

PROVIDING EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OFFENDERS

GROWING SUSTAINABLE WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

A CASE STUDIES SERIES



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The views expressed in these case studies are those of the respective organisations and the publication of the case studies should not be viewed as an endorsement of these organisations and their work by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice. The data and statistics presented within the case studies have been locally collected and cannot be verified by the Home Office, Clinks and Social Firms UK.

Background

Low qualifications and lack of employment are recognised within the Government's strategy for *Transforming Rehabilitation* as key social issues related to re-offending.*

Some local areas have already developed social enterprises as one way to overcome barriers around the employability of ex-offenders. However at the time of writing there is currently very little that brings together learning or examples of effective practice to assist others in doing this.

Recognising this gap, the Home Office commissioned a short term programme of work undertaken in February and March 2013 by Clinks and Social Firms UK.

The programme set out to explore and assess the role of social enterprises in enabling both adult and young offenders to access training and employment opportunities. The results provide a body of work that will significantly contribute to cross-Government thinking about how to embed and support social enterprises working with offenders. The programme included two elements:

- The development and publication of this series of twenty Case Studies. The social enterprises featured in the case study series were invited, following a competitive application process, to write about their own experiences and insights into the opportunities and barriers confronting their development and sustainability.
- A Summary Report which brings together the key learning about developing and sustaining social enterprises offering employment and employability training to offenders.

Together they provide a valuable resource for newly established social enterprises, for those planning to establish social enterprises, for police, prisons and probation providers, for Police and Crime Commissioners, for local Integrated Offender Management (IOM) partnerships, and for policy makers.

These resources also complement previous work undertaken in partnership between Clinks and the Home Office aimed at increasing the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector's involvement in local IOM arrangements.

* Ministry of Justice. May 2013. *Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform*: www.justice.gov.uk/transforming-rehabilitation

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Working Chance - a social enterprise leading a revolution in restorative recruitment

**Jocelyn Hillman, Chief Executive
Working Chance**



Introduction

Working Chance helps women ex-offenders to join or re-join the world of work. We do this by adopting strategies and tactics from the world of commercial recruitment consultancies and customising them to meet the needs of our target group. Our mission is to help women ex-offenders into work, but our business model is based on the concept of providing a professional service to employers, the majority of which are in the private sector. This case study examines how Working Chance balances the challenges involved in supporting these women and the prospective employers. The key issues for the women are the additional difficulties they face because they have a history of offending. Working Chance uses the same approach as a commercial recruitment consultancy but delivers its services with an underpinning compassion and experience of working with ex-offenders. This case study will demonstrate how a commercial model can be adapted to the vision and values of a socially beneficial enterprise, with impressive results.

Background

Ex-offenders in paid work are between a third and a half less likely to re-offend than those who are unemployed, so the business case for supporting them into the world of work is clear. Women ex-offenders tend to face additional barriers to finding work: chronic lack of self-esteem and a sense of disempowerment; limited awareness of how to access support, information and advice, particularly in the internet age; and, most importantly, the negative perceptions of employers.

Working Chance operates as a commercial recruitment consultancy, with the addition of extra services, both for candidates and employers that enable all parties to overcome the challenges of recruiting someone with recent involvement in the criminal justice system.

Working Chance is staffed by recruitment specialists who have worked in blue chip high street recruitment agencies such as Office Angels, Kelly and Search Consultancy. The four full-time recruitment consultants at Working Chance have over 20 years' experience between them. We provide recruitment services for key sectors such as retail, banking, pharmaceuticals, office services, hospitality and catering and call centres. That means that we really understand the recruitment cycle across a wide spectrum of businesses. This solid, commercial experience gives us a good grasp of the recruitment needs of potential employers and means we can speak with authority to candidates and employers alike.

What is different from many of the high street, high volume recruitment consultancies, however, is the individual service that Working Chance offers. Clearly, employing former offenders is a sensitive business so potential employers and candidates need support designed specifically for them. We take the time to get to know all of our candidates personally. We also lead by example, having recruited three ex-offenders to our own team. These team members add value to our services because they empathise with candidates and, through their dealings with potential employers; they overcome fears that may exist regarding employing ex-offenders.

Our experience – Working Chance

In addition to the core recruitment consultancy service provision, Working Chance offers a range of complementary services that work together in support of the central aim of getting women ex-offenders back into work. The journey from involvement in

the criminal justice system to paid employment is a long and sometimes rocky one, and the team at Working Chance are with candidates every step of the way.

Three times a year, Working Chance runs a series of workshops for employment candidates. The workshops offer women ex-offenders a comprehensive programme of preparation for work and this provides a bridge between past offending and a successful future. Some women come to the workshops while they are still in prison, as part of their preparation for release. Often the starting point is to work through the women's goals and ambitions for employment. We then help them to develop the tools they will need to apply for jobs. Putting together a CV presents particular challenges for ex-offenders. We give advice on how to deal with gaps in their employment history that result from spending time in prison and with the crucial matter of disclosing their offending history. This issue of disclosure of a criminal record is critical, as it is the source of many misconceptions on the part of candidates and employers alike. The Working Chance team has a wealth of advice and 'do's and don'ts' for candidates on this subject, including what to put on their CVs, what to say in face to face interviews and how to deal with the subject in conversation with colleagues and managers once they are in a job.

The workshops include a programme of interview coaching in which the candidates learn techniques and build self-esteem and are able to practise these skills in a role play, where volunteers from the professional world often take part. The programme also includes practical advice on the mechanics of getting a job. The culmination of the programme is a recruitment fair at which employers and candidates meet each other, speed-dating style. The recruitment fairs provide valuable interview practice for the candidates and sometimes result in offers of work or work experience.

In addition to the workshops, we also offer serving offenders work experience placements. Serving offenders have worked at a leading City of London law firm on a voluntary basis as part of their preparation for release from prison. With coaching and guidance from Working Chance, the participants have flourished, and the firm has taken on ex-offenders as paid employees after they have finished their work experience, one of whom has recently been promoted after only a few months in post.

By the time candidates have gone through the careful preparation provided by Working Chance and are judged by our experienced staff to be ready to meet a potential employer, they are indeed valuable human resources. As we have identified that a major barrier to ex-offenders gaining employment is the preconceptions of employers, we also provide support for businesses considering taking on our clients.

Our consultants take enormous care to understand potential employers' needs. It takes many months to cultivate the relationship to a point where employers feel they are in a position to offer a job to a candidate. A particular strategy that we adopt is to create unpaid work experience positions in the businesses and, once trust is established and misconceptions confounded, the relationship can progress to a commercial one where the consultancy is paid by the business for providing a successful candidate for a permanent job. Our payment model is not the same as a commercial agency as we do not charge a percentage of the first year salary. We charge a flat fee on a sliding scale. This approach builds confidence in the employer and supports the candidate and has proved to be an effective way of working.

Any employer who opens their mind to the possibility of taking on an ex-offender will benefit from the specialist service that Working Chance provides. Employers will be allocated a dedicated account manager who will get to know the business,

its needs and its recruitment criteria. An employer who recruits a woman through us will know far more about her than they would about someone who has come through a conventional employment agency. Her background will have been thoroughly examined, and her commitment tested in a way that most candidates' have not. The risk for an employer has been significantly reduced by the process.

Our specialist expertise in working with ex-offenders also means that we can provide potential employers with a great deal of advice on the legal issues relating to employing ex-offenders and also offer examples of good practice, which in our experience, will help them to manage relationships with their other staff and customers

In our experience, the main concerns that employers have are the following:

I can't hire ex-offenders because I have to do Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks [as CRB checks are now called] on all our employees

The Ministry of Justice has stated that employers should not use a DBS check as part of the recruitment exercise as this would breach employment law, unless the role in question is listed in the DBS eligibility guidance; for example, working with vulnerable children or adults with learning difficulties. The DBS Code of Practice also requires that employers who use DBS checks should have a written policy on the recruitment of ex-offenders and that the policy should ensure applicants who have a criminal record are treated fairly and not discriminated against because of their conviction.

I can't hire someone with a criminal record

Employers can hire someone with a criminal record. It is the decision of the recruiter, based on the job, the individual and their suitability/match to the role and the crime, to hire them.

Information about convictions is only part of a wide range of information available to employers, for example references, academic achievements, previous employment. The Government has always encouraged employers to take a balanced approach when considering the suitability of ex-offenders for employment.

I can't justify giving a 'criminal' a job when graduates can't find jobs

This is not what we suggest employers should do. Many of our candidates are graduates (around 20%). They are not asking for charity or any favours, they are asking for a level playing field so that candidates can compete fairly and openly in the job market.

I can't hire ex-offenders because my clients wouldn't like it

Businesses' clients depend on them to deliver a reliable service. They are not concerned with the internal decisions that the business makes. It is up to the business to employ people who can deliver for their clients.

We would need to get special lockers so other staff can keep their possessions safe

It is wrong to assume that all ex-offenders are thieves. The vast majority of our candidates have totally unrelated offences. Working Chance has not had a single candidate offend in the workplace. Our workplace re-offending rate is zero.

My staff won't like it

Many employers have found exactly the opposite. Marks & Spencer has reported that employees say it makes them proud to be working for M&S and increases staff moral and motivation.

Ex-offenders are unreliable and need handholding

Again, our experience suggests that the opposite is likely to be true. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has found that ex-offenders tend to be more reliable and stay as long if not longer than others as they have more to prove.

My insurance company will increase my premiums

The vast majority of our employers with whom we have placed candidates have not needed to make any changes to their insurance policies as a result of hiring ex-offenders.

We are regulated by the Financial Services Authority and we cannot employ someone with a criminal record

This is not true. What the FSA says is:

Very many of the roles within the regulated sector do not require FSA approval so the suggestion that firms are unable to employ ex-offenders is not accurate. Controlled function roles are the only instance in which we may impede that employment and the FSA will treat each application for approval to perform a controlled function on a case by case basis.

The barriers to employment for an ex-offender are such that a Working Chance woman who is given an opportunity to prove herself will take it with both hands. Employers who have recruited women through us have told us that these candidates are among the most loyal and conscientious members of staff they have. As one satisfied CEO of a housing trust said:

"I thought I was doing you a favour by hiring an ex-offender but, in fact, you've done me the favour. I've changed my whole perception about hiring ex-offenders and been educated at the same time."

Key learning

Our experience has shown that there are many barriers to employers taking on ex-offenders but that our approach can overcome them. It is important to work hard with employers to help overcome their concerns; in many ways this is a bigger barrier than the level of skills of the ex-offenders. Women ex-offenders lack confidence and need intensive support to help them to become good job candidates – and once they get jobs they often prove to be good and loyal workers. We offer specialist knowledge of all these issues, in particular the legal framework for employing ex-offenders.

The arguments in favour of helping ex-offenders back to work are legion. Re-offending falls dramatically and most compassionate people think that former offenders deserve another chance once they have completed their punishment. But all too often, even though people are in favour of the concept in principle, they find it difficult to convert that theory in practice, especially in relation to their own businesses. We frequently hear the sincere assertion, 'We think you are doing great work, but of course my company can't get involved'. A large portion of our time and effort is taken up in exploding these myths and helping employers to see that many of the perceived barriers to recruiting former offenders are illusions.

Since 2007, Working Chance has placed more than three hundred women ex-offenders into paid work. We have grown the roster of employers on our books from three to one hundred and fifty. The re-offending rate amongst our clients is under 3%, compared with the national average for women of 51%, and they have a zero re-offending rate relating to the workplace. It is Working Chance's ambition to break down the

remaining prejudices and preconceptions and to achieve a shift in perception such that a wider population of employers values our service and recognises the worth of our candidates. As Adam Goodwin, one of our volunteers from HM Treasury, remarked:

“Every time I take part in one of these [ex-offenders’] employment fairs, I become more convinced that the issue is not the employability of the women, but the stigma amongst employers.”

Working Chance is proving that, with support and encouragement, women whose lives have taken a wrong turn, can re-join the workforce and become productive and respected members of society.

