

Offender employment and employability: An overview

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Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has increased its focus on employment training in order to ensure inmates are job ready at the time of release. Employment and Employability Process (EEP) in CSC, which is strategic in its approach, enhances inmates' chances of finding and keeping employment upon release. EEP provides inmates with a sense of purpose, and develops and maintains the generic competencies needed to be employable in today's market. Research conducted by the Conference Board of Canada suggests that employers are willing to provide instruction and training in the trades. However, they seek potential employees who have acquired employability skills, which include fundamental, teamwork and personal management skills, in order to succeed.

The Employment and Employability (EEP) process begins at intake with an employment domain vocational assessment. This assessment includes, the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA), parole officer and employment assessor interviews, the vocational assessment tests, an employment report and results from a thorough employment domain analysis. This analysis is condensed into meaningful objectives for the offender which are placed in their correctional plan to address the inmate's individual needs. In order to take the vocational assessment, inmates must have a functioning grade 9 education in mathematics and English.

The employment plan's objective becomes, enhancing the employability of an offender through academic upgrading (as reflected from resulting educational assessment tests), employability skills training, short-term, third-party, trade related certification and practical institutional employment opportunities that mirror standards in the community and are reflective of the offenders abilities and interests.

The vocational assessment provides the ability to identify the interest patterns that reflect the offender's personality type, as well as their aptitudes and trainability. The integration of interests, abilities and aptitudes can be related to occupational options. The results of the tests identify clusters of jobs that match the strengths and needs of the individual inmates. These clusters are then linked to the generic work descriptions of employment available at the sites. Work descriptions have been developed for all work opportunities in the institution. Through these work

descriptions inmates can develop the necessary skills, attitudes and behaviours that are transferable when released into the community. The work descriptions include a learning objective, skills to be learned, a recommended length of stay to acquire the skills identified and a measurement strategy. The work description can also be used to assist an inmate in the preparation of a resumé. Work supervisors also use the work descriptions when assessing skill development and performance. Through work assignments, and vocational training opportunities inmates may also obtain short-term trade related third party certification. CSC has added numerous third party certifications to further enhance job readiness at the time of release. During 2003–2004, approximately 4000 vocational certificates were earned by inmates (3,494 by male inmates and 393 by women inmates). Certificates were earned in areas such as Basic Food Safe, Work Hazardous Materials Information System, Industrial Cleaning, Forklift Operation, Construction Safety and many others.

As part of the employment strategy CSC is in the process of piloting an in-class Employability Skills Program to train inmates in generic skills, necessary to find, keep and advance in employment in the community. The Employability Skills Program was designed in conjunction with the Conference Board of Canada. The Board is the foremost independent, not-for-profit applied research organization in Canada and is affiliated with The Conference Board, Inc. that services some 3000 companies in 67 nations. When an offender enrolls in the employability skills program they learn the eleven important skills, attitudes moreover, behaviours that employers value most. As well, they receive a Skills Solutions certification from the Conference Board of Canada. To date, 46 male inmates have completed the pilot program. A unique, employability skill program is presently under development with the Conference Board of Canada for women inmates and is scheduled to commence in March 2005. The employability skills program has a research component attached, that will assist the Service in determining results.

In addition to the employability skills program, a portfolio program is being piloted. This initiative builds on the inmates prior experiences in order to build a personal skills portfolio. This program was delivered by the Nova Scotia Community College

in cooperation with the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre of Halifax. The purpose of the program was to test whether such a program could work in an institution by:

- Providing inmates with tools to help them identify their skills and abilities acquired from formal education and life experiences; and,
- Encouraging inmates to establish goals toward the next steps in their personal development.²

The results of the initial skills portfolio program were positive. Twelve (12) inmates were chosen based on a specific criteria and their participation was voluntary. All candidates had work experience. At the end of the program, 10 out of the 12 successfully completed and 8 of the 10 participants formally presented their portfolios to a wide audience. In addition, 8 out of 10 wanted to further their education by:

- Completing their General Education Development (GED) within the institution;
- Attending Community College to attain certification in a specific trade; and
- Beginning a university degree through distance learning.

All the inmates created an action plan to achieve their goals and they turned perceived negative life experience into positive skill development and greater self-confidence.³ The results of the Skills Portfolio Program were deemed significant enough to warrant further analysis. Therefore, CSC is presently negotiating with the Centre in Halifax to run the Program in four institutions in the Atlantic Region.

To enhance job readiness in our communities, there are approximately 34 employment locations where offenders can obtain services in preparation for employment. Services are provided through partnership contracts internally (CSC and Corcan) and externally. External contracts are arrangements with local community-based service delivery agencies recognized for their knowledge of offenders' needs such as, the Elizabeth Fry Society, the John Howard Society, the St. Leonard's Society and the private sector. Through our community partnerships,

hundreds of offenders have been placed in jobs in the community. Links between institutions and the community have been strengthened to ensure inmates with employment needs on release are referred to these employment services. The employment locations provide a variety of employment services including individual employment assessment, counselling, job search techniques, resumé writing training and ultimately on-the-job placements. Over 1,000 offenders have been employed each year, with the number growing from 1,036 in 2001–02 to 1,194 in 2002–03 and by year end 2003–04 1,193 male offenders and 70 women offenders found employment using these services in the areas of construction, general labour, hospitality, janitorial services, manufacturing, call centres and food and beverage services. Preliminary results indicate that the employment locations are fulfilling an important role in the reintegration of offenders into the labour force.

In the simplest of terms, the EEP equals job readiness. The tools being developed and tested are to assist the offender to maximize his/her skills so that, when released, he/she is better equipped to find and retain stable employment. The practical work experience and the innovative programs introduced in federal correctional institutions and the services provided through community employment locations complete what CSC refers to as the job readiness continuum.

CSC's Employment and Employability strategy has recently been cited as a best practice in the *Re-entry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community*. The Re-Entry Policy Council is a network of policy makers and practitioners from across the United States guided by staff representing many organizations. While this result is very encouraging continued work is needed to assist offenders with their job readiness in order to assist them in becoming productive members of society. ■

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² Mott, K. (2005). *The Graduates, Saltscapes*, 6(1), 71–73

³ Ibid.