



P I O N E E R
HUMAN SERVICES
A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

Supervising Employees with Criminal History: An Exploratory Study of Manager Strategies and Perceptions

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Study Overview

- Qualitative study examined supervisors' perceptions on how to support employees who have been formerly incarcerated.
- Goal of the study: determine strategies used by supervisors that can be integrated into management training and disseminated to second chance employers and others interested in hiring individuals with criminal history.

Research on the Role of Employment in Recidivism

- Employment has been linked to recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 1990).
- Low paying temporary jobs are not effective in reducing recidivism.
- Work hours and income are not related to reoffending, but strong commitment to a job has been linked to reduced self-reported crime.
- Keeping a job for at least six months and having a higher occupational level may decrease the likelihood of reoffending.
- The link between employment and recidivism may be more complex than having a job vs. not having a job.

Social Control Theory

- Theory most commonly used to explain the link between employment and recidivism.
- Persons who have strong bonds to society are less willing than those with weaker bonds to risk the negative consequences that can result from criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969).
- Four elements of social bonds:
 - (1) attachment or being sensitive to the opinions of others,
 - (2) commitment to conventional goals (e.g., educational, occupational),
 - (3) involvement in conventional activities, and
 - (4) belief in conventional norms.
- Employment on its own does not increase social control. Instead it is the characteristics associated with employment like stability, job commitment and ties to work that can increase social control (Sampson & Laub, 1990).

Gaps in Research

- However, to-date, many of the studies examining the impact of employment on reoffending have focused on structural aspects of employment, such as income, hours and occupational level.
- Few studies have explored what supervisors and employers can do to assimilate employees with criminal history into work life.

Study Overview

- Collaboration with Seattle University.
- Four graduate students taking the *Organizational Theory & Analysis in Criminal Justice Course* were recruited to work on the study as part of a service learning project.
- Araceli Ochoa, Enedelia Garcia, Josee Hildebrandt & Carly Holmes
- Graduate students conducted interviews, transcribed interviews, and participated in the analysis of the qualitative data.

Methodology

- Purposive sample
- Recommendations about who to interview came from VP of Enterprises.
- 10 supervisors were invited to participate in the study (50% male).
- Interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-40 minutes.
- Eight interviews were conducted in person, and two interviews were conducted over the phone.
- IRB approval was obtained from Seattle U Institutional Review Board.

Study Setting: Pioneer Human Services

- Pioneer Human Services, headquartered in Seattle, WA, is a social enterprise.
- Pioneer was founded in 1963 by Jack Dalton, an attorney, who after serving time in prison opened a halfway house in Seattle.
- Pioneer operates a broad range of programs in over 50 locations across Washington State.
- Pioneer's mission is to provide individuals with criminal history the opportunity to lead healthy, productive lives.

Study Setting: Pioneer Human Services

- Pioneer Industries (PI) is a manufacturing business that produces parts for the aerospace industry.
- Pioneer Distribution Center provides fulfillment for aerospace parts, shipping over 210,000 parts a year.
- Pioneer Food Services operates an institutional kitchen that prepares and delivers more than 1,200 fully-cooked meals per day to care facilities, residential reentry facilities, and other nonprofit organizations.
- Pioneer Construction Services performs interior and exterior renovations and maintenance for Pioneer facilities and external customers.

Approximately two-thirds of Pioneer enterprise employees have a criminal history and/or are in recovery from substance use disorder.

Interview Questions

- How are the needs of mission employees different from the needs of non-mission employees?
- What are the most important things that supervisors can do to help mission employees succeed?
- What aspects of the work environment are helpful to mission employees? What aspects of the work environment are not helpful to mission employees?
- What positive changes have you seen in mission employees as a result of being successful in the workplace?
- What knowledge is important for a supervisor working with mission employees to have? What would you recommend to new supervisors? Is there anything that you would have liked to know when you started supervising mission employees?

Interview Questions

- Have you experienced situations where an employee experienced SUD relapse? How did you notice that there was a problem? What are your recommendations for dealing with such situations?
- Have you experienced situations where an employee had problems managing a mental illness? How did you notice that there was a problem? What are your recommendations for dealing with such situations?
- Have you experienced situations where an employee reoffended? What are your recommendations for dealing with such situations?
- Is there anything else a supervisor can do when they see that a mission employee is struggling?
- What are your recommendations for employers who do not have extensive experience working with mission employees?

Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim.
- Codes were developed by the research team based on the interview questions and emerging themes (e.g., success, team, accountability, self-worth).
- Lead researcher coded all interviews.
- Data were analyzed using pile sorts, in which five researchers grouped coded segments for thematic similarity.

How are employees with criminal history different from employees without criminal history?

Main differences:

- Little or no work experience
- Lack of soft skills
- Criminal justice or SUD treatment related appointments that require flexibility
- Low self-worth
- Needs (housing, transportation, other non-work life issues)
- Differences are temporary

“Typically what we see with [these] employees is that they need more accommodations to balance their life as they transition back into the working world out of incarceration or out of treatment.”

What does success look like for employees with criminal history?

- Success does not mean the same for everyone.
- Three distinct themes emerged:
 - Gaining basic competencies which can result in promotions and new job.
 - Job specific skills
 - Soft skills like talking to colleagues and supervisors, being on time, and knowing how to behave in the work place.
 - Achieving stability (relationships, sobriety, financial)
 - Gaining self-confidence

What does success look like for employees with criminal history?

- Supervisors need to get to know their employees in order to understand how they view success.
- Awareness that not everyone will be successful.

- Stability and structure
 - Regular hours
 - Expectations to meet requirements, follow rules
 - Drug-free work place
- Being part of a team
 - Like family
 - Employees reoffending or relapsing can be detrimental for the team

- Support and compassion
 - Role models and mentors
- Resources
 - Incl. good working relationship with HR

What's not helpful

- Lack of structure
 - Too much freedom too soon
 - Colleagues who use drugs
- Lack of discretion
- Making light of substance use disorder relapse

What is important for supervisors of employees with criminal history to know?

- The importance of communication
- Balancing compassion and understanding with accountability

“If they really want the chance for change, they’re going to do it. But don’t take advantage of it. Nothing’s for free”

- Giving additional chances to succeed

What to do when an employee is struggling?

- Communication
- Providing information about resources

“It’s very powerful when those one-on-one [meetings] come from somebody who’s walked in their shoes. [...] and then having that background can look somebody in the eyes who isn’t on the right track and say ‘I’ve been where you are and look where I’m at.’ Whoa, that’s powerful stuff. Sometimes it’s enough to make a difference.”

Recommendations for employers interested in hiring employees with lived experience

- Consider the resumes of those with lived experience
- Change your perceptions about who will be a good employee
- Separate the criminal history from the person
- Be mindful not to stigmatize employees

*“You may be missing out on some phenomenal talent”
[...] you have damaged your company if you haven’t
stopped to talk to some of [the job applicants with
criminal history].”*

Limitations of the Study

- Not a representative sample
- Supervisor perspective, not the employee perspective
- It is unknown whether these strategies have an impact on the employees

Conclusion

- Cultural competence
 - Understand the workings of the criminal justice system
 - Understand the impact of incarceration on individuals
 - Teach soft skills
 - Build social support
 - Communicate with employees without stigmatizing them
- Resources
 - Be able to link employees to resources (e.g., housing, transportation, counseling, legal advice)

"I would've liked to have a better understanding of what people were going through. I wish that I would've passed less judgment on people's circumstances."