

Employment Retention:

A Question of Public Safety

By Patricia Elizabeth Taylor

Practitioners in criminal justice traditionally evaluate public safety based on the relationship between crime (socially unacceptable behavior) and punishment (incarceration). However, such measures fail to address offenders' criminogenic needs, those needs that place them at risk of crime and repeating crimes upon release. With at least 95 percent of offenders returning to the community annually, these public safety measures should begin to account for what evidence shows are risk areas in which offenders can improve. Mechanisms should be established to help offenders reconnect with families, ensure that rehabilitation programs address complex offender health and human service needs, and challenge the policies and practices that restrict an offender's ability to obtain and retain employment.¹

Success in measures such as these can be used to inform evaluations of public safety, and such an approach should begin when offenders have their initial contact with the criminal justice system. Society can no longer afford to provide treatment as an afterthought. Public safety requires that the criminal justice field become proactive in its interventions and begin focusing on inmate programming that successfully addresses offenders' criminogenic risks.

Risk Factors

Programs should focus on the treatment of the risk factors that correlate highly with criminal conduct, understanding "that most offenders are not high risk for recidivism because they have one risk or need, but rather are high risk because they have multiple risk and need factors."² Researchers³ have identified eight major risk/needs factors:

- History of anti-social behavior;
- Anti-social personality pattern;
- Anti-social cognition;
- Anti-social associates;
- Family/marital status;
- School/work;
- Leisure/recreation; and
- Substance abuse.

Current research suggests that unemployment is both a risk factor and a link to post-incarceration crime.⁴ With nearly 5.1 million adults under community supervision, as the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports, the ability of offenders to secure and maintain attachment to the work force is a public safety issue. As Mary Lou Leary, principal deputy assistant attorney general, said last year before the Senate Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs: "We have a responsibility to be not only tough on crime, but also smart on crime. This means supporting programs that are backed by evidence of effectiveness." Effective programs include those that address offenders' risks and needs, which include those that address offender unemployment.

Studies have shown that an unstable employment record and low levels of personal, educational, vocational and financial achievement are among the predictors of continued criminal conduct.⁵ Therefore, a movement to overcoming the barriers to long-term employment warrants the development of innovative approaches for offender employment service providers. New and effective ways of overcoming barriers to long-term employment may be found in the parallels between relapse prevention and offender employment retention. By focusing on offenders maintaining employment as the desired outcome, a revised relapse prevention model would imply "that people can and do change and that crimes may be

viewed as behaviors enacted by people, not traits forever defining them.”⁶ From this perspective, offenders are no longer considered unemployed because they are unemployable. The offenders are viewed as people who can and will maintain gainful employment provided they receive the needed support to identify and address the life barriers that affect their ability to compete in today’s work force.

Practitioners who have the competencies to help offenders become successful in maintaining a long-term connection to the work force will be able to identify quickly those offenders at high risk for job loss, identify specific indicators, and analyze the chain of events and behaviors that lead to job loss. Their intermediate goal would be to assist offenders in developing and using a plan both to avoid high-risk situations and deal satisfactorily with such situations as they occur. This necessitates the development of a competency-based training program to provide practitioners the knowledge, skills and abilities to develop specialized services and programming for offenders targeted as being at high risk for job loss. In addition, practitioners will need to develop the skills to support offenders as they explore answers to five basic questions related to offender employment:

- Why would an employer want to hire me?
- What type of job do I qualify for?
- What type of job should I apply for?
- How do I secure a position that interests me?
- How do I keep my job and avoid getting fired?

NIC’s Role

In 1999, the Transition and Offender Workforce Development (T/OWD) Division (formerly the Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement) of the National Institute of Corrections started emphasizing the importance of offender job retention. In March 1999, NIC and the Safer Foundation co-sponsored a national forum in a deliberate effort to move corrections from its focus on job placement to a focus on job retention. Forty correctional administrators and stakeholders attended and, as a result of the meeting, offender job retention was identified as a priority for federal assistance and a process began to create a system to increase offenders’ self-knowledge about the world of work. The goal was to increase job retention and stability. By 2000, NIC-funded research was being developed that assisted the corrections field relative to offender retention and, in 2002, NIC broadcast a 32-hour distance training that addressed:

- Development of action plans to improve offender job retention;
- Use of job retention strategies and tools;
- Implementation of best and promising practices; and
- Collaboration.

Research shows that “employment is an important need of most individuals; it provides income, social connection, and feelings of societal contribution and self-worth.”⁷ Yet stable employment that provides a livable wage can be an elusive goal for offenders who lack the emotional intelli-

gence to resolve internal and external challenges, including those relating to substance abuse, chronic medical or mental health issues, histories of felony convictions, lack of pro-social support, affordable housing and the reluctance of employers to hire offenders. In fact, the issues that affect an offender’s ability to secure gainful employment are often the same issues that will result in the offender’s separation from the work force. Thus, NIC is sponsoring the multiyear Employment Retention Initiative to contribute to the advancement and shaping of effective policy and practice that supports the provision of employment services for offenders having unstable work histories and high propensities for job loss. To this end, a training curriculum and assessment instrument are being developed for use by correctional staff and stakeholders.

Staff Training

The Employment Retention Initiative will include a curriculum that will be the third “knowledge block” or collection of knowledge on a particular subject matter for the T/OWD Division — with the offender employment specialist and the offender work force development specialist trainings being the first two. Influenced by the principles of adult learning theory and practice, the employment retention curriculum scheduled to be piloted January 2011 for its first training in May 2011, will build on the offender work force training/resources that the T/OWD currently provides: knowledge blocks that are systematic and sequential. The employment retention training will broaden the ability of a practitioner to:

- Improve outcomes through collaboration;
- Address offender pre-employment and job readiness;
- Use assessment tools;
- Make good job matches;
- Implement effective strategies for change; and
- Connect with employers for job development.

In addition, trainees will have the opportunity to increase their knowledge in:

- Career development theory and application;
- Facilitation skills;
- The role of assessment in career planning and job placement;
- Designing and implementing training and work development services;
- Barriers to employment;
- Transition intervention for the offender population;
- Job-seeking and employability skills;
- The role of computers in career planning; and
- Job retention.

The Employment Retention Initiative supports the development of a competency-based, blended and Web- and classroom-based curriculum. The curriculum will be developed using the instructional theory into practice model.⁸

Table 1. Knowledge, Skills and Tasks of an Employment Retention Specialist

Duties	Highest Ranking Job Tasks
Support Case Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance participant soft skills. • Identify barriers to employment.
Train/Support Employability Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote soft skills. • Address employability/employment barriers.
Facilitate Employment Readiness Classes/Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train on interview skills. • Identify employment barriers.
Maintain Employment Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct client follow-up. • Communicate with employers and other agencies.
Work With Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review best practices in employer recruitment and retention strategies. • Maintain relationship with employer even when no participants are currently employed. • Identify customized training opportunities to support employer needs. • Identify employer needs. • Educate employers regarding the criminal justice system.
Research Best-Practice Retention Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify successful instructional delivery systems for employment readiness. • Modify best practices to fit a retention specialist’s site needs.
Collaborate With Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in outreach events. • Demonstrate positive relationships and cooperation.

- Learning Objective — Select an objective at an appropriate level of difficulty and complexity, as determined through a task analysis, diagnostic testing and/or congruence with Bloom’s cognitive taxonomy.⁹
- Anticipatory Set — Motivate instruction by focusing the learning task, its importance or the prior knowledge/experience of the learners.
- Lesson Objectives — State the lesson objectives to the students.
- Input — Identify and teach main concepts and skills, emphasizing clear explanations, frequent use of examples/diagrams, and invite active student participation.
- Check for Understanding — Observe and interpret student reactions (active interest, boredom) and provide frequent formative evaluations with immediate feedback. Adjust instruction as needed and reteach if necessary.
- Guided Practice — Provide guided practice following instruction by having students answer questions, discuss with one another, demonstrate skills or solve problems. Give immediate feedback and reteach if necessary.

- Independent Practice — Assign independent practice to solidify skills and knowledge when students have demonstrated understanding.

The overarching goal of the Employment Retention Initiative is to ensure that corrections practitioners develop skills to support offender employment retention. All of NIC’s trainings are based on provable, reliable and valid methodologies. Anecdotal stories about “how good the training was” are not the sole determinants for developing a course. The developmental structure of the Employment Retention Initiative helps ensure that the training’s objectives can be identified, measured and evaluated. The employment retention training will apply the cognitive-behavioral model of relapse prevention to helping practitioners help offenders avoid preventable job loss. Trainees will develop the competencies needed to assist offenders in analyzing the chain of events that lead to job loss, behaviors and individual precursors that affect gainful employment, and the potential result of their separation from the work force. In addition, this initiative supports the development of an assessment instrument that will address both the strengths and risks of offenders in danger of job loss, with the ultimate goal of reducing offender recidivism.

Evolution of the Initiative

The work outlined herein on the Employment Retention Initiative was directed by a four-stage process that included supporting the writing of a white paper, sponsoring a literature review focusing on offender employment, conducting and validating a DACUM or job task analysis of an employment retention specialist, and convening a national forum on employment retention.

In the white paper, "New Approaches to Using Relapse Prevention Therapy in the Criminal Justice System," George Parks discusses some of the nontraditional applications of a cognitive approach in corrections related to the management of the reintegration of offenders back into the community. The literature review helped further identify evidence-based and promising practices that address the work force development issues of offenders.

Acknowledging the importance of capturing the thoughts of experts, six to eight employment retention specialists participated in a process led by a trained facilitator to provide input specific to the knowledge, skills and tasks required to perform their jobs. The sessions identified seven duties and corresponding job tasks as shown in Table 1.

The national forum on the Employment Retention Initiative, convened by the Urban Institute, included a discussion of key terms and addressed:

- Factors affecting job tenure;
- Dimensions of the relapse prevention model;
- Cognitive-behavioral approaches that can be replicated;
- The needs of special populations; and
- Staging success for retention specialists.

Finally, the Employment Retention Initiative fostered the development of a working definition of an employment retention specialist. The definition was based on the work of professionals who have supported this initiative since its inception, and its wording is as follows: "An employment retention specialist is one who develops and implements workforce development services and uses evidence-based practices for career planning and successful, long-term gainful employment that leads to sustained economic self-sufficiency."

By applying Parks' concepts of relapse prevention to job loss, a practitioner can develop a better understanding of the circumstances that trigger job loss by knowing the chain of events that frequently lead to offender separation from the work force. The employment retention curriculum and related assessment instrument will help practitioners bridge the gap between evidence-based practices (research) and offender work force development (practice).

ENDNOTES

¹ Clear, John. 2007. The Impacts of Incarceration on Public Safety. 2007. *Social Research*. Retrieved online at http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-6959895/The-impacts-of-incarceration-on.html.

² Latessa, E. and C. Lowenkamp. 2005. What are criminogenic needs and why are they important? *For the Record – 4th Quarter, 15*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Judicial Conference.

³ Andrews, D.A., J. Bonta and J.S. Wormith. 2006. The recent past and near future of risk and/or need assessment. *Crime & Delinquency*, 52(1):7-27. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

⁴ Kethineni, S. and D.N. Falcone. 2007. Employment and ex-offenders in the United States: Effects of legal and extra legal factors. *Probation Journal*, 54(1):36-51. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

⁵ Houston, M. 2006. *Offender job retention*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections. (March).

⁶ Parks, G. 2007. New approaches to using relapse prevention therapy in the criminal justice system. *Corrections Today*, 69(6):46-49. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association. (December).

⁷ Fahey, J., C. Roberts and L. Engel. 2006. *Employment of ex-offenders: Employer perspectives*. Boston: Crime and Justice Institute.

⁸ Hunter, M. 1994. Planning for effective instruction: Lesson design. In *Enhancing teaching*, 87-95. New York: Macmillan.

⁹ Bloom's cognitive taxonomy classifies objectives by levels of learning from lower level skills like memorization to higher level skills like evaluation or comparison.

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