

Onward roundtable

Unlocking a better life: Helping ex-offenders find and stay in good jobs

Summary

This roundtable discussion highlighted some of the key aspects of the debate around reoffending and how to increase sustainable employment for ex-offenders. There was a general consensus around the table that ex-offenders finding work and keeping it were absolutely crucial to reducing recidivism.

There was an acknowledgment that government initiatives have tried and failed to reform the system of rehabilitation countless times. New ideas were needed. The roundtable meeting outlined the key areas of concern on this issue, such as: a need to change the public attitude towards ex-offenders; the requirement for a support system which goes substantially further than the prison gate; a further intertwining of external training by businesses inside the prison walls; a need to get more companies to employ ex-offenders.

A clear message that came out of this discussion was that employers need to be educated about the benefits of employing ex-offenders. An ex-offender's skills, loyalty and transparency often makes them brilliant employees, where they can contribute to a company both culturally and economically. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule on 29 January 2019.

Key discussion points

1. An increase in ROTL and in-prison employment is needed. While over 12,000 prisoners are currently in ROTL jobs in category D prisons and over 3,000 prisoners are working in prison services across the estate, there was a clear view in the discussion that there should be substantially more ROTL placements in the prison system. Additionally, there was a feeling that prisoners in category B and C prisons must be allowed to partake in outsourced employment inside the prison walls, as this increases their employability and personal confidence ahead of entering the public domain.

2. We should be better at explaining the cold hard business case for employing ex-offenders.

While companies see material benefit in employing ex-offenders, this message is not clearly broadcasted to the general public through the media or through the Ministry of Justice Press Office. One of the participants pointed out that "businesses need to see employing ex-offenders not as a charity mission or a box-ticking exercise but as something genuinely economically beneficial to their businesses". Those in the room, as well as organisations like Timpsons and Virgin, have outlined the economic sense of employing ex-offenders but getting many more firms to see this upside is key. Ex-offenders are often talented and will be loyal as they are grateful for being given a second chance. Additionally, employers know exactly who they are getting with an

ex-offender. Ex-offenders have a detailed record of their skills, behaviour and past, much more so than many normal applicants. This transparency should make them more favourable, not less. The discussion highlighted these points and called for employers to be informed of these arguments so that the stigma around ex-offenders can be broken down.

3. A support system is needed that assists both the employee and the employer for a prolonged period of time after release. While ROTL and in-prison employment have already been highlighted as important, there was also a continued concern around the table that further substantial support systems are vital in order to reduce re-offending. For some offenders this will mean long term support, for example Switchback works with ex-offenders for up to “22 months”. A better support structure would need to assist ex-offenders in a number of ways, including finding them work even if it takes a few attempts. One participant said that “brokering the link somehow between prisons and employers so that employers find it easier than it is at present to hire ex-offenders” was extremely important. An idea that was presented was of a reversed interview process, whereby employers attend prison job fairs to scout for new talent. The general view was that brokerage could play a role in pairing ex-offenders with appropriate employers who fit their skill profiles. Such a role would be mutually beneficial for both employers and ex-offenders. There is also a need to look at problems ex-offenders have in establishing an initial life post-release, the obvious ones being gaining access to Universal Credit in a timely fashion, finding housing and getting a bank account.

5. Tax breaks could be one way of getting firms to take the first step in employing ex-offenders. Many of the participants in the roundtable brought up the idea of offering tax breaks to firms as a means of drawing in more employers to hire ex-offenders. A reduction or elimination in employers NI contributions for employers of ex-offenders was discussed. The Apprenticeship Levy was also discussed, which currently does not apply to prisoners due to them not being an employee. This creates limited incentives to hire former offenders as they leave prison. Attendees were keen to address this issue in particular and several employers suggested it would have a tangible effect on their practices.

6. Some support for realistic self-employment ambitions for ex-offenders could be helpful. The idea of setting up a system of small investments for offenders who want to set up small businesses post-release was discussed. It was noted that the Prince’s Trust do this. What was stressed was that this shouldn’t become something in which hundreds of unrealistic proposals for businesses were supported, but rather there could be a sort of “business in a box” system arranged, in which things like a burger van or a small cleaning company could be packaged. The offender could pick one of these relatively off the shelf, tried and tested entrepreneurial models and then could qualify for the seed funding upon successful completion of a training course built around that model. This wouldn’t eliminate all risk from such investments, yet it could pave the way for more ex-offenders to start their own businesses with the highest possible ratio of success.

7. Better training of prison officers is key. There was broad agreement in the value of approaches such as that of Unlock Graduates, which runs a two year program for prospective prison officers, with rehabilitation and key worker ethos at the heart of their programme. If this could become the norm for UK prison officers this could make a huge difference. Part of this training would be pivoting from the current system which is much more about simply upholding security in prison, towards a system in which rehabilitation is a key part of the prison officer's job.

This was a research event ahead of Onward's upcoming report *Unlocking a better life: Helping ex-offenders find and stay in good jobs*. For more information on this report, please contact Nick Tyrone, at nick.tyrone@ukonward.com.