



Working with Special Populations

Tips & Strategies

Substance Abuse

- Never disclose substance abuse history on applications or interviews. Although employers can test for current drug use, it is illegal for them to ask about past substance abuse. Addiction is a recognized medical condition and as such the confidentiality of treatment records is guaranteed by federal law. If an employer demands information on past substance abuse, the job seeker can deflect the question by answering "I do not use drugs and am willing to take a test to prove it."
- Employment can be a trigger for relapse. Even for those with long periods of sobriety, employment can act as a trigger to relapse for a number of reasons: more free time after leaving highly structured treatment or training programs; anxiety over the challenges of the new job and self-sufficiency; or the sudden availability of money from a regular paycheck. Job seekers with addiction histories should have a strong support system and treatment plan (aftercare, NA/AA, etc.) in place before accepting employment.
- Experience gained during treatment can be a valuable asset. Many substance abuse treatment programs integrate require training or work at the facility as part of a treatment plan. That experience can often be listed on a resume as either training or volunteer work without explicitly stating that the job seeker was in treatment.

Criminal Justice

- The largest barrier for ex-offenders is their perception of themselves and the world of work. Many people coming out of the criminal justice system believe they will never find employment due to their conviction history. Until that attitude changes, the road to success will be bumpy at best. Explain that many employers are more interested in what how someone can make them money today rather than the mistakes he or she made in the past. Highlight past program participants in the same situation who have found good work. Validate at every step of the process to build confidence.
- Everyone who has ever been arrested should request their rap sheet and credit histories prior to seeking employment. This is vital for two reasons: 1) people who

have been through the criminal justice system often do not understand the charges on which they were convicted, which may be different from what they were charged with; and 2) criminal justice records are filtered through multiple layers of bureaucracy and often contain incomplete or incorrect information. Although many states charge for rap sheets, they often waive the fees for low-income applicants. Job seekers can file a formal request to correct any errors or apply for certificates of rehabilitation if eligible. The Legal Action Center provides resources and assists with obtaining, interpreting and correcting criminal history.

- Many states and localities prohibit employers from refusing to hire ex-offenders solely on the basis of their criminal justice history, unless the conviction is directly related to the job. For example, a bank might legitimately refuse to hire someone with a conviction for credit card fraud, but not someone with a conviction for possession of a controlled substance.
- Ex-offenders should only disclose criminal justice history when an employer specifically requests it. Many ex-offenders are too quick to share information about their criminal activities even before an employer has asked. That can set a negative tone for the interview and cause the interviewer to worry needlessly. Of course, an ex-offender should never lie about their history if asked directly or they lose any legal protections against employment discrimination.
- Develop a statement of criminal history to help an ex-offender know what to say about his background. The best resume is of little use if the job seekers cannot get past the dreaded "Have you ever been convicted?" question. Many ex-offenders lie, or insist they were innocent, or share too many details about their criminal activities, because they do not know how to answer. A brief, written statement that acknowledges the past mistakes without describing them, expressing remorse, indicating that the person has changed and then describing the positive ways that change has occurred (skills developed, education, volunteer or work experience), can be a powerful script for a job seeker to internalize. They should memorize the statement and put it into their own words to keep it from sounding insincere. In addition, the statement can be attached to application forms that ask about criminal history.

Youth

- The impending retirement of the baby boom generation will create numerous opportunities in high wage, career track jobs. By 2010, one in five American workers will be on the verge of retirement, sparking demand for skilled younger workers. Many of these positions will not require a college degree, although may require specific training. By understanding the trends in the labor market, youth workers can help young people determine the best career tracks available. For a detailed look at the impact in the New York City economy, see the Center for an Urban Future's report *Chance of a Lifetime* (2006).
- Many youth criminal records can be sealed from employers. In New York State, if a young person is charged as a Juvenile Delinquent or Youthful Offender, their record

can be sealed and made available only to law enforcement and other specific agencies.

- Youth respond best to an asset-based, participant-centered curriculum. Many disconnected young people grow up hearing about their deficiencies. They don't respond well to traditional classroom-style lectures. A curriculum that emphasizes their strengths, uses activities and peer-learning to teach, and allows for significant input into its shaping will resonate far more effectively.

Mental Health

- There is a perception that mentally ill and mentally restored employees (that is, those in whom mental illness is effectively treated) tend to be second-rate workers. In fact, individuals with mental illnesses may in fact be superior in many ways to their co-workers without mental illness. Employers who have hired these individuals report that their attendance and punctuality exceed the norm, and that their motivation, work quality, and job tenure is as good as -- or better than -- that of other employees. Research has shown that there is no difference between the productivity of workers with and without mental illness.
- There is a perception that people with psychotic disabilities cannot tolerate stress on the job. In fact, the response to job-related stress, and precisely which factors will be perceived as stressful, varies among individuals with psychiatric disabilities just as they do among people without such disabilities. For all workers -- with or without psychiatric disabilities -- productivity is optimized when there is a close match between the employee's needs and his or her working conditions.

Physical Disabilities

- The Social Security Administration offers a number of programs to help people with disabilities obtain training and employment. For example, the Ticket to Work program provides a voucher that can be used at any approved training provider. For a full description of available resources, visit the Social Security Administration work website or contact a local Social Security office.
- Employers are often concerned about the potential high costs of implementing ADA information. In fact, the cost is often minimal to the employer. Data from an EEOC study indicates that only 22% of employees with disabilities need accommodations at the worksite. An EEOC-commissioned analysis by Berkeley Planning Associates found that nearly 70% of accommodations cost less than \$500 per employee with a disability.