

# America Working Forward

A U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION SPECIAL REPORT

## HIDDEN WORKFORCE

Businesses need workers. Ex-offenders need jobs. Here's how they're bridging the gap

### PLUS

*Orange Is the New Black* Author shares her story of finding work after prison

→ Meet Indiana's women welders

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**WE BELIEVE IN  
AMERICAN  
BUSINESS.**

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**IN ITS ENDLESS POTENTIAL AS A PROBLEM SOLVER.**

**DIFFERENCE MAKER. SOURCE OF PRIDE.**

**THAT JOB CREATORS ARE HEROES.**

**THAT EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL &  
PROSPERITY IS CELEBRATED.**

**IT'S WHAT KEEPS AMERICA STRONG  
AND CREATES OPPORTUNITY.**

**WHEN BUSINESS THRIVES, COMMUNITIES THRIVE, AND THAT'S GOOD FOR EVERYONE.**

**FOR WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S NEXT, WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER.**

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Josh Haxton, an ex-offender, installs electrical wiring for home builders in Avondale, Arizona.



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**PLUS** *The author of Orange Is the New Black on why you should become a second-chance employer*

# Welcome to the Workforce

**T**wo years ago, I met Coss Marte at a business conference. He's an entrepreneur who is creating jobs and giving back to the community. Like everyone else at the conference, he had an expansion plan, mentors, and investors. What was different was that he'd been released from prison just a few years earlier, and he couldn't find a job. Not a single one. Hiring managers ghosted away due to his record, so he created his own opportunity and is now giving the same chance to other ex-offenders.

He's not alone in facing this challenge. Every year, more than 600,000 former inmates return to society and face the same hurdles.

We brought Coss to the Chamber to talk about his experience and what employers should know about hiring ex-offenders. It's important because right now—for the first time ever—there are more open jobs than people without jobs. Can ex-offenders help fill this gap? Employers are beginning to think so, and they have a lot of questions about how to engage this “hidden workforce.”

This special edition of *America Working Forward* is devoted to the people who are building those pathways to employment. With original reporting and photography, we share best practices and real stories about the pathway from jail to job. We spent a year getting to know employers, nonprofits, entrepreneurs, corrections officials, and inmates who are creating innovative approaches to reentry in communities across the country.

These are the stories from inside prisons, job sites, and training facilities. We're honored to share them. You won't find all the answers in this magazine, but we hope you walk away with the knowledge to start having meaningful conversations about how to become a second-chance employer. Because when businesses do well, people do well, and the communities around us thrive. That's the credo at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

Please let us know what you think by sending a note to:  
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PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX SLITZ



—  
Ashleigh Hall of Indianapolis, speaks with potential employers during a job fair for soon-to-be-released prisoners in Madison, Indiana.

# A

t first glance the facilities at Dave's Killer Bread in Milwaukie, Oregon, look like any normal, bustling bakery.

What most visitors don't realize is that a majority of the 230 workers who make the company's popular organic breads have criminal records. Giving ex-offenders a second chance has been the company's philosophy ever since the Dahl family started the business in 2005. In fact, Dave Dahl, one of the family members who helped launch the company, was himself an ex-offender.

The Dahl family sold Dave's Killer Bread in 2015, but the company, one of the largest sellers of organic bread in the nation, continues the tradition. It supports the Dave's Killer Bread Foundation, which helps other businesses navigate the hiring, training, and retention of former prisoners. Genevieve Martin, executive director of the foundation, says many businesspeople used to find the idea of hiring formerly incarcerated people admirable but scary. When they'd ask Martin whether former prisoners would be unreliable or steal, she says she would tell them, "This is not a big deal...This is not complicated. At its core it's about people and making sure you have the right people in the right positions."

Today, Martin says the subject has become less taboo and prospective employers are less inclined

to stereotype people with records, partly because the current labor shortage—as of April 2019, unemployment is at 3.6 percent—makes it necessary to tap into every possible labor pool. Across the country, a growing number of companies like Dave's are aggressively hiring people with criminal records.

At the same time, a new breed of nonprofit is emerging that partners with businesses to help give people with records the job and life skills they need to stay out of jail and prosper. Ex-offenders who want to turn their lives around get a fair shot at a new life; meanwhile, employers get motivated workers with industry-specific training. In Arizona, where home construction is booming, a collaboration between business and the state prison system—called Second Chance—teaches inmates awaiting release construction skills and then connects them with busy contractors (see page 30). In Cleveland, EDWINS, a high-end French restaurant, has built a program that not only teaches ex-offenders advanced kitchen and restaurant skills but also gives them full-time jobs (see page 14).

Businesses can't be blamed for being skeptical about hiring former prisoners. Historically, prison training programs largely failed to provide employers with workers who had the right skills and work habits. Before becoming national director of reentry initiatives at Right on Crime, John Koufos was a New Jersey criminal attorney who went to prison for a

**“This is not a big deal... This is not complicated. At its core it’s about people and making sure you have the right people in the right positions.”**

●  
GENEVIEVE MARTIN  
*Executive Director, Dave’s Killer Bread  
Foundation (Milwaukie, Oregon)*

drunk-driving crash. He thinks of prisons as dysfunctional social hospitals. “They just set you out in the waiting room,” he says, “and they don’t X-ray you, don’t set the bone, don’t do anything. They just let the bone set wrong. And then say, ‘Go out and run a marathon.’”

For that reason, recidivism rates are high. Prisons are not a great place for getting an education or learning a trade. They are also not ideal for learning any of the social skills needed to get along on the job or for developing the necessary paper trail needed to even apply for a job—things such as getting a driver’s license, a Social Security number, or a bank account. Many ex-offenders have drug or mental health problems. Many are poor and burdened with fines, legal fees, and court costs, not to mention parole meetings or court-ordered treatment programs. Many wind up homeless.

As a result, the business community, despite some change of heart, is still unsure about hiring ex-offenders. According to a 2018 survey of managers and human resources professionals conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management and Koch Industries, Inc., 55 percent of managers say they are willing to work with people with criminal records, but 15 percent are not and 29 percent are unsure. The most common concerns among employers are the risk of violence in the workplace and the possibility of being sued for “negligent employment.”

## BY THE NUMBERS

### WORKFORCE

**55%**

The percentage of managers willing to work with people with criminal records

**19M**

The number of ex-offenders who have returned from prison

**230**

The number of employees at Dave’s Killer Bread that have criminal records

**Sources:** Society for Human Resource Management and Koch Industries, Inc.; University of Georgia; Dave’s Killer Bread company.

**“You need nonprofit workplace groups to tell you who is ready.”**

●  
JEFF KORZENIK  
*Chief Investment Strategist,  
Fifth Third Bank (Chicago)*



Prisoners willing to put in the time required by demanding skills-training programs tend to be highly motivated to change their lives.

# “These guys are serious about turning around their lives.”

●  
MICHAEL SUMMERS

*General Manager, Top Quality Masonry*

Fears about liability seem to be overblown. Brandon Chrostowski, the Cleveland restaurateur whose French restaurant, EDWINS, has been staffed almost entirely by people with criminal records since it opened in 2013, says he’s never been sued—and he isn’t aware of anyone who hires people with records who has. “I don’t know where that boogeyman came from,” Chrostowski says.

The numbers seem to back Chrostowski. There are currently about 2.3 million people in U.S. prisons. And there are a lot of people on the outside who have done time. One study estimated that as of 2010 there were 19 million ex-offenders who had been returned to society. Most of both groups of people were convicted of nonviolent crimes. Those prisoners willing to put in the time required by demanding skills-training programs tend to be highly motivated to change their lives. Carrie Pettus-Davis, an associate professor in Florida State University’s School of Social Work, who studies programs for prisoners reentering the workforce, says, “We have a highly punitive criminal justice system that punishes behavior that in other societies would not be considered criminal.”

A new generation of prison training programs, says Jeff Korzenik, chief investment strategist at Fifth Third Bank in Chicago, who often speaks and

writes about reentry programs, represents a huge resource for employee-hungry businesses, particularly those with a desire to do good in their communities. The best programs work closely with local businesses to figure out their labor needs and to help managers help these employees adjust to a new life. Korzenik says, “You need nonprofit workplace groups to tell you who is ready.”

It is too early to gauge the long-term success of such programs, but some evidence gives reason for hope. Numerous studies have found that people with criminal records who have steady jobs are rearrested at a far lower rate than those who don’t. A Johns Hopkins five-year study of almost 500 ex-offenders hired by the university’s hospitals showed that they had a lower turnover rate during the first 40 months of employment than other employees.

Michael Summers, an Arizona contractor who hires soon-to-be-released prisoners who have trained to be masons, sums it up: “These guys are serious about turning their lives around.”

At the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, we know that business owners struggle every day to find the right skilled employees. In the pages ahead you will learn more about an often overlooked source of new labor.

Read on. 

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**Wayne Garrett****Philadelphia**

An ex-offender, Garrett now manages the dairy section at ShopRite.

**GROCCERS**

## A New Source of Skilled Retail Workers

The value proposition for Uplift's workforce training program is pretty clear: spend six weeks in the classroom learning some of the soft and hard skills required to succeed in the workforce, and one of the group's partners will give you a job.

Uplift's goal is to keep ex-offenders in and around Philadelphia from returning to prison. Thanks to its partnership with local employers, Uplift reports that only a tiny percentage of the people who complete the training program are rearrested or reincarcerated.

*Original photography by Jessica Kourkanis*





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**Debra Wayne*****Philadelphia***

A participant in the Uplift program, Wayne, 45, works in the seafood department at Fresh Grocer. When she finishes the program she will be hired by Brown's Supermarket in Philadelphia.





# Serving Up Opportunity

Meet two purpose-driven restaurant owners committed to second chances.

HAVE A LOOK AROUND THE NEXT TIME you're having dinner in one of your favorite restaurants. There's an increasing chance one of your waiters—or the chef or a kitchen worker—has a prison record. ¶ It's not hard to understand why. The restaurant business struggles with finding good, hardworking employees, and the staff turnover can be crippling. That's why some food businesses have made a policy of giving a second chance to people with criminal records. In fact, restaurant owners are among the most committed and innovative when it comes to job training for ex-offenders: some of these businesses run their operations as schools where individuals with a criminal record can get a culinary education—and a paycheck. ¶ Restaurants have provided opportunities to millions of people across the country. Rob Gifford, executive vice president of the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, says the industry is committed to helping people acquire the skills they need to thrive. "Restaurants continue to open doors for people from all backgrounds—including previously incarcerated individuals looking for a second chance," he says. ¶ Two of the stars in this field are EDWINS in Cleveland, which was the subject of *Knife Skills*, a documentary nominated for an Oscar in 2018, and Café Momentum in Dallas, which has been featured in numerous TV and newspaper reports. While broadly taking a similar approach, EDWINS founder Brandon Chrostowski and Café Momentum chef and founder Chad Houser each work with a different segment of the prison population. EDWINS is about rehabilitation: its students are adults with criminal records trying to rebuild their lives. Café Momentum is about prevention; its paid interns are kids who have been in trouble with the law but aren't old enough yet to have adult records. ¶ Here's how they both do it in their own way.

Formerly incarcerated students train for careers in the culinary and hospitality industry at EDWINS in Cleveland.



# 13

The number of Ohio prisons in the EDWINS prerelease program.

# 400

The number of graduates from the EDWINS prerelease program.

**“If maybe the streets are looking kind of tempting early on, we want the student to think, ‘Wait, I’m winning here at a certain clip. This is where I need to be.’”**

BRANDON CHROSTOWSKI  
Restaurateur, EDWINS (Cleveland)

## EDWINS

Cleveland, Ohio

EDWINS is an upscale French restaurant launched in 2013 by Brandon Chrostowski, a veteran chef who has worked in Chicago, New York, Paris, and Cleveland.

While living in Cleveland, he taught cooking courses in local prisons—and liked it so much he decided to do it full-time. He got backing from his boss and other donors and launched EDWINS.

Chrostowski came by his passion honestly. He was inspired to hire ex-offenders by his own experience with the law as a young man in Detroit. After he was arrested on a drug charge, the judge gave him the choice of going to jail or getting a job. Jail didn’t sound all that great, so Chrostowski found a job in a Greek restaurant, and cooking turned out to be his life’s work.

So far, so good.

Over the last few years, EDWINS, a nonprofit, has expanded to include prerelease programs in 13 Ohio prisons, an EDWINS butcher shop, and a residential facility for students while they are training. In addition to culinary training, EDWINS helps students get reestablished in the world by showing them how to obtain driver’s licenses, professional accreditation, and bank accounts. The name is an abbreviation of “education wins.” So far, the prison program has graduated more than 400 people; another 286 have trained at the restaurant itself.

Chrostowski says the six-month restaurant course is designed to give students a crash course in every aspect of running a restaurant, from chopping mushrooms to the ins and outs of restaurant finance.

The biggest problem many ex-offenders bring with them is a lack of self-esteem. “You can tell,” Chrostowski says, “just by the energy that they answer certain questions with. Like ‘How’s your day going?’” He has learned that those who have reflected hard while behind bars and have decided that they want a taste of winning tend to make the best students and employees. “Once people think that way, teaching a skill on top of that is easy,” he says.

EDWINS’s restaurant program is designed to rebuild the confidence of its students by giving them a steady stream of increasingly challenging tasks to master. The first week of the training program involves memorizing culinary math (e.g., how many teaspoons in a tablespoon); this is followed by segments on safety and sanitation, gastronomic history, knife skills, sauces, and pairing wine with food.

Giving students a sense of accomplishment fast is important to keeping them motivated. “If maybe the streets are looking kind of tempting early on,” says Chrostowski, “we want the student to think, ‘Wait, I’m winning here at a certain clip. This is where I need to be.’”

When businesspeople from other industries tell Chrostowski they want to replicate what he is doing, he encourages them enthusiastically. “Just give me a call,” he says. His advice is to ask three questions before you start. “First is *what and how are you going to teach?*” he says. “The second thing is *how are you going to make it sustainable*, and the last is *where are you going to get the people?*” While answers to the first two will vary from business to business, Chrostowski says, the last is usually answered easily with a call to a state or county office for prisoner reentry. ■



**Chef Chad Houser (standing center) trains teens from juvenile detention for careers in the restaurant industry at Café Momentum in Dallas.**

## Café Momentum

Dallas, Texas

Café Momentum hires and trains minors coming out of juvenile detention as two-month paid interns. The restaurant, which serves New American cuisine, provides these young men and women with case-workers, teachers, and counselors. It also gives them referrals for permanent jobs at Dallas-area restaurants and hotels.

“The idea here is to create an ecosystem of support for the kids on all the issues and barriers that have prevented them from achieving their full potential in life,” founder and chef Chad Houser says.

The program started in 2009 when Houser taught some kids in detention to make ice cream for a competition. The enthusiasm of the teens he taught inspired him to launch Café Momentum. Between 60 and 70 percent of the restaurant’s workers at any time are young people with juvenile records. Houser says 751 kids so far have come through the program and only a handful have gotten into trouble with the law again.

One of the biggest lessons Houser has learned is how to win the trust and respect of kids who are

often labeled “throwaways.” Changing old habits is tough. “Of the kids I’m dealing with, 62 percent are homeless,” Houser says. “When we first opened, some would just walk away from their stations, walk out of the restaurant, and go around the corner to a taqueria or 7-Eleven to get food; then they’d come back, sit down, and eat.” He lectured the kids about it, but they kept doing it. “I felt defeated,” he says.

It took him a while to realize that it wasn’t a matter of the interns’ disrespecting him or the restaurant. They were poor kids who couldn’t wait around until the restaurant served them lunch late in the afternoon before it opened for dinner.

“They’re working all day with food, and they weren’t allowed to eat it. They were hangry,” he says. The problem was solved by a large box of granola bars. “I said, I’m going to make a deal with you. I’m going to give you two granola bars; whenever you get hungry, go ahead and eat them but don’t leave your station, don’t leave the restaurant. If you’re still hungry, I’ll give you more. And then at 4 p.m. we’re going to sit down and have a big meal; we’ll feed you like always. And they said OK.

“And I never had a problem again.”

Houser believes that businesspeople inspired by his example don’t need to build big or ambitious programs. “The best piece of advice I got,” he says, “was to focus on one kid. Help that kid. Then help another one, and another one. There are 14,000 restaurants in the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex, and if only half of them hired one juvenile offender a year that would cover every kid in the juvenile justice system.” 🍌

# The Case for Hiring Ex-Offenders

**More and more employers—including the Los Angeles Area Chamber itself—have found formerly incarcerated candidates can be outstanding employees.**

REPRESENTING MORE THAN 1,650 MEMBER COMPANIES WITH 650,000-plus employees, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce has taken a prominent role in supporting education and career pathways for formerly incarcerated men and women. That includes advocacy work, such as supporting California’s Proposition 47, which decriminalized certain drug offenses, and the Chamber’s Creating Opportunities and Real Experiences (CORE) internship program, which trains young adults and helps them obtain work experience.

¶ David Rattray, a 20-plus-year veteran of the food service industry, spoke about why employing formerly incarcerated adults is good for business, what gets in the way of hiring, and how companies can and should adapt. He is executive vice president of the Center for Education Excellence and Talent Development at the Chamber and president of UNITE-LA, the school-to-career partnership of Los Angeles.

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## **For businesses, what’s the benefit of hiring formerly incarcerated workers?**

There’s an enormous amount of talent, and it comes in every shape, just like the overall workforce. These are not only people who can do low-wage, low-skilled work. There are a lot of high-skilled workers and people who are super entrepreneurial and know how to get stuff done. Every type of skill, personality, and character trait exists in this population, just like it does in the larger population.

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## **Are employers turning to ex-prisoners because they have no choice in a tight labor market?**

This is a moment in which we can get a lot of ex-convicts back into labor markets. What I wouldn’t want to do is

create an impression that this is a marginal pool for when you’re desperate. I’d rather emphasize that there’s real talent here, in some cases the best talent, regardless of economic swings.

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## **Even if it’s not about economic swings, why is this especially important now?**

This was a smaller part of the adult population when we had much lower incarceration rates. As sentencing laws became harsher, it’s become an enormous portion of our adult workforce. That challenges us to think differently about something that 30 or 40 years ago seemed like a marginal issue. Employer practices, in some ways, are a relic. Companies can’t afford to exclude a huge portion of the talent pool.

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### What gets in the way of hiring?

Companies get flooded with resumes. It's time-consuming to examine 100 resumes or more for one position. It's natural for a company to come up with pretty simple criteria, like not having a criminal record, to just skim off the top of a bunch of resumes.

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### Companies are often prohibited by law from asking about criminal records. How do you talk about it in an interview?

Like in any job interview, interviewers should invite candidates to make their case. As they do, the natural thing is to walk through their work history. Somebody who's been incarcerated is going to have gaps. Employers often find out someone has a criminal past without directly asking.

You want the candidate to acknowledge their experience and say, "Here's the truth. Here's who I am, and here's what's happened to me," and take it as an opportunity

to explain their own fallibility, the realities of what they faced, and what happened. You would hope there's something that demonstrates growth.

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### How realistic is it for job seekers to volunteer that information?

It's so natural and rational for someone who's been incarcerated to think that if I tell you this, it's a guarantee I will not get the job. Why would I think that I somehow would score points by being candid? It is important that employers understand that fear.

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### How can senior management help when it comes to hiring applicants with criminal records?

In most cases, there's no reason for a criminal record to rule out a candidate, but many employers come up with a blanket policy. Senior management has to give hiring managers cover to avoid knee-jerk noes and balance risk with a hiring policy that's proactive, that increases the possibility of a lot of yeses. 📌



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Homeboy Electronics Recycling dismantles and shreds discarded electronics. Launched in 2011 as Isidore Electronics Recycling, the for-profit business was acquired in 2016 and renamed by Homeboy Industries, a nonprofit that rehabilitates former gang members and ex-convicts.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT HANASHIRO, USA TODAY

## GO-GETTER

Coss Marte teaches a fitness class at the ConBody studio in New York City.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CONBODY



Coss Marte speaks to the board of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation in Washington, D.C.

# SWEAT EQUITY

An entrepreneur does the time, then starts a successful fitness craze

By **Coss Marte**, founder of fitness company ConBody

## What if you were known for the worst thing you've ever done?

Think about it.

Well, I am. At 19, I was making over \$2 million a year running one of the largest drug delivery services in New York City.

I was raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the mid-80s. I watched my relatives sell drugs on the corner, and that's who I wanted to be. I wanted to be rich. We lived on a couch in my aunt's tenement apartment with eight other people. Going down my front steps I would see heroin addicts lining up to buy drugs off my cousins.

At 13, I started selling drugs and getting locked up. I realized I was getting arrested because of my appearance so I came up with a different way of selling drugs. I started wearing business suits and ties. I made 10,000 business cards. I had a team using a whole different strategy for drug delivery. I had 20 people working for me, a few vehicle dispatchers. It was a crazy, crazy thing.

At 23, it all ended. I was sentenced to seven years in prison.

When I went inside, I was told I was going to die there because of my weight and other health issues. I started thinking, *I cannot die here*. I had a two-year-old son at the time and wanted to come home for him. So I started doing dips and push-ups and jumping jacks in my small, nine-by-six prison cell. I started running laps around the prison yard. After six months I had lost 70 pounds. By the end, I had helped more than 20 inmates lose over 1,000 pounds combined.

I didn't think I was doing anything special. I was just working out and helping the inmates move forward. Then, with two months left, I was thrown into solitary. For the first time, I started asking how I could give back to society.

I was released from prison a year later. When I got home, I started looking for a simple retail job—minimum wage, I didn't care. I was looking for anything that would keep me out of the system and let me do the right thing.

I was faced with applications that asked, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Every time I checked "yes" and handed it back, the manager saw it and would say, "We're going to call you back." In the back of my head, I'm thinking, *No you're not*.

Out of desperation, I started going up to people in the park and pitching them on a prison-style boot camp led by people coming out of prison. All body weight, no equipment. It started growing, from one person to two people to now over 20,000 people we've trained.

ConBody opened on the same corner where I sold drugs and first got arrested. I built a prison gym where the people we train take a mug shot, go through a prison gym gate, take five-minute showers, get screamed at by an ex-con, and have a lot of fun.

Sultan Malik was my first hire. He spent 14 years in prison, including seven years in solitary confinement. He is now one of the top trainers in America, according to Reebok. From there, ConBody started growing and growing, so I started hiring more and more people.

But this is about more than my business. There are 70 million Americans today with criminal histories and 76 percent of them return back into the system within five years. (I fit that description; I was arrested nine times between the ages of 13 and 27.) My mentors said, "You got a gym, you're hiring a couple people. That's cute. Think scale, how are you going to blow this up?" We came up with an innovative idea called ConBodyLive, which lets people virtually work out with their favorite ex-convict in a small prison cell space from their home.

Then, after I shared my story at a wellness conference, one of the attendees came up to me to say she was inspired and wanted to help. I gave her my card. She emailed me with the subject line "Saks Opportunity." This led to an invitation to open a prison gym in the bougiest store in America. We had ladies wearing Louis Vuitton and Gucci who started changing their perspectives on people with criminal records.

And that became our mission: to change the way society sees formerly incarcerated individuals. Everybody on this planet, everybody in this world, makes mistakes. What we're asking for is a second chance. 📧

# The Last Mile

Why tech companies are helping teach prisoners how to code.

TO THE NORTH OF SAN FRANCISCO AND SILICON VALLEY SITS CALIFORNIA'S renowned San Quentin State Prison, home to some 4,000 inmates. Those two worlds, far apart in nearly every respect but geography, are forging a connection that is changing lives. ¶ In December, Google announced a \$2 million grant to The Last Mile, a nonprofit that was founded in 2010 to bring entrepreneurship programs to San Quentin and went on to introduce a groundbreaking coding curriculum designed to give inmates marketable skills and a better chance at success in the outside world. The group now trains software developers in 13 prisons in California and three other states, with plans to be in 17 facilities in six states by year-end. To date, it boasts a zero percent recidivism rate among its graduates. ¶ "We're optimistic in our belief that computer science can play an important role in helping people develop skills needed for today's economy," says Maab Ibrahim, criminal justice lead at Google.org, the philanthropic arm of the search giant. Education, workforce development, and economic opportunity are centerpieces of Google's charitable efforts, and that includes addressing racial bias and inequity in the criminal justice system. Over the past five years, Google.org has given more than \$32 million to nonprofits advancing criminal justice reform. ¶ Leaders at Google.org first visited The Last Mile at San Quentin over a year ago. "We were so impressed by the students that we immediately funded putting laptops into the hands of recent graduates, and wanted to do more," says Ibrahim.

**ALPIA**  
Alumni • Changed Lives • A Better California



Students learning to code at San Quentin State Prison in California.

Google.org's Maab Ibrahim advances the tech company's charitable efforts toward criminal justice reform.



**\$2m**

**Grant from Google to The Last Mile**

**13**

**Number of prisons where The Last Mile operates**

**0%**

**Recidivism rate among The Last Mile graduates**

**\$32m**

**Donations from Google.org to nonprofits advancing criminal justice reform**

This grant will help The Last Mile educate and train 525 incarcerated men, women, and youth around the country over the next two years. “The tech field and society will benefit from what they can bring to the table as digital creators,” Ibrahim adds.

Partnering with the business community is nothing new for The Last Mile. Founders Chris Redlitz and Beverly Parenti come from the venture capital and technology worlds. Volunteers, guest speakers, and mentors from tech firms play a hand in the prison coding classes, which run over three six-month semesters. “We’re starting to see a growing consciousness in the tech world of how tech can integrate with the larger society,” says Hayley Benham-Archdeacon, business account manager at TLM Works. (TLM stands for The Last Mile.)

In TLM Works, a one-of-a-kind development shop within San Quentin that was launched in 2016, inmates earn about \$17 an hour building websites for outside clients. (Due to prison rules, inmates must work without internet access and within highly restricted hours.) To prepare those employees for jobs on the outside—a first job ever, for some—TLM Works tries to replicate a professional tech workplace. “We put a heavy emphasis on teamwork, collaboration, and stand-up meetings,” says Sydney Heller, TLM Works technical manager, “so it’s less of a shock when they go out in the world.”

At mentor days every other Wednesday, software developers from a variety of tech companies including Google, Facebook, Alibaba, Dropbox, and Pandora, to name a few, stop by The Last Mile classrooms to answer questions from the inmates. “Through that socializing with people from the outside they become more comfortable and a transformation happens,” says Benham-Archdeacon. Google employees have long been among those who’ve volunteered at The Last Mile. Now as part of this new arrangement, Google software engineers, program managers, and designers will help

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## “Coding blew my mind, it’s a whole other world.”

● JASON JONES  
Program participant,  
Fandom (San Francisco)

for assault with a deadly weapon. “Before The Last Mile I was getting into trouble, I was angry, and I saw no reason to better myself,” he says. “Coding blew my mind, it’s a whole other world.” As he trained, he treated every visit from an outsider as a chance to network—a mind-set that paid off.

This type of seamless transition from prison to the workplace is something The Last Mile would like to see even more of. One recent development is another step in that direction: last August the tech firm Slack announced a yearlong apprenticeship program for three graduates of The Last Mile, called Next Chapter.

review code and expand the curriculum.

Jason Jones credits this kind of contact with tech professionals inside San Quentin with helping him land a position with the San Francisco company Fandom even before he left prison in 2018. (He has since taken a job with The Last Mile, building out the group’s virtual instruction program.) Jones, 35, had spent more than 13 years in San Quentin

Early clients of TLM Works were often other like-minded nonprofits who needed help with a website. Now the goal is to build more ongoing relationships with private firms. “If you can have established relationships with a company, the hope is they will be more open to hiring you once you’re released,” says Heller.

Even if graduates don’t join the tech industry, The Last Mile training can make a difference. “We’re teaching life skills, if not strictly coding skills,” Heller says. “It’s such an abrupt readjustment coming back to society. Does The Last Mile solve that? No. But even marginal steps in adjusting reduce the chance of failure.”

Google.org’s Ibrahim echoes that: “For someone who has been incarcerated, technical skills like coding, as well as business skills like teamwork and collaboration, can ease the transition back into their community.”

For Jones, The Last Mile prison program taught him a profession—and a new way of approaching problems. “With coding, you have to slow down and break apart the problem,” he says. “In prison, I started doing the same thing: think things out, weigh my options, and think about which is the best long-term solution for me. With coding you want long-term results, and that trickled over to my life.” 📦

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Fandom hired Jason Jones, a graduate of The Last Mile, as a coder in San Francisco.



# WOMEN WELDERS

A NEW PROGRAM IS TEACHING METALWORKING TO FEMALE PRISONERS

## REBUILD INDIANA'S WORKFORCE

THE TIGHT LABOR MARKET makes it hard for businesses of all kinds to hire enough workers. ¶ Welders are among those in demand, especially in Indiana, where a new program responds to employer needs by giving female inmates the skills to join the workforce when they're released from state prison. ¶ More than 200 women have gone through the Ivy Tech Community College program since December 2017, including a number who now belong to the small community of women welders. ¶ Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb singled out the program during this year's state of the state address. "Given the urgency around strengthening our workforce, we can't afford to overlook anyone, especially those who want to earn a second chance," he told lawmakers. *photography by Alex Slitz*

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**Brittany Young**  
*Madison, Indiana*

Young demonstrates her welding skills at Vehicle Service Group. She was the first woman to earn a welding certification while incarcerated at Madison Correctional Facility. "The program saved my life," she says.



**Brittany Young**  
*Madison, Indiana*  
Young takes a  
break from her  
welding duties.



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**Jessica Barton**  
*Madison, Indiana*  
Barton, shown at Ivy Tech Community College, says she hopes to find a job in manufacturing when she's released from prison.



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**Ashleigh Hall**  
*Madison, Indiana*  
Hall demonstrates the plasma cutter to welding instructor Ron Novak.





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## **Holly Fields**

***Madison, Indiana***

Prisoners meet potential employers at a “reverse job fair” for local businesses. Here, Fields (left) greets a manager from ResourceMFG, a national staffing firm specializing in manufacturing jobs. JCPenney helps participants dress for the event.

**Brittany Young**  
**Madison, Indiana**

Young leaves VSG after a hard day's work. She makes \$22 an hour and is well on her way to starting a new life outside prison.



# Bridging the Skills Gap in Arizona

Home builders mock up a construction site inside prison to train short-timers for high-demand jobs in one of America's hottest markets.

IN MOST PRISONS, NEWS THAT SOME OF THE INMATES have gotten hold of hand tools and are going to work on a wall would ordinarily be cause for alarm. ¶ But every rule has its exception, and in this case it's the Lewis Arizona State Prison Complex, west of Phoenix. The inmates are prisoners with fewer than 60 days to go on their sentences. And the wall is a structure inside the prison, overseen by a local contractor called Top Quality Masonry, that is used to teach the inmates skills that could land them jobs when they are released. ¶ "We have a wall that's put up and taken down again. It goes up again, it comes down again," says Karen Hellman, division director for inmate programs and reentry at the Arizona Department of Corrections. "Construction is booming in Arizona, which is a fabulous thing, but [home builders] are short of labor. In this case it was a perfect marriage. They needed workers, and we had people who needed work." ¶ It's part of a collaboration between the state prison system and Arizona employers called the Second Chance program. Since 2017, at Lewis and two other prisons in the state, selected inmates have been offered intensive vocational training before they are released. What sets the program apart is that private-sector employers are going into the prisons and setting up training programs tailored specifically to the kinds of jobs they are trying to fill. Members of the Home Builders Association of Central Arizona (HBACA) have mocked up a construction site inside the Lewis complex. They started with electrical work—teaching inmates to run wires through three framed walls—and painting. The training has expanded to include drywall, framing, door and trim, plumbing—and, yes, masonry.



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Katie Wesolek  
works for Austin  
Electric Services in  
Avondale, Arizona.

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# 50%

The job placement rate for the Second Chance program

# 2,116

The number of inmates who have gone through the Second Chance program

# 40%

The Arizona recidivism rate that Second Chance hopes to reduce

**“We assist our employers to address the labor shortage, and we assist the taxpayers... by keeping former offenders out of prison.”**

●  
CONNIE WILHELM  
CEO of Home Builders  
Association of Central  
Arizona (HBACA)

“From day one they start with a trowel in their hands,” says Michael Summers, general manager of Top Quality Masonry, an HBACA member. “It’s hands-on, five days a week.” Summers says, “I’ve got about eight guys out of the program who are really good,” and he’s planning to hire more. “I’ve been involved in a lot of high schools and trade schools, and this has been my best avenue for employees,” he says. Asked if there are risks associated with hiring people straight out of prison, he says, “I’ve had no issues. A lot of these guys are minor offenders. We’re not hiring from death row.”

And yet the Second Chance program doesn’t only deal with low-risk offenders. It also tries to help inmates whom the experts think have a moderate to high risk of committing new crimes after they are released. “If they’re low risk, we don’t need to intervene,” says Hellman. “What we do is we identify inmates who are at high risk of returning to prison—the more difficult ones. There’s a battery of assessments—types of crimes, how many, age, behavior inside, all those factors. Then we say, ‘In your last 60 days, let’s really prepare you.’ We don’t want them coming back through the door.”

Hellman says that of 2,116 inmates who have gone through the program so far, “We’ve had 1,284 job placements. So about a 50 percent placement rate.” She keeps her expectations realistic—“It’s not like we’ve had a magic wand to fix them and suddenly they’re going to be a model employee,” she says—but she has noted pleasant surprises. “We’ll get women going into electrician jobs, which is great because it’s atypical work for women. It sort of cancels itself out: they’ve got a criminal record, but they’re women in an atypical job, which is attractive to employers.”

It’s too soon to tell what effect the Second Chance program is having on Arizona’s recidivism rate, which is around 40 percent, although Hellman says “it’s trending well.” She says, “We’d like to get it down to 30 percent.”

HBACA chief executive Connie Wilhelm ticked off the benefits for her association’s members in testimony last April before the U.S. House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources. “First, 60 percent

of Arizona’s prison population is between the ages of 18 and 39,” Wilhelm said. “Due to the physical nature of construction, this age demographic was generally interested in more physically challenging jobs, and many have previous construction experience. Second, inmates recognize the opportunity to enter a career that would allow them to support themselves and their families. Third, when we allow ex-offenders to work we assist individuals to become productive members of our communities, we assist our employers to address the labor shortage, and we assist taxpayers and our communities by keeping former offenders out of prison.”

Even so, Wilhelm told the subcommittee, there are hurdles to making a program like this succeed. “First, there is the challenge of finding employers who are willing to take a chance on a former offender. We have had employers join our program only to leave after an incident with a former offender. Additionally, we have had employers tell us that they don’t want the liability of hiring a former offender.”

But the biggest obstacle to the successful employment of released inmates, according to people involved in the Second Chance program, is a mundane one: transportation. Many people coming out of prison have no car, no money, and suspended driver’s licenses due to court fines or other penalties. In the construction trades the problem is especially severe. New housing developments are often far from public transportation. And temperatures in Arizona get so high that the workday starts early; employees sometimes need to leave for work at 3 a.m. The governor’s office has begun talks with the major ride-hailing platforms to see if some kind of arrangement can be made for people in the Second Chance program.

Summers of Top Quality Masonry sends a truck to pick up his Second Chance masons, or helps them out with bus passes. He believes the program is good business. “There are challenges no matter who you’re trying to hire,” he says. “These guys are serious about turning their lives around.”

Summers adds, “One thing I do want to say is that most of the guys who come to me really care. I get a lot of Christmas messages.” 📧



**GALLUP**

## Building Stronger Prisoners

Experts brought Gallup's assessment tool to prisons. The results were stunning.

**W. Todd Johnson** leads the development and deployment of Gallup Builder Profile 10 (BP10), which helps identify and engage individuals with high-potential entrepreneurial talents.

**Two years ago, the founder** of an innovative reentry program called RISE shared some staggering statistics about the way we deal with the millions of people imprisoned in the United States. The vast majority return to prison within five years, with many reoffending within 100 days of release. Most telling, for me, is that the vast majority of recidivists are unemployed.

That's something I could help with, so I began going into prisons equipped with Gallup's tools for job creation and talent development. These powerful tools show workers, managers, and others how recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior can be productively applied.

It didn't take long to learn that most of the prisoners had never been recognized, let alone celebrated, for their strengths.

As I helped incarcerated men and women find innate potential within themselves for the first time, my role evolved from frustrated bystander to strengths coach for incarcerated men and women.

More than 100 prisoners have since signed up for strengths coaching.

Prison officials welcome the assistance. "Imagine a world where every interaction you had was focused on your failures and your weaknesses. A

world where your past behaviors seemed to define your future," says Scott Frakes, director of correctional services in Nebraska. "Welcome to the world of convicted felons."

"What if we could flip the script, and define these same people by their strengths?" Frakes asks. "Our prisons are filled with incredible talent and potential, and 95 percent of incarcerated people are coming back to the community. Employers need talented workers, and people reentering the community need meaningful work."

Warden Denise Davison has been using Gallup's CliftonStrengths tool to foster hope—as well as confidence and communication skills—among the women housed at the prison in York, Nebraska. You can feel the positive changes to the culture inside the prison as women begin to view themselves—and others—through a strengths-based lens.

One man I've worked with at the Nebraska State Penitentiary found his life's purpose in building up the men around him, men who, unlike him, will eventually return to society. "I have served 38 years of a life sentence and find extreme purpose in helping the men in this prison learn about their strengths, so when they get out, they can reenter the employment market knowing what they are good at," he says. "We walk the yard and talk about what contribution they can make to an organization based on their strengths."

We know from 17 years of global polling that all most people want is a good job, and we know from our strengths research that the likelihood of gainful employment goes way up when you, and ideally your manager, know your strengths.

This is just as true for ex-offenders.

Employment, rooted in hope and confidence, is a leading factor in reducing recidivism and increasing well-being. As CliftonStrengths coach Curt Liesveld liked to say, "When we help a person discover how they can fulfill their role within the context of their own soul, we have added value to both the person and their organization." ✦

# Michigan Listened to Employers

**This first-of-its-kind training program gives prisoners marketable skills in high-demand fields like robotics and automotive technology.**

“THIS IS GOOD MONEY HERE,” SAYS MICHAEL SMITH, 41. “The benefits are gonna be good. This is probably the best job I’ve had.” ¶ Since November, Smith has been working as an auto mechanic at the Spartan Toyota dealership in Lansing, Michigan. He got his training and certifications at the innovative Vocational Village program of the Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan, where he was serving time for a nonviolent felony. ¶ The Vocational Village programs at Parnall and a second Michigan prison, in Ionia, groom inmates for positions in nearly a dozen skilled trades that local employers need to fill, including carpentry, masonry, plumbing, welding, electrical wiring, operating machine tools and robotic arms, truck driving, and forklift operation. By the end of this year a third Vocational Village, at a women’s prison in Ypsilanti, will start training inmates there in computer coding, 3-D printing, carpentry, graphic design, and cosmetology. Though the program’s still very young, early assessments from employers, prison officials, and reentering inmates have been strongly positive.

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Travis Gilbert works on house wiring at the Vocational Village school in the Richard Handlon Correctional Facility near Ionia, Michigan.



Terry Fisher sets up a vertical CNC milling machine at the prison's Vocational Village school near Ionia, Michigan.



“The data so far show us that this is working,” says Chris Gautz, a spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), “and we will continue to enhance the concept to provide even better results.”

Smith was paroled last November after 23 months in custody. The very next day he had a job interview lined up with Joe Criscuolo, whose family runs six auto dealerships across Michigan, including Spartan Toyota. By then, Criscuolo had already reviewed Smith’s background and paperwork, Criscuolo says, and just needed to meet him in person. They shook hands that day, and Smith started the following Monday, just six days after release. He’s an entry-level technician in the express service department, initially earning an hourly wage but on track for promotion to a \$40,000 - to - \$80,000 salaried mechanic’s position, according to Criscuolo.

Smith now considers his arrest “a blessing in disguise,” he says, because of Vocational Village. “That program is specifically why I got the job I have now.”

Prior to Vocational Village, MDOC—like most state prison systems—had long offered isolated vocational training courses, explains public information officer Gautz. But the Vocational Village program, first launched

at the Ionia facility in spring 2016, offers a more far more realistic, holistic, and rigorous approach to both job training and job placement. Both the inmate and prison officials commit to making the prisoner’s reentry into society a success.

The key to the program, which was conceived by MDOC director Heidi Washington, is that the prison truly partners with the business community.

“We needed to get employers’ input, and we needed their buy-in,” says Gautz. Employers tell prison officials what trades are in demand in which communities, and also what “soft skills” inmates need to succeed in the real world. First and foremost, for instance, they need to become habituated to the discipline of a standard workday, which many of them have never experienced.

In light of that advice, prison officials set up each Vocational Village as a community apart from the rest of the prison. Participants—about 200 per Village—go together to the training facility in the morning, have lunch together there, and return together in the afternoon to their own separate housing unit. “They never interact with other prisoners,” says Gautz, “so they’re never around the negativity, the gangs, the people with nothing to lose.”

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DALE YOUNG



Instructor Shane Peterman (left) explains how to lay out stairs to inmates (from left) Pedro Rivera, Gary Means, and Kenneth Moose at the Vocational Village school.

**“We tell the employer, ‘You’re not just on your own. We’re invested in this person being a success.’”**

● CHRIS GAUTZ  
Spokesperson, Michigan  
Department of Corrections

The training day roughly mimics a workday. Smith, the Toyota mechanic, says his training at Parnall started at 6:30 a.m. and went until 2 p.m., with a short break for lunch. Afterward, back at the dormitory, there was sometimes homework, he says, though he could also watch television or play chess.

To preserve the discipline of the workday, visitation hours are confined to evenings or weekends, MDOC’s Gautz explains. “If you’re working,” he says, “you can’t tell the boss, ‘I’m taking off to meet my aunt today.’ It was a mind-set change for families, but we had to make this as real-world as possible.”

Inmates apply to get into the program, which is highly competitive. While MDOC now houses about 38,000 inmates statewide, there are only about 400 slots in the Vocational Village program—rising to about 600 once the women’s facility program gets up and running. To be eligible, prisoners must be within about 18 months of their parole date, show an aptitude for the skill they seek to learn, and have an outstanding disciplinary record.

Setting up the first two Villages cost the state about \$7 million, Gautz says, mostly to buy state-of-the-art training equipment and to renovate or construct physical

facilities. Ongoing costs are about \$3 million for the two sites, but mostly for payroll that would have been spent on conventional programs anyway.

No formal return-on-investment study was performed, says Gautz, because “our mission is public safety. We accomplish that by reducing recidivism. There is not an acceptable cost to allowing new crimes to happen.”

While inmates must work hard in the program, prison officials also do their part to make sure the inmates succeed. To teach these trades in a way employers find credible, the state has had to invest in expensive equipment. Inmates train on up-to-the-minute robot arms or CNC (computer numerical control) machine tools that can cost more than \$100,000 each, Gautz says. Apprentice truck drivers are prepared for their commercial driving licenses on 3-D simulators, with a truck seat, gearshift, dashboard, and three flat-screen monitors.

“The instructor can make it rain or snow, or make it light or dark,” says Gautz. “He’ll tell you, ‘Take a left. Go down that alley.’”

Reaching out to employers directly and through clubs like Kiwanis and Rotary, Vocational Village has compiled an email list of about 400 Michigan businesses that have

## BY THE NUMBERS

# 400

Michigan businesses that have expressed interest in the graduates

# 66%

The percentage of graduates that have jobs waiting for them before parole

# one

Number of Vocational Village graduates to return to prison so far

# \$7m

What it cost to set up the Villages

# 600

The number of slots in the Vocational Village program at the end of 2018

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## “I have a need, and they fill my need.”



JOE CRISCUOLO  
*Services Manager, Spartan  
Toyota (Lansing, Michigan)*

expressed interest in its graduates. “We send out emails a couple times a month, saying, ‘Here’s all the guys, the trades, the certificates, and the days they’ll be paroled,’” Gautz explains. In recent months, he says, about two-thirds of graduates have had jobs waiting for them before they were paroled.

“We have open houses,” he explains. “We invite employers to interview inmates by phone, Skype, or they can come in. They can see the machines they’re working on, and recognize that they’re the same machines they’re using in their shops.”

Even after an inmate lands a job, Vocational Village remains involved.

“We don’t just hand them to [the employers],” Gautz says. “Everyone is still on parole, so we still have supervision when they get out.” They get periodic drug tests, their parole officers check up on them, and prison employment counselors stay in contact.

Adds Gautz: “We tell the employer, ‘You’re not just on your own. We’re invested in this person being a success.’”

The program is still too young to judge statistically. But only one graduate has gone back to prison so far, according to Gautz, which is obviously promising. Michigan’s statewide recidivism rate is 28.1 percent.

Spartan Toyota’s Criscuolo, who hired Smith, hired a second inmate from the program in December, and says he may hire more.

“I have a need, and they fill my need,” he says. “I’ve been doing this for 35 years, and the number of people today who show up every day and want to work eight hours a day are few and far between. These two people [from Vocational Village] seemed highly motivated. They really want to take a step in the right direction.” 📍

## TALENT

# The Next Step for Criminal Justice Reform—Jobs

By **Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.**, *President and CEO of SHRM, the Society for Human Resources Management*

One in three working-age adults has a criminal record—more than have college degrees—and one in 100 currently is in prison. It is not just families who are hurt: over-incarceration damages our businesses and economy.

Last year, Congress made history with the First Step Act, bipartisan legislation that aims to revise prison and sentencing laws and do more to prevent recidivism.

But it will never live up to its promise if people leaving prison remain barred from the workforce. Almost 700,000 of them will be released this year to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. One year later, 75 percent will still be looking for work.

Studies show that recidivism is closely linked to unemployment. So when employers overcome their fears to consider candidates with criminal records, they are doing a service to society. When ex-offenders are rejected from work, we are resentencing them to a life of instability and hardship. And we are wasting a vast, willing, trainable segment of the workforce during a time of critical skills shortages and ultralow unemployment.

The “next step” of the First Step Act is for business leaders to act. As the voice of all things work, SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, has teamed up with Koch Industries, Inc. on the Getting Talent Back to Work campaign, which calls on corporate executives and association leaders to pledge to give individuals with criminal histories a fair chance at gainful employment.

A diverse coalition representing more than 50 percent of the workforce has signed

Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.



the pledge—including Koch Industries, Inc., American Staffing Association, National Retail Federation, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce. A growing number of private employers, such as Dave’s Killer Bread Foundation, Butterball Farms, and Checkr, are taking the pledge too.

CEOs may worry about pushback from their human resources team, which must be rigorous about safety and compliance. The good news is that SHRM/KII research shows that nearly half of HR practitioners believe having a criminal history should not be a deciding factor in hiring. I expect that number to grow as more employers develop formal policies and strategies for hiring workers with criminal records. To help them, SHRM developed the Getting Talent Back to Work Toolkit, offering best practices for screening and evaluating these candidates.

Giving a second chance to people who want to reenter society is a win-win-win. It decreases the risk of recidivism, promotes a valuable U.S. talent pool, and helps reduce the growing skills gap.

People who have made mistakes want and deserve the dignity of work. We hope you will join us and sign the pledge today. 📄

## SHRM’s Tips for Considering Criminal Records in Hiring Decisions

**1** Don’t ask about criminal records during the application process. Conduct a reliable background check late in the hiring process, when the results can be considered in context.

**2** Conduct an individualized assessment of the applicant’s personal history beyond the conviction, such as training, work experience, or references.

**3** Consider only convictions and pending prosecutions that are relevant to the job. The critical question is this: “Does this job present an opportunity for the type of behavior involved in the conviction?”

**4** Consider only convictions recent enough to create risk. The longer a person goes without committing a new offense, the less likely he or she will.

## LAST WORD



Piper Kerman

**L**ike millions of Americans, I have a criminal record. I served 13 months in federal prison for a drug offense and was released in 2005. While I was locked up, Dan Hoffman, a friend who headed a technology company that delivered VoIP phone service, would visit me and he would say, “Hurry up and get out of here, the marketing department needs you!” A week after I was released from prison, Dan and his executive team—and all my coworkers—gave me a second chance. My new life began with a new job.

I can’t tell you what a difference that second chance meant to me—it is beyond measure. Along with a salary and health care coverage, the job gave me a sense of normalcy after the experience of incarceration, an experience that by design is deeply traumatizing and dehumanizing. My return to the workforce, taking my place among my colleagues at a growing company, was an essential step in my transformation from a prisoner back to a productive citizen. I was able to shed the identity of an incarcerated person and step forward toward my future in large part because of that first job after prison.

The reality for most people returning home from prison or jail is different.

Significant opportunity gaps and inequality in education, housing, and safety are compounded by the stigma of a criminal record. The struggle to find work is the number one problem that I hear about from other people who, like me, have a past conviction, as they strive to succeed and meet their responsibilities. The stigma they face is powerful, and most folks don’t have a Dan Hoffman who can give them the second chance they need. The truth is the U.S. needs more employers who are courageous enough to offer a fellow human a second chance—and in return they can get great employees.

There are 700,000 people coming home from prison and jail every year in the U.S. They want to

return to their families and communities, regain their lives, and make a positive contribution.

An estimated 70 million Americans have some sort of criminal legal record—an arrest, a misdemeanor, or a felony conviction. It is a grave mistake to sideline such a large percentage of people from jobs they’ll be good at and grateful to have. It is a disservice to them and a disservice to companies who need hardworking, talented people. I know from personal experience behind bars that you’ll find bright, capable people whose skills and talents would be an asset to any company; their past mistakes should not prevent future accomplishments. A prison sentence marginalizes people who have transgressed and pushes them away from their communities. Meaningful work at a living wage brings a person back into the fold of the community and reinforces that there is dignity in labor and value placed on that labor in the form of fair compensation.

It’s important to recognize companies and organizations giving people the second chance they have earned; the good news is that there are more and more people doing it right.

Early movers in the private sector, like Michigan’s Butterball Farms, have shown a strong business case for hiring people with past criminal justice involvement. Innovative companies like Ohio’s Hot Chicken Takeover and Dave’s Killer Bread in Oregon show us that including social purpose in a business plan can yield wild success. National nonprofits like the Center for Employment Opportunities help the private sector find qualified workers and navigate questions on fair hiring practices. And programs like Inmates to Entrepreneurs, based in North Carolina, recruit and train prisoners to prepare for their release day with business plans and the necessary skills to succeed as self-employed entrepreneurs when they return home.

We have all needed second chances in our lives. We all know what it feels like when we need someone to see us for who we really are and not punish us indefinitely for our bad decisions. The bottom line: we need to create pathways back to being members in good standing in every community. Innovative businesses can make this progress happen on a much larger scale so that individuals, companies, and our American economy can reach their full potential. We simply must find the will to make that opportunity a reality for all people after they have done their time. 📌

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**Piper Kerman**, author of the best-selling memoir *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women’s Prison*, has been recognized for her efforts to help people with criminal records secure employment.



Mike Rowe (left) with Tyrone Ferrans, an electrician in Baltimore and graduate of PROJECT JUMPSTART

**“No one hiring in the skilled trades is agonizing over ‘which’ qualified candidate to choose,”**

TV host MIKE ROWE tells *America Working Forward*. Rowe, who might be best known for his work on *Dirty Jobs*, leads the mikeroweWORKS Foundation.

“Thousands of employers are struggling to find qualified workers to fix our cars and build our houses and keep our pipes connected. What possible harm can arise from teaching a former inmate a useful skill? More to the point, who would we prefer to have for a neighbor—a former inmate with a job, or a former inmate with no job?”

Rowe supports PROJECT JUMPSTART in Baltimore, a partnership of the local chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors that provides 14 weeks of pre-apprenticeship training to ex-offenders and other local residents.

**1,000+**  
graduates

**75%**  
have a criminal record

**80%**  
get construction jobs

For more information, scan to visit  
[www.uschamberfoundation.org](http://www.uschamberfoundation.org)



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