

The importance of employment to offender re-integration

Robert Small¹

Corcan Employment Services, Correctional Service of Canada

When we meet someone for the first time it is often asked of us, “What do you do for a living?” When we think of describing someone to others, it is often in the context of defining them through the work they perform. Our work always seems to define us, not only in context of self, but also in the context of others. It gives us status, prestige, and a certain class structure.

We also know how devastating it can be to one’s life if a job is lost or a period of unemployment occurs and the stress it creates. For many, it can lead to feelings of low self-worth, depression, and self-doubt. Work becomes the essence of our being. People, who do not work, seldom have purchasing power or the ability to make important decisions that effect them relative to the world around. They can become powerless without income or status.

People who lose their jobs or positions through incarceration face a greater challenge. They have to serve time in prison and then be released into a community that has little if any empathy for the charged and convicted. Incarceration is a stigma that may follow an individual for life.

The reintegration of a person to the community would be much easier if that community would show tolerance for the individuals, allowing them to prove to themselves and others they can be productive, law abiding citizens again. It is seldom, if ever, an easy task. The stigma of jail has a negative effect on most released offenders and results in having doors closed on them before their skills or strengths are taken into account.

My role at Corcan Employment Services (C.E.S.) for the last eight years has been to assist people on release from prison in finding suitable employment or training. This is a major task as the ones we are trying to help often have multiple barriers to address before they are ready to pursue jobs.

Our services at Corcan, with two counsellors and an administrative person hired through St. Leonard’s, attempt to bridge the gap between the “not job ready” and the “job ready”. We try to focus on needs, strengths, skills, goals, along with many other

things that impact finding work. This is frequently complicated by the fact that there are more pressing immediate needs. Sometimes, the first priority is to deal with the basic needs of people such as food, clothing, and shelter before we can begin to think of job searching for someone. As well, many of our clients are looking for work with incomplete personal identification, no work clothes or proper footwear. All of this combined with no money makes a job search very difficult. It may result in a person finding an entry level job and earning a below market value wage to begin their “employment reintegration.” However, this is only the first step. Soon there will arise all the previous barriers in this person’s life such as family obligations, poor coping strategies or issues such as substance abuse, and program commitments of CSC. The person may realize that all the things present before jail time are still there after release. It is fair to say that people reintegrating must prove themselves twice as much as ones who have not done time.

One way to overcome past and present barriers is through retraining or re-education. But how can an individual afford either when they have few, if any resources? It is also easier said than done and idealistic to think everyone is capable of re-education. Retraining of any kind has value and merit. Employers want to see recent certification that shows prospective employees are adaptable, trainable, and willing to learn.

When people are released from prison with the same skills, education, work ethic and a negative attitude, they have considerable personal challenges to address, not to just succeed, but to stay out of prison. The economics of our society position the value of the individual by their employment/ profession relative to attainable income. Furthermore, today’s labour force requires a person’s ability to adapt to an ever changing market place which is, for many, key to survival in the workforce. Even the gainfully employed must look at refreshing their work skills. For the released offender, the absence of any marketable trade skills significantly reduces the opportunity for successful reintegration.

An example that works for parole releases is how a certificate in driving a forklift opens up a new field of employment. A two year course in chef training may indeed launch a person into careers in the food services. Computer skill upgrading is essential for almost every job. The problem with these choices is they cost money which the parolee does not have. Therefore, a person finds it difficult to visualize the simplest plans when they seem out of reach financially. Our job at CES, when necessary, is to try to convince them otherwise. We try and find what community resources are available and how this person can access them. This, however, is an ongoing problem. There just isn't money available to everyone who needs it for retraining. The person must realize they're required to work and save money to invest in their own future. It becomes a hard message to hear when an individual just wants to earn enough for the necessities of life. The trade unions are other options that can be attractive to the recently paroled. However, the unions and apprenticeships they foster have an aging workforce that needs replacing. Many people on parole seeking union work are not in their twenties and, therefore, not good candidates for long term apprentice training. As well, most union training requires minimum education grade levels and candidates must show up to the training sites with transcripts in hand. There is also an initial cost factor to join unions and training programs.

It is difficult to try to undo years of educational neglect once a person is incarcerated and it is inconceivable that one organization can do it in isolation. However, if further "affordable" community resources were available to deal with adult literacy, learning disabilities, basic skill upgrading, a major need of the incarcerated would begin to be addressed. Most people who supervise parole or work in the field of corrections see this as a major problem. To be tested in the community for learning potential, strengths and interests, the costs exceed \$600. Not to mention trying to have someone assessed for a learning disability. Literacy programs in the community are not always set up to deal with the assessment of learning disabilities. It is enough of a task trying to teach an adult how to read and write without running the battery of testing necessary to determine a learning disability. In many cases, adult upgrading programs are filled to capacity and applicant waiting lists have become necessary. At CES we are constantly reviewing existing resources that would assist us in providing a more effective and efficient employability service to our clients and the reintegration process.

Corcan Employment Services assesses the individual's strengths, job readiness, motivation to work and all available community resources as we try to come up with a workable plan with the parolee. We are able to see much more success of course when someone has skills, work history and is motivated to change. The most successful people are often the ones who, through sheer motivation, overcome barriers that otherwise would remain. Motivation to change must, of course, be absolute as we have frequently seen people with initial success sabotage it through substance abuse or acts of crime. Motivation is one thing that is very hard to teach. It must be a quality that comes from within.

If one's motivation is to succeed based on higher earning power, they often get re-educated, resulting in better jobs. Of course an effective job search becomes much easier when you have something of value to offer the employer. An employer may even overlook a criminal record when the applicant facing them is well prepared for an interview, has skills and a good attitude.

The other reality of the present job market is that employers advertise job postings with the requirements of having not just a resume in hand, but also a criminal abstract. This is even more reason to be skill trained, with job references in hand and certificates of qualifications available. It appears that society as a whole is becoming less tolerant of a criminal record. We need to educate the public more about the successes that have occurred with re-integration, not just the failures. We should somehow balance that with the ones who have turned the corner and made the transition from prison to community successfully.

Unfortunately, these stories are not heard, as the individual who makes it would rather remain anonymous due to the stigma, than reveal their success. People realize they will have an asterisk beside their name if it becomes known they were ever in prison. It has happened occasionally that when an 'on release' worker was up for a promotion, they were subjected to a required security background check. For many, this has resulted in not only the loss of the promotion, but also the loss of their job.

The open mindedness of an employer can turn a person's life around by giving them that much needed chance. Once they realize they are hiring someone who has something to prove, it soon becomes evident that person is a good worker. The employer may need to rely on references from prison-based instructors, community parole officers, employment counsellors in order to be assured they are hiring a good worker. For the majority of those

who do not reveal their backgrounds, their job market shrinks considerably and skills, education and solid work references become even more vital. People most often feel more comfortable revealing their records when they become entrenched in their jobs, after proving their work skills to the employer.

Conclusion

When dealing with released offenders that have incomplete education, poor work history, substance abuse issues and poor coping skills, the task of finding and keeping employment becomes almost insurmountable. The main function of Corcan

Employment Services is not to convince them of what direction to take, but to not give up and help them identify attainable options. Not always, but sometimes an effective resume is all one needs to begin turning the corner. Generally though, it runs much deeper and requires a long-term commitment to deal with employability through retraining and re-education. ■

¹ Suite 1010, 180 Dundas Street West, Toronto, ON M5G 1Z8

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