



A second shot: inmates at HM Young Offender Institution Aylesbury learn skills in the prison's Redemption Roasters coffee shop that will help them to find sustainable employment on the outside (see panel, p45)

**THE BUSINESS
BENEFITS OF**

hiring ex-offenders

More than 11 million British citizens have a criminal record. Only a quarter of UK employers would hire someone with a conviction, yet 92 per cent of these believe that doing so has benefited their business. As skills shortages continue to bite, is it time for more firms to rethink their recruitment criteria?

Words Ryan Herman **Photographs** Matthew Walder

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ack in 2016 the IoD hosted a dining event with a difference. It began with a drinks reception where the guests enjoyed Prosecco produced by San Patrignano, an Italian organisation that helps people

with drug dependencies. Meanwhile, a group of British ex-offenders representing a charity called The Clink worked with IoD staffers in the kitchen to make canapés. They also helped the front-of-house team.

After dinner The Clink's CEO, Chris Moore, spoke about its work to give inmates hospitality skills that would move them from serving time to serving haute cuisine. The charity runs restaurants at four prisons – Brixton, Cardiff, High Down and Styal – and recently opened a Clink Café in central Manchester. If you like to consult TripAdvisor before choosing where to eat out, you'll be reassured to see that The Clink at Brixton ranks 10th out of 18,244 restaurants in London.

"In 2017 we served lunch to more than 100,000 members of the public in our four restaurants," Moore says. "We're helping them to understand that the prison population is made up of a cross-section of society, just like you and me."

Indeed, a third of all male adults in the UK and nine per cent of female adults aged under 53 have a criminal record. That equates to 11 million people. Three-quarters of British employers would not recruit someone with a conviction to their name, according to research by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Such reluctance is understandable, but, as Moore says: "If you were to hire me, you'd know my name and details of my previous employment, but nothing much else. With the permission of our ex-offenders, we can say what they did wrong, how they behaved in prison and the qualifications they gained. So you'd know far more about a Clink graduate than you would about any other person you hire. Of course, there'll be the occasional disappointment, but I'd like to think that you'd get fewer failures than you would when recruiting the average person off the street."

A range of skills

Finding suitably skilled recruits has been cited by many IoD members as a big problem in recent years. The prison population represents a pool of talent that could help them solve it, according to Judah Armani. The founder of InHouse Records, which works with inmates at six prisons (see panel, p46), argues that "these guys have brilliance to them that doesn't exist in any other sector. They have come through challenges that no one else has faced. They used to be criminal entrepreneurs and now we have the chance to make them legitimate entrepreneurs."

Rob Lowe, the MD of online retailer Rinkit.com, agrees (see panel, p46). A convert to the benefits of employing ex-offenders, he says: "When we did a Q&A session at HMP Ford, near our base in West Sussex,

EMPLOYING EX-OFFENDERS: THE FACTS

More than **11,000** serving prisoners are employed in the UK, by more than

300 businesses and government departments.

75% of employers would not hire a candidate with a criminal record.

49% of those businesses that wouldn't consider hiring ex-offenders cited concerns about their "reliability" as the reason for this.

Only **17%** of inmates find a job within a year of release. Reoffending wipes an estimated £15 billion off UK GDP each year.



Bean machine: Jamie Marler, a coffee expert from Redemption Roasters, runs tasting sessions for its trainees at HM Young Offender Institution Aylesbury

'Many businesses tell us that the ex-offenders they employ seize their second chance'

one of the inmates questioned why our panellists were talking so much about recruitment into our warehouse. He said: 'A lot of us have skills that sit outside manual labour.'

But how exactly should a business go about employing an ex-offender? The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (Nacro) is a charity that can offer invaluable guidance.

"There's a procedure for criminal record checks that is incredibly complicated and can be quite arbitrary," says Helen Berresford, its external engagement director. "Nacro will help you put the right processes in place, including a risk assessment that's in accordance with the law."

She adds that Nacro is campaigning to relax the law governing the disclosure of unspent convictions. "Application forms with an automatic question about whether a candidate has a criminal record can deter people from applying. Further along the process, perhaps at the interview stage, there could be a fair

discussion about the offence and its relevance, rather than: 'That person has a record, so we won't hire them.'"

Lowe says that Rinkit.com now works directly with HMP Ford. "We write a job advert and send it to our contact there. They post it on the noticeboard and will check the eligibility of each applicant, based on factors such as the nature of the crime and time left to serve," he says. "The interviews are interesting, because it's hard for someone to inflate their skills and achievements when they're sitting in prison."

Government support

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) offers another route. In May 2018 it unveiled its New Futures Network scheme. This was created to increase the number of prisoners in England and Wales working productively while in custody and entering employment on their release.

The secretary of state for justice, David Gauke, told *Director*: "Our education and employment strategy means that prisoners are being trained in vocational skills that employers need. The New Futures Network will act as a broker between employers and prisons, so that businesses can recruit skilled people. Many businesses tell us that the ex-offenders they employ seize their second chance and are extremely hard-working and loyal. They are also much less likely to reoffend, which makes good sense for society."

Reoffending costs the British economy an estimated £15 billion every year. As some commentators have >>



CASE STUDY

'THE RESPONSE HAS BEEN REALLY POSITIVE'

Max Dubiel is co-founder of Redemption Roasters, which runs three coffee shops, including one based inside HM Young Offender Institution Aylesbury.

"We started out as wholesalers, roasting beans and selling to cafés, bars and restaurants. We'd also visit these clients to teach them how to make our coffee. Purely by chance, we got talking to someone from the MoJ's reoffending team, who asked if we could train people in a prison. We said we'd also install a roastery and teach inmates the whole production process.

"We now have a shop in the prison that sells coffee to staff. This turns the usual relationship between the officers and inmates on its head – it's refreshing to see.

"Once our trainees are released, we'll ideally hire them in our shops or refer them to one of our clients or an employer in the wider industry via the MoJ. Employing ex-offenders has a stigma attached, but the response from our customers has been really positive – 'redemption' is part of our name, after all.

"One of our trainees was interviewed by a journalist last year, who asked him: 'What do you say to people who believe you should be locked up forever and you shouldn't be taught these skills?' He replied: 'I think you should frame the question the other way: you can't lock up everyone forever and what are you going to do when they're released?'"





noted, that's more than the UK's annual contribution to the EU. Those who fail to find employment after prison are highly likely to become career criminals.

Berresford welcomes the initiative. "People in prison may have been learning skills in the past, but those skills didn't necessarily match the needs of the local labour market," she says. "Now it's about trying to put the two together by identifying potential employers and understanding their needs."

The New Futures Network works closely with companies including Balfour Beatty, Bernard Matthews, Halfords and Timpson. Larger organisations such as these will have plenty of resources to help them integrate ex-offenders, of course, but more and more

smaller firms are participating – and almost all of them believe it's had a positive effect on their business. The MoJ website offenderemployment.campaign.gov.uk has details about the scheme and how to get involved.

Our experts stress that, while there's clearly no guarantee that every person with a criminal record you hire will stay on the straight and narrow, there are numerous cases where it has been a transformative experience for both employer and employee. As Armani puts it: "I would advise any potential employer not to employ ex-offenders out of charity. Do it because these guys are high-level problem-solvers – and I've yet to meet any business owner who doesn't have a problem that needs solving." **dl**

92%

of inclusive employers say that their willingness to recruit ex-offenders has enhanced their reputation, often helping them to win contracts.



CASE STUDY

'IT HAD AN INCREDIBLE IMPACT'

Judah Armani is the founder of InHouse Records, which runs workshops in prisons and is about to open a record shop staffed by ex-offenders.

"InHouse Records has to be a sustainable business, where we get paid by the prisons. 'Projects' always end – and some inmates have had bad experiences of things ending in their lives. But the real meat of InHouse is how it helps the guys learn more skills.

"We started in September 2017 at HMP Elmley. We risked something, as we said: 'We'll do it free of charge for three months.' It had an incredible impact in reducing violence and other negative behaviour. The MoJ wrote about it on its intranet and suddenly other prisons were saying: 'We want to work with you.' So we're now at Lewes, Rochester, Stamford Hill, Thamesmead and Wormwood Scrubs.

"We're about to open a shop in east London. Universal Records is our music partner and EY is our business partner. EY not only sees this as an opportunity for a start-up to do something positive. It also sees the venture as an alignment of business and social good. It's been involved since day one, providing a full-time member of staff for a year, helping me to develop the business narrative and work with the guys once they're on the outside."

CASE STUDY

'IT'S BEEN BRILLIANT FOR OUR BUSINESS'

Rob Lowe is MD of Rinkit.com, which sells everything from glassware to sun loungers online, handling more than 500,000 orders a year.

"Our firm's founder, Richard Goss, and I attended a conference where we heard an ex-offender talk about the positive effect on his life of being hired by Timpson. Our site in Littlehampton is near HMP Ford, so we thought: 'Let's see if anyone there wants to work for us.' Another local business recommended that we speak to James Palmer, the prison's head of business and community engagement.

"We learnt a lot about prison and how probation works: in some cases, people could leave with very little money and nowhere to go. We felt that their path towards reoffending had already been laid out, which made us more determined to get involved. We employ people both while they're inside and after their release. We've had 16 participants so far.

"We went into this with a very open, upfront attitude and all of our staff supported the move. This is something that other employers need to consider. It's about getting in there and meeting the people you might end up recruiting. Like any other job interview, it might lead to nothing. But there is a huge pool of talented people who want to learn new skills and make good use of the ones they have. This is the first thing I talk about when I meet new people. It's been brilliant for our business and I hope it continues."

