

## Helping Candidates with Felony Convictions: 5 Things to Remember

by Elisabeth Sanders-Park

Much of the “hiring” process is spent throwing people in the trash. Only when an employer has their top 3-10 candidates do they focus on who they want. So, an effective job search must first help the candidate avoiding getting screened-out, then let them prove they’re the best choice. Often, job seekers focus too much on proving their value and not enough on avoiding getting screened-out. They may be qualified, but the employer never sees it because they’re already in the trash! Candidates must first avoid the “screen-out,” then focus on getting hired. This is especially true for people with barriers, such as felony convictions.

At last census “there were an estimated 5.6 million adults who had ever served time in prison... If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated 1 of every 15 persons will serve time in a prison during their lifetime” (Bureau of Justice, [www.ojp.usdoj.gov](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov)). It’s no surprise that we find ourselves coming alongside people with convictions and prison time. Here are “5 things to remember” to make you and candidates with felony convictions more successful.

#1 – No one hires felons! It’s discouraging, but true. No one hires welfare mothers, displaced workers or the disabled either. They hire people... people they believe will do the job well, fit in, and make them more money than they cost... who happen to be disabled, displaced, in transition or have convictions. Help the candidate to be seen as a person before they are seen as a felon by avoiding the application as long as possible in lieu of phone or in-person interactions, or even a good resume or point-by-point letter. Many people get interviews and job offers before submitting an application. This should be the case with these candidates. It’s also helpful to consider the demographics of interviewers, employers and industries that may be sympathetic to a candidate with this experience, and seek them out.

#2 – People with felonies do work! They succeed and lead in the workforce, and own their own companies. But, attitude is everything. The candidate’s fear of failure, judgment or being found out is powerful. Until the candidate believes someone will hire them, much of our efforts are fruitless. To quickly decrease fear and increase confidence, have them talk with others with similar felonies who are succeeding. Then, help them craft a good, honest answer to eliminate (or dramatically reduce) the employer’s concerns and share how the gain is worth the risk (for details, see my March/April 2006 article).

#3 – Know who to avoid! Many practitioners want a list of “felon-friendly companies.” This is a waste of time. It’s better to identify those that won’t consider the candidate (and those they can’t legally work for), and assume that everyone else is fair game! Yes, some employers will be put-off, but if the candidate is well-matched and avoids being seen first as a felon, some will consider them... a person, with talent and passion, who adds to the bottom-line, who happens to have a felony conviction.

#4 – Timing is everything! If you asked an attractive person out to dinner, you wouldn’t first warn them about your stinky feet, would you?! If they ever get to know about it, there would be much more to you than stinky feet. Yet felons, and those who serve them, often feel compelled to tell employers this stinky

detail upfront, which makes it hard for the candidate to be seen as a person. Prepare the candidate with a good answer, and use qualifications from non-employment, criminal or prison experience on the resume, but most of all, help them job search so they're seen first as a person, not a felon. Consider their felony and other barriers, their strengths, and the job requirements. Decide how they make the best first impression... on paper, over the phone or in person (and get specific)... then, craft a job search strategy that maximizes those opportunities!

#5 – Employers need to know! When an employer doesn't ask about the candidate's criminal history and offers them a job, should the candidate bring it up? Yes, but timing is vital! The employer has a right to know and will feel deceived if they find out later (though they never asked!). Many people have lost jobs after a successful probation or upon promotion, when a background check is done. Such a setback! From the beginning, candidates must answer honestly when asked, but they should strategize so it doesn't come up until the employer is sold on their qualifications. When offered a job they want before the felony comes up, they should accept, express their joy and give the employer a chance to clarify the issue. For example:

"I'm pleased to accept your offer and I look forward to officially joining your team.

~ I also want to say that you didn't ask about something I learned the hard way that resulted in... - OR -

~ You'll note on my application that I have learned some things the hard way and had some...

... contact with the criminal justice system. I don't want anything to stop me from growing with the company, so I want to be sure your questions are answered upfront."

Happy helping! Email me with your questions and challenges.