

Helping People with Criminal Histories Find Work

Tips for Employment Specialists

- Begin building relationships with employers by learning about their business and workforce needs. At some point, return to talk about a job seeker who has skills and strengths that match the needs of that employer. Ask if the employer would be interested in meeting the person. If the employer agrees to meet, come back with your client to help her talk about the reasons she would be a good employee, and also to help the job seeker explain her criminal history. Many employers would prefer to hire people without criminal histories, but may decide to hire an individual who takes responsibility for her actions, is trying to turn her life around, and has the skills and qualifications to do the job. It is best to bring up the criminal history while the job seeker is meeting face-to-face with an employer. This gives the employer an opportunity to see that the job seeker is sincere about making changes in her life.
- If you already have a good relationship with an employer (for example, the employer has hired one of your clients in the past) you might do things differently. With client permission, you might talk to the employer yourself about the job seeker's strengths, his criminal history, and the reasons you believe the person will be a good employee. Describe how the person has been working to change his life and explain how the person's skills and abilities will be an asset to the company. For example, "Rick has a conviction for possession of drugs with intent to sell. However, he has been in treatment for eight months and is very committed to changing his life. In regard to a job, Rick is someone who always shows up. He really wants to work and I know that you have expressed interest in meeting people who are very reliable. Would you be interested in meeting with Rick?"
- As you get to know individual employers, keep track of their policies about hiring people with felonies. Remember to differentiate between hard policies and opinions, because opinions can change as employers react to individual job seekers. Rely on things you learn from talking directly to employers, rather than lists of "felony-friendly employers" that may be circling around your community.
- Work hard to help the job seeker make face-to-face contact with employers. "Give the job seeker a face." It is essential that the job seeker use this meeting to engage with the employer and begin building a relationship of his or her own with the employer.
- Help the person think of examples that illustrate their skills or how they have changed. Don't rely on global examples. For instance, rather than saying, "I can multitask", try "On my last job, I was responsible for answering the phone, helping people who walked in the front door, and entering information into the computer. During busy times, I juggled all of these responsibilities at once." Rather than, "I

have changed my life”, try “I’ve learned that there are consequences for the things I do and I am trying to make better choices. For example, I am not spending time with people who get in trouble—instead I have been going to GED classes three days a week. Getting a job is another part of my recovery.” Both employment specialists and mental health practitioners can help clients think about the strengths and skills that they can bring to the workplace.

- Help the person practice the way that she or he explains the conviction(s). Be direct. Give the facts but keep it brief. Essential elements of this script should include:

1. *A brief statement about the conviction.*

The idea is to avoid sounding evasive. “In 2002, I was convicted of breaking and entering.”

2. *A statement that shows that the person takes ownership for her actions.*

“It was a mistake.” “I regret that decision.” “I made a poor choice.”

3. *An explanation of things the person has done to change his life.*

“I’m in counseling.” “I’m in AA now and I’m helping people in my group.”

“I’m working on my GED because I want to better myself.” “I’m volunteering because I want to give back to my community.” “I’ve learned that I ...”

4. *An explanation of how the person would be a good employee.*

“I am very reliable. For example, I have been volunteering at my church and I have never missed a day.” “In my previous jobs I have always been on time and my employers thought I was a good team player.”

An example of how to put it all together:

“Two years ago I had a drug problem and made some bad choices. As a result, I was convicted of theft. I no longer want to live that kind of lifestyle. I’m working on changing my life. For example, I’m involved in treatment and I have been sober for six months. Going back to work is part of moving my life forward and I will be a good employee because I have experience as an assembler...”

- Help the person deal with feelings of hopelessness and shame by building a list of strengths and abilities. Another strategy would be to help the person develop a list of positive affirmations. Use a paradigm shift. For example, rather than “you were homeless”, ask the person how they survived on the streets. What strengths did they use to get by?
- Help the person feel confident about his or her strengths so that he can sound believable when describing the reasons that he would be a good fit for the business. Rehearse talking about strengths with the person. Allow the person to use his or her own words.

- Think about vocabulary. Are you or the person using words such as “felon”, “ex-convict”, “ex-offender” or “client”? Instead talk about a qualified job seeker who has made changes in his or her life.
- Help the job seeker focus on his or her tone of voice. For example, speaking clearly and using a matter-of-fact tone, rather than an angry tone.
- Help people obtain letters of recommendation. Parole or probation officers, mental health practitioners, clergy, volunteer supervisors, GED instructors, college professors, past employers, and employment specialists can be good sources. Consider helping the person to gather letters of references, certificates of treatment completion, awards, work samples, and other material into a self-promotional portfolio.
- Practice job interviews with the person. Video. Role-play.
- Help the person to follow up on all job applications and interviews to show enthusiasm for working. For example, help the person write thank-you notes for job interviews.
- Be familiar with Work Opportunities Tax Credit (www.doleta.gov/business/incentives/opptax) and federal bonding program (www.bonds4jobs.com) before offering these incentives to employers. The websites include information that you can share with employers.
- If someone does not respond well to your suggestions, enlist the help of others such as mentors or parole officers with whom the person can identify. Ask those people to provide feedback to job seekers, if needed. For example, feedback about demeanor, body language or dress.
- Align yourself with your client. Focus on your client’s goals. “I want to help you with your goal. Some employers may have stigma about legal histories, but that isn’t your barrier—it belongs to those employers. We’ll find an employer who is right for you.”
- Consider checking the person’s references (with permission). Call references to see if they really will say positive things about the person. “I’m working with Bob. He’s applying for jobs and I noticed that you are listed as a reference. What would you say about Bob as a potential employee?”
- Be respectful of client preferences by supporting long-term employment goals and asking about short-term goals. If a person is unable to find work in his area of interest, then help the person explore additional job options.
- If the person is not using disclosure, offer to help the person draft a letter of explanation that will accompany all job applications. Also encourage these job

seekers to try to make direct contact with employers to explain how they are changing their lives. The letter should include the following elements:

- A brief statement about the conviction
- A statement that shows that the person takes ownership for their actions. “It was a mistake.” “I regret that decision.” “I made a poor choice.”
- An explanation of ways that the person has changed his or her life since then. “I’m in counseling.” “I’m in AA now and I’m helping people in my group.” “I’m working on my GED because I want to better myself.” “I’m volunteering because I want to give back to my community.”
- Explanation of how the person would be a good employee.