

How to Find a Job after Prison

Knowing Your Options When Starting Over

Finding a job after being in prison takes a different approach from the ordinary job search. Before you even begin, it is important to know exactly what avenues are open to you. For example, if you are on parole or probation resulting from a drug-related crime, you may not be allowed to work in a pharmacy.

It is critical to understand any limitations to your job search right away. To learn what types of jobs may or may not be open to you, seek out all available resources immediately upon your release. This may include your parole or probation officer who will be knowledgeable about your specific case; a counselor or career coach; and the local workforce experts — the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation. Take stock of what your community offers for job training and/or placement programs, and contact them quickly. Find out from the Department of Labor and Regulation or other employment agencies which companies might be taking advantage of certain federal credits that encourage employers to hire ex-offenders.



Please do this right away so you are clear on what direction you can take.

It is also important for you to understand and accept that because you may be the last person hired in your future workplace, if times get tough, you may be the first to be let go as well. While accepting this possibility, do not let it bring you down and do not take it personally.

Think of it this way: Even if you were not an ex-offender and were the last person hired, if times are tough, you might **still** be the first to be let go. Most of the time, if a company is willing to hire an ex-offender, they are merely looking for someone to work for them — they are not expecting business to go sour!

A person with a criminal record is simply going to face greater challenges in getting employment. There are certain jobs where an employer will justifiably not hire an ex-offender. However, challenging is **not** the same as impossible. The key is the right attitude and getting and keeping that first job, so that as time goes by, a person has developed a successful job history that outweighs past problems.

Being Worth More

Understand that you may have to start at the bottom and work for minimum wage. Again, this is nothing personal and, no matter how experienced you feel you are, if you are offered a position starting at minimum wage, you can only go up from there!

If you are offered a job at minimum wage, you can ask, "Once I prove myself to you and the company, will I be eligible for a pay increase?"

Also, once you have some work experience under your belt, and you've proven yourself for several months at one job, you can begin to search for something better. However, do not give in to the temptation to job hop every time the grass appears greener

March 19, 2012

elsewhere. This will not enhance your resume or marketability! You need to work consistently at one job for a while in order to gain references.

After a while, the favorable references you accumulate will begin to outweigh the stigma of your ex-offender status. This has proven true for many, so stick with it!

The Company You Keep

If you have been involved in a group or gang with a tendency toward troublemaking, it is time to make new friends. In some neighborhoods this can be very difficult. It is easy to fall back into old routines but, as time goes by and you begin to gain a firmer foothold in the workforce, you should find yourself naturally making new, more enjoyable friends who are not aligned with your old way of life.

Honesty and Self-Confidence

Instead of spending your time trying to figure out how to hide the fact you were incarcerated, learn how to honestly and candidly discuss your situation with a potential employer. Some people may tell you to lie about your conviction but you should **never** do this. Why add more difficulties to an already difficult situation? Besides, your past will likely catch up to you anyway. There may come a time when your record is clear, and you no longer have to divulge your past. But until that time, you **must** be honest.

On most job applications, there is a space asking if you have ever been convicted of a crime. You should answer, "Yes." and also print neatly, "Please let me discuss this with you when we meet." With so many companies conducting background checks and drug testing, it's best to get this right out in the open.

You need to confidently convey the fact you have paid your debt and are working diligently to put it behind you, so you can prove who you really are inside. You are no longer the same person who committed the crime. You are likely to be asked tough interview questions so practice, practice, practice!

It also takes unshakable faith in yourself that this is all true. You **are** a different person. You **have** taken the responsibility for your actions. It was your choice and your decision to do whatever it was that landed you in trouble, and there is no one other than yourself to blame for your situation. Once you can truly come to terms with your past, and begin working to release your past, then you will begin to demonstrate a lot more confidence to your potential employers.

References

If you have been in prison, you probably don't have a lot of references. Although this is a difficult challenge, you'll just have to work on it, one day at a time. You may have to take the first job an employment assistance program or agency is able to find you, and stick at it long enough to prove yourself, so your employer will be willing to provide a reference when it's time for you to move on.

If you have kept up friendships throughout your incarceration with people who are 1) not ex-offenders themselves, and 2) can speak about your job performance or strengths you showed prior to your troubles, they might be willing to vouch for you.

Spend your non-work or non-job-search time wisely. Volunteer. Offer to speak with youth groups about your situation and what led you there. These types of activities can also help you build references.

Interviews

The thing to remember — which may be difficult — is that **you are not the crime you committed**. You are a person who made a mistake, you are remorseful, and you have paid for your mistake. Keep letting your potential employers know this, and continue to tell them you are doing your very best to move forward and put the past behind you.

Become a regular visitor at your local Department of Labor and Regulation office, and request mock interview assistance to practice explaining your situation. You will need to gain the confidence to look your interviewer in the eye while you explain your background.

Practice literally keeping your head up, and your eyes forward. If you are having difficulty looking people in the eyes, begin by looking at the point at the bridge of the nose.

Practice discussing all the skills you do have, rather than those you lack. As you discover the various types of skills employers are looking for, strive to learn them for yourself, if you do not already have them. If you have not received a high school diploma, sign up to get your GED!

Be sure you address how your skills will help meet your potential employer's needs. For example, if you are looking for a job at the grocery store's deli counter and you learned food service sanitation skills while in prison, mention this up front. State that one excellent reason they should consider you for the deli counter position is your ability to scour and sanitize your work area to the highest health department standards.

Some of the tough interview questions you may be asked include:

- What did you do during your time in prison to improve yourself and your situation?
- Why should I hire you when I can hire someone who hasn't been in prison?
- How will you show your value to my company if I hire you?
- When you were in prison, how did you handle stressful situations?
- What type of programs and work did you do in prison, and how was your performance rated?

One human resources professional says: "Be honest about the past. Ex-offenders should take responsibility for their actions and keep their explanation in legal terms whenever possible. For example, say 'I committed a felony four,' instead of 'I was convicted of domestic violence.'" (Source: HR.com/Communities)

Presenting Yourself

Attitude

Stop playing the blame game. We all have stories about our terrible childhoods or abusive relationships we say caused our problems. The truth is this: **No one other than ourselves causes our problems.** The sooner we stop blaming others for our situations, the better our futures will begin to look.

Bring an attitude filled with perspective and optimism to your job search. Yes, you will have challenges. Lots of them. But let's think about this for a second: You have an opportunity to find a job. Some people don't. If you can look at this activity as a puzzle you are determined to put together, you will succeed. When you find a company you want to work at, offer to prove yourself on a temporary or even voluntary basis for a few days to show the company what you can do.

Appearance

Dress nicely. You may not have an extensive wardrobe at this stage of your life, but you can find clean and tidy clothes to wear. Most cities and even smaller towns have thrift stores, Salvation Army or Good Will stores that can help you. Some places might even donate some clothes to you.



If you have tattoos, regardless of whether they are prison tattoos, do your best to conceal them. The time you spend job hunting and interviewing is not the time to be showing off your body art or piercings. While you may hardly notice them, others may be distracted by them. You want the focus to be on who you are and what you can do, not what you are wearing.

Good grooming is critical. Make sure you have a nice haircut or, if you have long hair, be sure it's neatly tied back. Please — no cologne! Frequently people come out of prison and can't wait to drench themselves in scents. However, it is extremely distracting to an interviewer and will **not** help your chances of getting a job.

Good old-fashioned soap, shampoo, deodorant and clean clothes will do the trick! Be especially sure your clothes are clean. Many folks will shower but wear clothes that have not been washed. Unfortunately, the odor of stale clothes can be mistaken for body odor. Don't take the chance! Wash the clothes as well as yourself. Think clean, clean, clean!

Taking This Seriously

Do not go job hunting with friends or relatives. If you need advice or backup, go to your Department of Labor and Regulation office. Friends and relatives may be ok for some networking, but they should not be accompanying you.

Carry a portfolio (a nice neat folder or binder) with copies of your resume, pages showing any work or writing you've done, any certificates you've earned, etc. If you are

going to a specific company, find an article or story about them that shows them in a positive light. Cut it out and bring it with you to show them or give them, in case their public relations department might like it.

If you have been accustomed to swearing or using slang, you will need to work on getting out of the habit. Do this as quickly as possible, and beware of letting things slip.

If you want to work a 35-hour-per-week job, work 35 hours per week **looking** for that job. Treat your job search as though it were a job, and let employers know you are treating it like a job. If you can tell an employer you are working full-time to find work, it will show you are already on a schedule and you are serious.

Even if you are turned down for a job, write a short note thanking the employer for the opportunity to meet. Make it clear you do appreciate it, and you are hopeful if another opportunity arises, they will consider you.

All of this shows you are serious, and indicates that you're not just knocking on every door in town (even if you are). Employers may be leery about hiring an ex-offender because they aren't sure it's worth the risk. If you can show them you **are** worth the risk — through your words, attitude, appearance, posture, portfolio and ability to take full responsibility for what you did without blaming others — you'll stand a better chance of getting hired.

Education

Some studies indicate 70 percent of offenders are high school dropouts. If you are among this population, get your GED. You must improve your skills, your reading and writing abilities, and your basic math abilities. Even if school was difficult for you, there are terrific programs now available to help individuals raise their basic skill levels. Show your potential employers you are working to better educate yourself and you are working on gaining various skills.

Your Criminal Record and Background Checks

Employers have been assessed large fines for negligent hiring, situations in which they neglected to do a criminal record check and hired a person with a criminal record who then harmed others. Employers have a legal duty to exercise “due diligence” in the hiring process, meaning they may not hire someone they know (or should have known) was dangerous or unfit for a job.

From the employer's point of view, the concern is that a person with a criminal past may re-offend in the future. Thus, employers have become increasingly concerned about knowing if an applicant has a criminal record and more employers are conducting pre-employment background checks.

On the other hand, society also has a strong interest in helping people with a criminal record become law-abiding, tax-paying citizens. Unfortunately, it is difficult for an ex-offender to do so without obtaining and maintaining employment.

The ex-offender's job search can become a frustrating “Catch-22.” Nearly every employment application will ask if a person has a criminal record. If a person lies, they are always at risk of being terminated when their criminal record is discovered. A person

must be honest and admit to the past misconduct, which may put him or her at risk of not getting the job. There is no perfect answer.

Understand Your Rights

A person who has a criminal record and is looking for employment must understand his or her rights. There are instances where an applicant can legally and ethically answer “no” on a question about a past offense. This may occur in some of the following situations:

- In many states, there is no obligation to report arrests not resulting in a conviction or that are not currently pending.
- There are limitations on reporting pre-trial adjudications where the conduct by statute is not considered a criminal offense. Some states have pre-trial diversion or delayed entry of judgment).

Also keep in mind that most employment applications also contain language that the conviction of a crime will not automatically result in a denial of employment. Automatic disqualification could be a violation of state and federal discrimination laws. However, an employer may deny employment if the employer can establish a business-related reason for the refusal to hire.

Employment Background Check Law

If employers conduct a check of your background (credit, criminal, past employer) using a third party, the background check is covered by The Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA). The FCRA defines a background check as a consumer report. Before an employer can get a consumer report for employment purposes, they must notify you in writing and get your written consent. If the employer is simply conducting inquiries (rather than running reports) they should also ask for your consent.

When conducting an employment background check, employers can check your credit, your criminal record (what can be checked varies from state to state), your work history, and your driving record. When you complete an employment application form, it should give you an idea of what's being checked.

From a work history perspective, keep in mind that when you sign the application you are giving the company permission to check your background. You are also giving your previous or current employer your consent to release the information. If you include references on the application, you can expect them to be contacted as well.

If you're not truthful on your application, it can disqualify you from employment and you could be terminated in the future - not necessarily because of what was found, but because you were dishonest when you applied.

Summary

- Know your rights. Be a knowledgeable applicant. Visit the Department of Labor and Regulation website and review what an employer can check.
- Get a credit report. Get a copy of your credit report, so you are aware of what's on it. If there are issues, try to clean it up or dispute it if there are errors.

March 19, 2012

- Read the job application. Read the application carefully, so you are informed as to what will be checked.
- Disclose only what is asked. Only disclose the information you need to, based on the employment application.
- Be honest. If you are asked about credit or your criminal record and have issues, explain the circumstances. The employer will value an explanation up front, rather than discovering there is a problem when they get the report.

Web-based Resources

The Legal Action Center: Their mission states they are "the only non-profit law and policy organization in the United States whose sole mission is to fight discrimination against people with histories of addiction, HIV/AIDS, or criminal records, and to advocate for sound public policies in these areas." www.lac.org

The Women's Prison Association: Their mission states that "WPA is a service and advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves and their families." www.wpaonline.org

The National H.I.R.E. Network (Helping Individuals with Criminal Records Reenter Through Employment): The National H.I.R.E. Network's mission is "to increase the number and quality of job opportunities available to people with criminal records by improving public policies, practices, and public opinion." www.hirenetwork.org

Information provided by: <http://www.squidoo.com/how-to-find-a-job-after-prison#module43852682>