

JOB SEARCH TIPS FOR EX-OFFENDERS

By James T. Ingram

As challenging as the job search landscape may be, none is more daunting than searching for employment as a newly released ex-offender. And if the period of incarceration has been lengthy (say 20 plus years) the entire game has changed relative to networking, technology and employer expectations. Twenty years ago, email was not used to contact employers and online job searches and applications were non-existent. Therefore, a recently released ex-offender may want to take advantage of the myriad FREE computer workshops offered by the local public library and participate in job readiness workshops such as those offered by The Community Action Agency of St. Louis County.

Now, let's begin with the resume. I would strongly encourage ex-offenders *not* to reference their criminal background and to highlight any work experience they've previously had, including work experience gained *during* their incarceration. How does one achieve this goal? Choosing the proper resume format is the first step. Avoid the chronological format, which focuses on the specific *dates* of employment. Rather, use the functional resume format which emphasizes work *experience* versus *when* you actually worked on a particular job. This method takes the focus away from gaps in employment due to incarceration. Note that there is no rule that says that dates of employment must be listed on your resume. That should be reserved for discussion during the job interview.

Next, describe your prison experience in *non-prison* terms. For instance, if you worked as a laundry attendant at the "Missouri State Prison", you would simply say that you were employed by the "State of Missouri". Sounds much better, doesn't it? Both statements are accurate, but the first statement might eliminate you from consideration. When interviewing, the ex-offender should dress neatly, be punctual, avoid vague statements, and focus on their work experience, qualifications and strong work ethic.

Then there's the number one question which ALL ex-offenders should be prepared to address: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" The answer to that question requires a combination of tact, brevity and candor, without sounding too evasive.

Some examples of good answers or approaches to that question are:

- "In my past I made mistakes, learned from them and am a better person."
- "I am a hard worker who just needs an opportunity."
- "I have many goals for the future and a job will help me to achieve them."

Also, prepare a list of GOOD references, i.e., previous employers or places for which you may have volunteered, consisting of people who will vouch for your work ethic and character. It could be the difference between gainful employment and the unemployment line.

Finally, understand the reality that there are many employers who may not be willing to hire ex-offenders. Do not be discouraged. Look at your job search as a marathon as opposed to a sprint. You must be persistent and DO NOT give up!