

Offenders and work in the Correctional Service of Canada: A historical evolution

Work plays a significant role in our lives. With little effort, we can all remember highly significant experiences associated with the world of work-getting the job, getting the promotion, getting laid off or even getting fired.

Jobs and co-workers also shape our daily lives. Friendships and romances are born in the workplace. Personal expectations are reinforced or altered through the complex interactions involved in the work experience.

It is easy to understand why work plays such a dominant role in our lives and culture. Work provides us with income and the means of consumption. It allows us to establish independence and develop a true adult identity. The work we do gives purpose to our days and, at least partly, defines our social identity.

Work does not have the same social meaning for offenders. Roughly 70% of offenders indicate that they have never held a steady job. Most offenders engage in behaviour that make finding and keeping a job very difficult (such as excessive alcohol or drug use). Many are also too impulsive to work in a structured setting.

Given this lack of employment skills, the Correctional Service of Canada has traditionally focused on work programs to develop offender work habits and employability skills. This article examines the evolution of these attempts, and culminates with an assessment of where we are now and where we must go in the future. A starting point Elected officials and, indeed, the public have always placed high value on establishing prison work regimes to teach inmates job skills. This notion has broad appeal and a strong tradition, but it has become increasingly difficult in recent years to maintain effective offender work programs. The value of work within modern rehabilitative programming is still being debated, as are the means for managing work in a prison environment.

The use of offenders to perform work in prison is as old as the practice of incarcerating wrong-doers. In fact, it could well have been an inmate work gang that quarried the stone to build Canada's first penitentiary. When the then Penitentiary Service first began operation, work was the cornerstone of the prison regime. This work was essential to the operation of correctional facilities and was an integral part of an offender's sentence.

Over the last 50 years, offender work has steadily declined in importance. The reasons are many and varied, but they can be grouped into three categories:

- the increasing pace of automation in society was not paralleled in prisons;
- modern correctional programming reduced the need for work as an offender activity; and
- new operational practices placed a low value on work.

The changing nature of offender work Throughout most of the last century, there was little mechanization in agriculture, food processing or the other jobs needed to keep a penitentiary functioning. The skills needed for these jobs were minimal and easily learned by inmates.

Penitentiaries employed few staff, so offenders were needed to maintain the institution. Canadian penitentiaries were also relatively small, which meant that a large proportion of inmates could be occupied with the task of keeping the facility self-sufficient.

Work-saving innovations have since been introduced in all major areas of inmate employment. However, because of the need to keep inmates busy, technological improvements have been slow to reach the prison workforce. Therefore, inmate jobs have become less and less like similar jobs in the community.

This gap between free-world and prison work has widened as inmate populations have grown. Unfortunately, the inmate population has increased much faster over the past 25 years than the number of prison jobs, so work previously done by one inmate is now divided among several workers to prevent offender unemployment.

This is done in two ways. Work supervisors may accept more workers than they need and then enforce idleness at the work site (workers are told to stay on the site, but out of the way), or a day's work may be redefined (for example, assign each cleaner a smaller area). The result is that inmate productivity is only a fraction of the productivity currently expected from a Canadian worker.

This century's most profound shift in correctional policy has also occurred during the last 25 years. The Service has gained important insights into the factors that influence criminality and the programming that best addresses those factors. However, correctional programs have had an unintended negative impact on offender work.

Only recently have attempts been made to determine the correctional impacts of work programs and how work should be organized to produce strong correctional results. As a result, work has largely been perceived as having little correctional effect.

At the operational level, this has resulted in a failure to assign offenders who might benefit from a particular type of work to a related work placement, as well as other practices that signal to offenders that work placements are a low priority.

Changes in operational practice have also diminished the role of offender work. As more resources were assigned to the correctional system, institutional staffing was increased to ensure that services could be provided (with minimal disruptions) even when inmates were not available. Increased staffing has, therefore, limited meaningful work opportunities for offenders. It has also permitted increased inmate movement between program assignments, which has destabilized many work areas and prevented inmates from staying in one spot long enough to obtain benefit.

Staff also now more frequently describe inmates as unreliable, lazy, inattentive and only capable of performing minimal tasks. Although this may reflect changing inmate characteristics, it may also reflect inmate reaction to the fact that most prison work is unnecessary, unchallenging and unvalued.

Despite all this, work can have meaning and can influence offender rehabilitation. Our challenge is to integrate recent knowledge in this area into an agenda for change. The following key elements of this

research could, and should, form the basis for establishing effective new prison work programs. The correctional value of work There is a basic need to re-establish work as part of correctional programming. Under the right circumstances, prison work experience is a factor in the safe reintegration of offenders. The results of research into offender work and post-release performance must, therefore, be widely disseminated among staff. It is critical that staff see inmate work as more than just something to fill inmates' time. Staff must recommend work as part of correctional plans and monitor inmate workplace performance. This will not happen unless they believe that prison work has correctional value. Segregate "make-work" from jobs In the short run, it will not be possible to eliminate "make-work" activity. It is, however, essential that we stop calling things like a 15-minute cleaning activity a job. Make work should have neither the status nor the benefits associated with a job.

This also means re-evaluating the inmate job roster, defining requirements for each work position and setting time limits for each activity. Further, benchmarks should be established and used to relate prison work to comparable outside work. This should be done by determining the staff and inmate hours required to produce a given output, and by comparing the productivity of inmate workers with that of their outside counterparts. Work and the correctional plan Work must be treated as a complex social situation and should not be scheduled on an offender's correctional plan until after certain personal and interpersonal needs have been met.

Pay should encourage skill acquisition-motivation is critical to success. For example, a data-entry facility was set up at a Canadian penitentiary in the 1970s that needed inmates with keyboard skills. The better-paying data-entry jobs required a typing speed of 35 words a minute. Inmates interested in these jobs routinely completed the institution's typing course in half the normal time to gain access to the better pay.

We must learn from this experience. Make prerequisites for higher-paying jobs work as they do in society by letting earning potential motivate offenders to move forward with their program plans. Maximize impact Work is learning by doing. If the work experience is to have value, it must continue for a certain length of time (research indicates that the minimum threshold is six months). The commitment involved in a work assignment should, therefore, be made clear to inmates and reinforced in program plans and case management progress reporting. Feedback Inmate workers should receive continuous performance feedback to make them aware of case management team observations of key behaviours. They should also receive performance feedback on key aspects of employability as defined by Canadian employers.

The first behavioural correctional feedback tool was developed by industry supervisors as part of a program to increase the impact of work on offenders. This powerful instrument allows supervisors to communicate expectations in simple language, rank performance according to observable behaviours and provide clear feedback. This system must be broadly implemented. Work supervisors Workplace supervisors need to be recognized as critical players on the correctional team. Not only must they continually develop their work specialization, they should also receive training to enhance their leadership skills. It is unfortunate that many of the people who spend the most time with offenders have the least training. The number of jobs We need to find more ways to create inmate jobs. The key to success in this area is accessing outside job markets-both government and private sector. As prison populations grow, we need to secure the market needed to productively employ offenders Each inmate

job needs about \$35,000 of market to support it.

Offender work also has to become much more cost-responsive. Institutions must respond to the market pressures from which they have been insulated for the last 25 years. This will be disruptive and, in many cases, will change established institutional practices.

Finally, the Service should set a corporate objective of employing not less than 20% of inmates in prison industries and farms. Transition programs and support services Skill development and experience will not go far if the released offender cannot overcome barriers to finding jobs. The labour market can be confusing and even frightening for someone with little experience. We must, therefore, provide support services (where required) to help offenders successfully re-enter society A final thought ... Prison work is at a watershed. Some very compelling research has given us the unique opportunity to rethink the role of work inside our institutions. Offender work has the potential to be revitalized and repositioned as a valued form of correctional intervention.

More important, the knowledge that properly conceived and executed work programs can promote the safe reintegration of offenders into society calls on us to act. This challenge requires us to break with practices that have been part of our professional environment for as long as many of us have worked in corrections. Nevertheless, it is necessary, and the payoffs could be great.

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