

Job Search Tips for Ex-Offenders



There is no doubt that ex-offenders face many challenges in their job search. The biggest hurdle is the prejudice that some employers have toward ex-offenders. How ex-offender job seekers react to and defuse this prejudice will determine how successful they are in securing meaningful employment.

Are you really serious?

Are you really serious about getting a job and becoming a productive, self-sufficient member of society once you are released? Nearly every prisoner professes that he/she intends to assimilate back into society, change their behavior, get a job and become a productive member of society. The odds are not in your favor to accomplish your goal. Two out of every three released inmates will return to prison within 3 years of their release and three out of four within 5 years.

This and the other **Offender JobSearch Guides** are filled with valuable, effective ways that you can obtain and maintain meaningful employment. The process is not going to be easy and you will be confronted with many situations that discourage and perhaps anger you. Whether you are successful or not rests entirely with you. It will not be an easy journey. There will be many people who will want you to succeed, and even some that want you to fail. You are the one who can identify those people who are acting in your best interest and are truly committed to assisting you to reach your goals and those who are not. Use the **Offender JobSearch Guide Resources for Ex-Offenders** to obtain additional information and to locate resources that can assist you in your journey.

The process is the same

The process, the steps to securing meaningful employment, is the same for ex-offenders as it is for non-offenders. This **Offender JobSearch Guide** will focus only on those issues that are unique to the ex-offender. The ex-offender job seeker is directed to all of the other **Offender JobSearch Guides** for information on the process.

Negative thoughts

The biggest obstacle to a successful job search is you. You have been in prison and prison is harsh. It has made you feel worthless, paranoid, hopeless and alone. You distrust most people, the system and yourself. It is easy to convince yourself that what you feel is the way things really are... that you really are worthless. To move forward, you must question the origin and validity of each belief. *Am I really not very smart? Should I really never trust another person? Is it true that everyone is out to get me?* These are all negative thoughts and negative thoughts are cancerous.

Attitude and desire

Attitude and desire are the two most important factors in your job search. If you really don't want to succeed, you won't, plain and simple. The world is full of talented people who failed because they didn't have the desire to succeed. Conversely, there are millions of stories of average and below average people who accomplished a great deal because they wanted to succeed. Doubt and negativity are killers. You can control your attitude! It takes practice and desire. Successful ex-offenders turn the negative attitude, *I can't* into *I can*. They constantly tell themselves that they can attain their chosen goal. They abandon the negative talk of prison for the positive attitude of successful people.

Rebuilding you

It has often been said that incarceration dehumanizes the individual. It is now time to rediscover yourself and the outside world.

- **Family.** Who have been the people who have been good to (and for) you during your incarceration? These are the people you need to re-establish contact with. Not only can they provide emotional support, they can be invaluable as contact people during your job search. Don't worry about the fact that you have not communicated with them for a while. If you are concerned about their reaction, begin your contact with a letter. Most likely they will be glad to hear from you.
- **Forgiveness.** Just as you have felt hurt and anger toward significant others, so have they experienced these same feelings toward you. It is time to move on and put these feelings behind you. In order to accomplish this it may be necessary for you not only to ask for forgiveness from significant others, but also to be willing to forgive them.
- **Circle of Friends.** It is critical that your circle of friends are supporting the new you. As hard as it may be, you may have to avoid former friends (and former inmates) who may expect you to engage in activities that are inappropriate and not consistent with your new life.
- **Self-Esteem.** Do you like who you were in the past, who you are today and who you plan to be in the future? The prison experience may have zapped you of what little self-esteem you had. How you re-establish your self worth will determine your success upon release. Ex-offenders are particularly vulnerable because society will be slow to forget and forgive, and will constantly remind you of your mistakes. You will need to insulate yourself from this negativism with positive affirmation of your worth both by your own self-talk (*I am unique, and I have value to society, family, friends and to myself*) and from significant others, including employers.
- **Know who you are.** You need to know what you have to offer to employers. Review all of the **Offender JobSearch Guides** related to the job search.
- **Clean and Sober.** The same as you want to surround yourself with positive people, so do you want to embrace a positive lifestyle and avoid those lifestyle environments that are troublesome. It is not surprising that a vast number of crimes are committed while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The message is clear... stay clean and sober. Get help if this is a concern.



The challenge of being an ex-offender



What makes you different from the average job seeker is the fact that you have a criminal record and you will need to tell the prospective employer about your past. You might be asked on the application or you may be asked about it in the interview. As stated earlier, many people are suspicious and possibly frightened of ex-offenders. The reasons for these attitudes are many, but usually relate to the fact that they do not trust you. Your challenge is to convince them that you can be trusted.

Employers perception

It is important that the job-seeker understand that most employers view their company in the same manner that we view our family and home. We are extremely protective of family members and will defend our home and property against any threat. Likewise, employers want to protect the integrity, assets and employees of their company from harm. It is, therefore, incumbent upon ex-offender job seekers to



convince the employer that they are not a threat. Remember, usually the only thing an employer knows about the penal system is what they have viewed on television and in movies. They do not have a very realistic viewpoint of the system or the people who have been incarcerated. You have an opportunity to educate them.

Communicating your record on the application



It is legal for an employer to ask if you have ever been *convicted* of a felony. You do not need to mention any arrest unless there was a conviction, including any pending court action. Any convictions while you were a juvenile are kept confidential and, therefore, do not need to be mentioned.

When asked on the application if you have been convicted of a felony, be honest and say, yes. Rather than attempt to explain on the application (even if you have space), write, *will explain in the interview*. If they require you to explain on the application, be as brief as possible. State your offense, the date it happened, where it happened, the sentence that you received and the date that you were released. Finish the explanation with, *I will be happy to supply more details in the interview*.

Do not lie about your record.

Communicating your record during the interview

The most difficult question you will be asked in the job interview is the one about your criminal record. Prepare your response well before you enter the interview room. Practice your response with your parole officer or a career counselor.

- **Be honest and direct.** Restate what you wrote on the application. Give the date that the incident happened, charge, conviction date, sentence length and date released.
- **Explain what you did.** Be brief. Don't deny the charge or the conviction. Accept responsibility. Acknowledge that what you did was wrong. Describe what amends you have made to the victims.
- **Explain what you have learned from your mistakes.** This is the most important part of the interview. Since everyone makes mistakes in their lives, the interviewer is interested in what you learned from your mistake and the steps you have taken to prevent it from happening again. How are you different today than you were when you entered prison? Give concrete examples: *Before I was convicted I drank heavily but since my parole I have been attending AA meetings and have been sober.* How have your values changed? *I didn't realize how important my family was to me until I got incarcerated.* Talk about your future goals. *Prison gave me an opportunity to get my GED and welding training. I really want to make a career as a welder.*
- **Drugs and alcohol.** Be prepared to submit to a drug test as a condition of employment. In fact, offer to submit to such testing as a way of demonstrating your being clean and sober.

It's not so much what you say...

It's not always what you say in the interview, but how credible you are that determines whether the interviewer trusts you. The interviewer is looking at your body language, facial expressions and overall appearance. The interviewer is also listening to what you say and your tone of voice and verbal expressions. Do the facial expressions and body language match the words being spoken? If you are sincere, it will show in many ways.



The outside is different

It is not going to be easy to adapt to the *real world*, but you have to in order to survive. Inside prison you had to be tough, suspicious and aloof. To be successful on the outside you have to be almost the opposite... trustworthy, friendly and flexible.

Finally, the language of the *real world* is different from the language you have adopted while incarcerated. Slang expressions, swear words and phrases, and insider code words may have been acceptable on the inside but are unacceptable on the outside. Watch what you say and how you say it.

Internet resources



- <http://www.lionheart.org> -- Programs for ex-offenders.
- www.bonds4jobs.com -- Federal bonding program for at risk job seekers.
- www.hard2hire.org -- Job placement services for hard to hire workers.
- <http://jailtojob.com/wordpress/> -- Good information for ex-offenders seeking employment.

Additional Internet resources can be found in the **Offender JobSearch Guide** *Resources for Ex-Offenders*.