector jobs, health-related programs and programs involving working with children and other vulnerable people.

- *Impact of criminal record.* Help clients brainstorm the ways in which having a criminal record might impact work options they have identified, as well as their work search and related employment. Some work options may require criminal record checks and, therefore, may not be available to particular clients.
- *Conditions of release.* Ensure that all career and work search planning meets the clients' conditions of release.
- *Collaboration.* Continue to collaborate with the parole officer and/or other agencies and programs.
- *Skill-building programs.* Help clients access relevant skill-building programs and funding for such programs.
- *Pardons.* Counsellors may want to refer clients to non-profit organizations that assist individuals in removing a past criminal offence from the public record.²⁷

Focusing on Employment

Employment skills identified by ex-offenders

The following 36 skills were identified by ex-offenders for ex-offenders. The skills were selected for being instrumental in making a successful transition from incarceration to employment on the outside. This information may be useful as a checklist to help counsellors ensure that they are working with clients in areas of employability most meaningful to them. Described in the ex-offenders' words, the key skills include the following areas: human relationships, self-management, planning and goal setting, and employment-related skills.²⁸

Human relationship skills

- self-esteem
- communication skills
- assertiveness skills
- establishing a personal support system—help clients develop a network of family, friends and others who will help them reach their personal goals

- helping others
- working with others—help clients learn to get along with supervisors and co-workers and provide service for customers
- skills for overcoming unfairness—help clients deal with the fact that sometimes people may treat them unfairly based on who they think they are, not on who they really are²⁹

Self-management skills

- problem-solving and decision-making skills
- recognizing their limits—help clients know what they are capable of undertaking at any particular time
- work and lifestyle balance—help clients sort and manage their personal and work responsibilities in a manner that’s appropriate for them
- living skills—ensure clients can look after their basic needs
- appearance and dress skills—help clients present themselves in the workplace in a manner that is appropriate for the job and its safety requirements
- managing addictions—help clients recognize and find help to deal with their addictions
- time management skills
- stress management skills
- anger management skills
- money management skills—help clients learn to live on the money they are/will be earning³⁰

Planning and goal setting skills

- setting career goals
- trying new things—help clients to be open to new experiences and people
- accepting setbacks—help clients learn from experiences
- adaptability skills—help clients make changes to reach goals³¹

Employment-related skills

- basic skills—help clients find literacy programs, if necessary
- job specific skills
- developing personal strengths—help clients to see the benefits of ongoing personal growth
- showing a positive work attitude
- independence and initiative
- dependability
- integrity
- concern for quality
- staying motivated—help clients put jail behind them and focus on the present, give themselves a chance
- commitment to an employer
- ability to use training opportunities³²

Helping clients with work search

Fear of rejection

“The number one fear for my clients is looking for work because of the rejection they might have to face if they don’t get hired.”

Jackie Norman

Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

Clients who are ex-offenders are likely to benefit from assistance in building their work search skills, including writing resumés and finding references. Ex-offenders need to consider how to handle disclosure or nondisclosure of criminal records and how to manage compliance with conditions of release.

Work search strategies

Some suggestions include the following:

- Help clients determine the duties and qualifications required for jobs they are interested in.
- Help clients to apply for jobs.
- Help clients become aware of the hidden job market and help them develop strategies for accessing it.
- When transportation is an issue, encourage clients to use the telephone to gather information and to follow up with employers. Encourage clients to email or fax their resumés rather than delivering them in person. Refer clients to local resources that can provide free access to computers, telephones and faxes for their job search. Clients might consider government employment offices, not-for-profit agencies or offices contracted to provide such services.
- Encourage clients to consider casual labour or employment with a temporary agency. These options are good starting points for ex-offenders because they provide a transition into employment and allow clients flexibility if they are attending programs and/or require time to build their confidence in the workplace.
- Help parents with child care issues through referrals and information about child care options.
- Help clients find permanent housing if needed. Housing is especially important for clients living in homeless shelters. Clients in such accommodations may face great challenges maintaining employment. Given that their nightly accommodation is temporary, they must carry all their possessions with them everywhere, including the job site. Many places of employment do not provide storage.
- Help clients obtain appropriate apparel and tools for interviews and work. Offer referrals to community agencies that provide appropriate clothing. Help clients access any funding available to obtain safety items such as a hard hat or steel-toed boots.

- Help clients pursue volunteer opportunities, part-time or temporary work, work experience programs and/or applicable government placement programs. Remember to confirm whether a criminal record check is required.
- Find out if there is a CORCAN employment centre in the client's area. These employment centres can help federal ex-offenders prepare for and find a job once they leave prison.

Compliance with conditions of release

Consider how to help ex-offenders comply with conditions of release:

- Determine if the client is subject to conditions of release and identify the specific conditions.
- Find out the name of the client's parole officer.
- Communicate with the parole officer and other individuals from supporting agencies or programs to ensure a collaborative approach to employing the client.

Counsellors may want to help ex-offenders under conditions of release to identify employment situations that may cause them difficulties. For example, an ex-offender who is employed at a convenience store may be left alone in the store. If a sixteen-year-old customer enters the store, the ex-offender would be in violation of a condition of his release: he may not be alone with individuals under the age of 18.

Resumé development

Use these strategies to help clients build a resumé:

- Help clients identify skills and strengths using strength-based questions. Examples of these questions are listed in this chapter in the section titled *Strength-based approach*.
- Include skill-building experiences.
- List certifications earned before and during incarceration.
- Use the functional resumé format that focuses on transferable skills.³³

References

- Encourage the client to develop a list of names and contact information for at least three references.
- Choose references who recognize and support positive life changes made by the client.
- References might include previous employers, a religious leader, an Elder, an instructor, a former teacher, or a probation or parole officer.³⁴

Dealing with employers

Many employers are willing to hire an ex-offender, but common misperceptions can still create barriers for ex-offenders.

Myths about hiring ex-offenders

Patrick Henry and George Odiorne explored the myths³⁵ about hiring ex-offenders. They list and refute misinformation that employers commonly hold.

“All offenders are alike.”

- Hardened, habitual criminals, who make up a small percentage of those incarcerated, usually do not want to work.
- White-collar criminals, car thieves, minor drug offenders and political offenders differ from hardened criminals in their offences, motives and potential for rehabilitation.

“Ex-offenders have no useful skills.”

- On-the-job training and educational opportunities are available for many inmates.
- Prison industries may offer opportunities to build valuable work-related skills.

“Educated people don’t go to jail.”

- White-collar criminals are a growing population.
- White-collar ex-offenders usually express gratitude at being hired, display outstanding co-operation and work habits in post-discharge jobs.
- These ex-offenders are eager to rebuild their lives.

“Ex-offenders can’t hold down a job.”

- Most offenders had jobs at the time of their arrest, and most had above average work records.
- Case studies from companies that hire significant numbers of ex-offenders reveal a lower than normal turnover rate.

“Co-workers won’t accept ex-offenders as fellow employees.”

- Employees should be judged on the quality of their work, their willingness to co-operate, their attitude and their competence.
- Most employees object to the presence of another worker only if she or he has a detrimental effect on them, their work or their job arrangements.

“Employees who are ex-offenders need special monitoring.”

- After typical orientation and training, ex-offenders need the same level of supervision as other employees.
- Ex-offenders usually welcome the opportunity to blend in with the rest of the workforce.
- Ex-offenders do not need special privileges.
- If ex-offenders carry outside responsibilities, such as a family to support or employment as a condition of parole, they are usually eager to succeed.³⁶

In your discussions with clients regarding potential employers, include these topics:

- Remind them that there are many employers who will hire ex-offenders.
- Provide examples of such employers.
- Share anonymous examples of previous ex-offender clients who successfully gained and maintained employment.³⁷

Client’s disclosure of a criminal record

Discuss with clients the issue of disclosing their criminal records to employers:

- Facilitate discussions with clients regarding the impact of disclosure.

- Have clients brainstorm all the possible outcomes of disclosure/nondisclosure to an employer.
- If clients choose not to disclose their criminal record, facilitate a related discussion, including strategies for handling situations where the client's employer or colleagues become aware of their criminal record.

If clients choose to disclose their criminal records to employers, help them review the anticipated scenario, what they might say and the negative and positive reactions an employer may have. Here are some suggestions for the client:

- Talk about the criminal record in the middle of the interview. If the subject is raised at the beginning of an interview, it might make a bad first impression. If the subject is raised at the end of an interview, it may be a negative last impression.
- Say enough to be truthful. The employer does not need to know the life history of a potential employee.
- Indicate full responsibility for the past. The client should tell the interviewer what was learned.³⁸

Providing employment supports

Supportive communities

"A supportive community is critical to the re-integration of offenders."

Nancy Stabelforth

Correctional Service of Canada

Once clients find employment, they may need ongoing support to help them maintain this employment. They may experience difficulties in their employment related to issues of self-esteem, communication, assertiveness, anger management, stress management and decision-making. Such issues may not have emerged during the career-building process and they may become evident only when a situation arises at the workplace.

Employment support may involve facilitating, discussing, brainstorming, explaining and debriefing. Areas where further intervention may be required could include

- dispute resolution between your client and a co-worker or the employer
- investigating options and consequences
- understanding workplace expectations, norms or culture
- transitioning to workplace routines
- understanding their rights as supported by the employment standards law in Alberta
- exploring how to leave employment appropriately

Final note for counsellors

"Don't get in over your head. Keep your boundaries and ethics in place. And, always reach out and get help when you need it."

Jackie Mah

Edmonton John Howard Society

In Conclusion

Counsellors can be of great assistance to clients who have been in conflict with the law. While this chapter provides career-building information and strategies, it would be valuable to build relationships with, and access support from, others experienced in the field. Consult with parole/probation officers and other professionals working with clients. Refer clients to appropriate resources for assistance in areas beyond the scope of your experience.

Endnotes

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