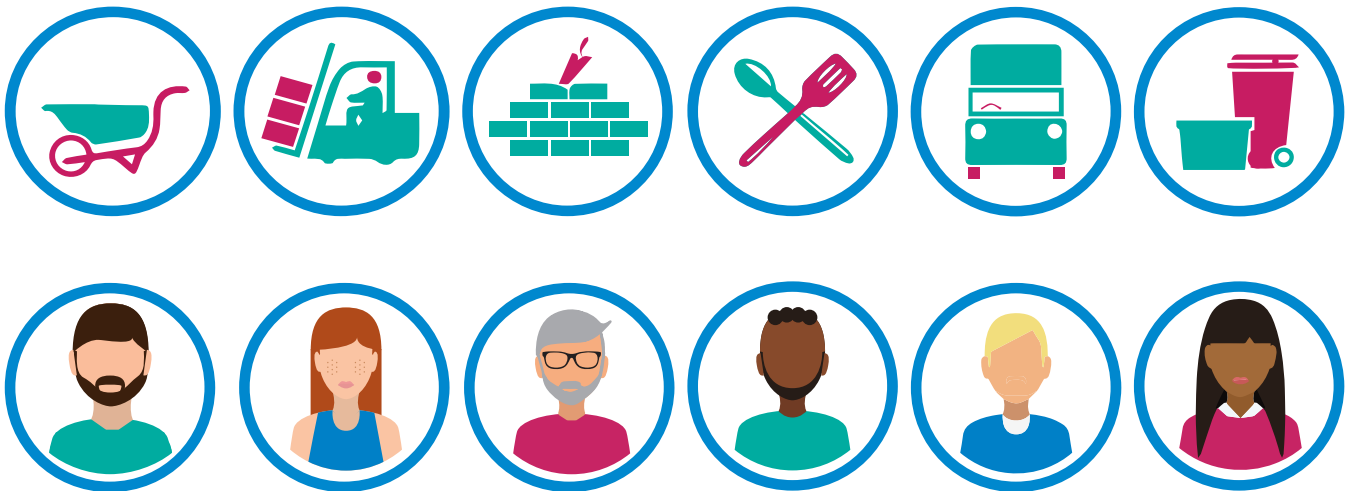


Bridging the gaps:

Supporting ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction into work



A briefing from The Forward Trust on how companies can address skills gaps by employing ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction, and how policy makers, Prison Governors and Government can facilitate pathways to bridge the gap from prison to real jobs in the community.

forward

About Forward

We are The Forward Trust (formerly RAPt and Blue Sky), the social business with charitable status that empowers people to break the often interlinked cycles of crime and addiction to move forward with their lives. For more than 25 years we have been working with people to build positive and productive lives, whatever their past.

We believe that anyone is capable of lasting change. Our services have supported thousands of people to make positive changes and build productive lives with a job, family, friends and a sense of community.

Executive Summary

The UK economy faces significant skills gaps: Sectors such as construction, hospitality and catering, transport, and waste management require tens of thousands of new workers in the next few years.

However, ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction - one potential source of labour to bridge these gaps - are excluded from the workplace: In a recent survey of Forward clients, 75% felt that they would be turned down for work by disclosing their criminal record or addiction. Nearly 50% had experienced rejection for work on these grounds.

Ex-offenders and people in recovery are highly motivated to work: Despite their experience of exclusion, this same survey showed that over 80% of prisoners and people in recovery want to work and feel capable of holding down a job and of contributing to society.

They have the potential to become committed, loyal and resilient employees: In the last 12 years, Forward has employed and supported over 2,000 ex-offenders and people in recovery. Over 40% of those employed on temporary work placements (through Forward's Blue Sky Agency) progress to higher skilled and better-paid jobs with our partner companies. Similarly, 76% of graduates of Forward's apprentice programme for people in recovery have secured permanent employment.

But they need support to realise this potential, especially when leaving prison: While improved access to vocational training, personal development and employment opportunities within prison is welcomed, continued support is needed 'through the gate' in the community – support that needs to be motivational, streamlined, and focussed on skills, achievements and ambitions.

Employment brings personal, business, social and economic benefits: As well as self-esteem, pride, purpose, and being a role model for family members, employment for ex-offenders and people in recovery brings real benefits to companies who take them on. The state also benefits – £18,600 is generated for every ex-offender who completes Blue Sky Agency's employment programme.

In order to maximise these benefits on a greater scale, Forward recommends that:

Employers

- Learn from companies who already recruit ex-offenders and people in recovery and have overcome institutional and internal barriers in changing policy and practice
- Work with specialist agencies to de-risk the recruitment process, navigate the complexities of the criminal justice system, and provide in-work support for new recruits
- Challenge supply chain partners (and recruitment agencies) to change discriminatory policy and practice, adding social value in the process

Prison Governors and criminal justice policy makers

- Make real jobs the central goal of the service user journey – less repetitive needs assessment, and more focus on skills and achievements relevant to the real world of work
- Make data available to employers and agencies on releasing patterns across the prison estate

Government

- Establish clear responsibility for employment outcomes across the Prisoner Education Framework, Transforming Rehabilitation and the Work & Health Programme
- Incentivise employers through tax breaks to employ ex-offenders and people in recovery

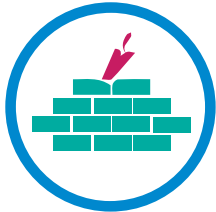
Prisoners, ex-offenders and people in recovery

- Utilise training and employment opportunities in prison, and reference them in job interviews
- Know their rights and understand what they need to disclose, and practise how to disclose it
- Draw hope and inspiration from peers who have gained employment and moved forward in life

The skills gap

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills estimates that between 2012 and 2022 some 12.5 million vacancies will be opened up through people leaving the workforce. An additional 2 million new jobs will also be created, making a total of 14.5 million employment opportunities. With only 7 million young people due to enter the workforce during this time period, and even in the unlikely event of post-Brexit net immigration staying at 300,000 a year, this means that 50% of this labour requirement will be left unmet.

Particular examples of industries that face significant skills gaps include:



Construction

The construction industry will need 36,000 new recruits per year from 2017-2021¹



Hospitality and catering

The hospitality industry needs 1.3 million new employees by 2024, of whom 975,000 will be replacements for staff that have left²



Transport

The transport sector is predicting a shortfall of 55,000 by 2020³



Waste management

There will need to be 90,000 new recruits to the sustainable resource management sector in the next five to seven years⁴

Forward believes that ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction represent a significant pool of potential candidates for these jobs – more than 62,000 people leave prison each year without a job to go to (75% of those released)⁵. There are also many thousands of ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction currently unemployed in the community who could be supported into work.

¹ <http://www.citb.co.uk/global/research/final%20achievers%20and%20leavers%20report.pdf.pdf>

² <https://www.thecaterer.com/articles/368873/how-big-is-hospitality-skills-shortage>

³ <http://www.hrmmagazine.co.uk/article-details/closing-the-uk-transport-skills-gap>

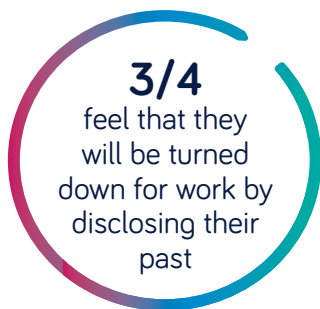
⁴ http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/apsrg/sites/site_apsrg/files/report/331/fieldreportdownload/apsrg-sustainable-skills-report.pdf

⁵ *Unlocking Potential* (Ministry of Justice 2016)

The experience of ex-offenders and people in recovery

Exclusion and discrimination

Ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction are routinely excluded from the workplace. Research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions⁶ has shown that they are the two groups that employers are least likely to hire. This practice is reflected by findings from Forward's recent survey of over 100 clients:



"I have worked really hard to address my addiction, but I still feel my criminal record will hold me back."

"Bosses can stereotype ex-cons and addicts."



"I've not been able to get work on certain building sites due to my criminal record."



"I am struggling to get to interview stage now if I tell the truth on an application, so I lie then when I get to interview I will disclose my history."

Motivated to work

Despite their experience of exclusion, Forward's survey shows that **88% of prisoners and 83% of people in recovery from addiction** feel motivated to get a job.

Even those who never previously had a job (over 15% of Forward clients) feel ready to work if given the chance, and acknowledge their own sense of responsibility to make the most of any opportunity given to them.

"I'm capable of most employment, just need a chance or a start."

"Nobody told me what I was capable of."

"Addicts work hard in addiction and could work harder at a job and a fresh start."

"I realise it's up to me if I sink or swim."

⁶ An Independent review into the impact on employment outcomes of drug or alcohol addiction, and obesity Dame Carol Black, 2016

Forward's experience

In the last 12 years, Forward has employed and supported over 2,000 ex-offenders and people in recovery. We have extensive experience of working with our clients side by side to support them on their journey from crime and addiction to better lives with jobs, family, friends and a sense of community.

We also have extensive experience of working with many partner employers, and understand their strategic and day-to-day challenges in the commercial world. We support employers to navigate the complexities of the criminal justice system and to understand our clients' challenges of leaving prison and being in recovery from addiction. We also work with them to identify labour needs and skills gaps, and develop in-prison and in-community training to address those needs and gaps.

"I felt so terribly lonely [on leaving prison] that I wouldn't have felt happy even if I won the lottery."

"I ignore all the offers but by old friends still contact me."

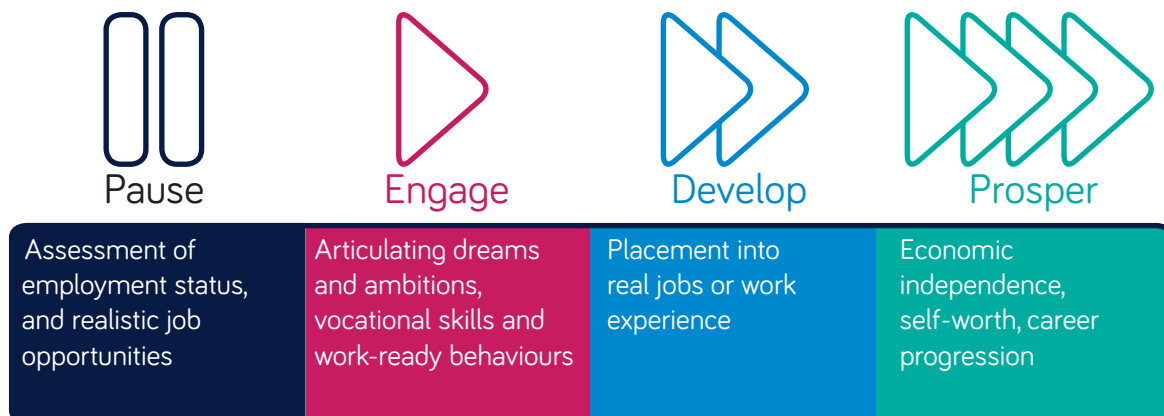
"What system?"

Support when leaving prison

Even when strongly motivated to work, ex-offenders and people in recovery often need support to gain stability and build confidence to be ready for work. The reality of leaving prison and starting again in the community can hit hard – people often feel lonely, and feel pressure from peers to re-offend. Those leaving prison often lack faith in professional services - their experience of Probation and Through the Gate support is often fragmented and confusing, with numerous forms to fill in, leaving little time to focus on their skills, achievements and ambitions. This is why Forward creates relationships of trust and networks of support for clients, with a particular emphasis on peer support – over 1/3 of our staff have lived experience of the criminal justice system or addiction – and we have extensive volunteering and apprenticeship schemes that our clients can use to develop their careers. We encourage clients to identify key achievements from their time in prison (however modest they may seem to them) and we coach clients on how to disclose their convictions professionally and in a positive light (emphasising what they've learned about themselves and how they've moved on in life).

Building trust, confidence and opportunity

This work of building trust with clients and instilling hope and motivation starts in prison. Our package of employability support (summarised in the diagram below) promotes the message that getting a job is achievable – with hundreds of examples of peers to provide inspiration. We raise awareness of realistic job opportunities, and then develop skills, confidence and work-ready behaviours through targeted vocational training and personal development courses.



Our support continues through the gate in the community where our Employment Coaches and Recovery Support Workers maintain motivation and match candidates to real work opportunities:

- **Blue Sky Agency** – direct employment and placement with partner companies (see below)
- **Apprentice Programme** – for people in recovery from addiction to develop careers within substance misuse services and other sectors
- **Brokerage** – placement into jobs in a growing range of industry sectors including retail and hospitality
- **Forward Enterprises** – support for ex-offenders and people in recovery to start their own businesses
- **Volunteering and work placements** – to ease them into full-time work

Working in partnerships with employers

Through Blue Sky Agency we work in partnership with a growing number of companies in an expanding range of sectors – including waste management (Veolia and Amey), grounds maintenance (id Verde), construction (Powerday), catering and food manufacturing (Adelie) and bus driving (HCT Group). Blue Sky Agency employs ex-offenders for up to six months and places them with mainstream employers, who can then assess their contribution in the real workplace, and take on those who impress as permanent employees.

One of the keys to the success of these partnerships is the positive attitude and commitment of local managers of partner companies – they are the ‘unsung heroes’ of our work, who supervise our clients day in, day out (alongside our own in-work support), set clear expectations of what’s expected of them in the workplace, and show belief and trust in their ability and potential.

“We have someone who has been with us for three months through Blue Sky and we’ve just promoted him from a key man to a handy man role. I wouldn’t have done that if I didn’t believe in him and had the trust that I have in him to do that.”

Jack McVeigh, Contract Manager, Powerday

“In my experience they are hardworking guys, the ‘ex-offender phobia’ never bothered me, we get people through (a regular) agency and you don’t know his background or anything.”

Jamie Hope, Operations Manager, Amey

Our achievements

- Blue Sky Agency currently employs, on average, over 200 ex-offenders per year and Forward employs over 60 people in recovery from addiction; we also offer 25 apprenticeships to people in recovery from addiction and industry specific apprenticeship training through our Forward Enterprises
- Over 40% of ex-offenders employed on temporary work placements (through Blue Sky Agency) progress to permanent jobs, primarily to higher skilled and better-paid jobs with our partner companies – this is four times higher than what the Work Programme achieved for prison leavers
- For those who complete Forward’s apprentice programme, the progression rate to permanent employment is even higher at 76%

The benefits of employment

Personal and emotional

As well as financial stability, structure and routine, employment brings profound personal and emotional benefits to ex-offenders and people in recovery. These include feelings of legitimacy and purpose leading to self-belief and self-worth, changed attitudes to crime, longer-term thinking, and ultimately a commitment not to re-offend or relapse. Employment also makes people a role model for their family and peers.

“The ability to embody the values of my recovery through my work gives me the sense of wholeness I’ve yearned for my whole life.”

“It’s wonderful to be able to tell my kids about what I’m doing – they’re so proud of me. My wife tells me I’m a different man, and I feel like one too.”

“Now I’ve got a beautiful family, I own my house, we’re starting an extension - without Blue Sky, none of this would have been possible.”

Business and commercial

Working with specialist intermediaries such as Forward to employ ex-offenders and people in recovery brings employers real business benefits:

- **Bridging the skills gap:** finding a solution to the immediate need for skills and labour
- **Generating social value:** demonstrating corporate social responsibility and meeting the requirements of the Social Value Act
- **Recruiting committed, loyal employees:** who with further training and support can add long-term value to the company

“On one hand you could say we are working to fulfil our corporate social responsibility, but we’re also sourcing quality, highly committed people who want to work with us.”

“We service the construction sector and it has been widely written about and accepted as fact that there is a huge skills gap in construction. We are keen to find the right people to come into the industry and we know if we put the right training in we can upskill for the long term.”

Simon Little, Sales and Marketing Director, Powerday

Social and economic

- Employment is the single biggest factor in reducing the likelihood of reoffending, yet 75% of people leaving prisons don’t have a job to go to
- Our Blue Sky Agency model of employment has a proven impact on reducing re-offending – a reduction of up to 23% according the Ministry of Justice’s Data Lab⁷, one of the highest performing interventions on record
- Every ex-offender who completes Blue Sky Agency’s employment programme (as part of Forward’s Employment Service) generates £18,600⁸ on average of savings to the state
- 45% of those in recovery from addiction who were unemployed relapsed, compared to 23% of people in recovery who were employed

⁷ Ministry of Justice Data Lab Re-offending analysis: Blue Sky 2013

⁸ Deloitte / Pro Bono Economics

Recommendations

To maximise the benefits described above, Forward makes the following recommendations to employers, policy makers and prison governors, and ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction:

Employers

- **Change recruitment policies and practice** – Many organisations have recruitment processes and policies that exclude ex-offenders or people in recovery from addiction. Much of this exclusion stems from confusion around employer's responsibilities when hiring ex-offenders and the legal requirements for disclosing past offences, including the difference between spent and unspent convictions.
- **Work with other employers and with specialist agencies** - Employers can seek practical advice on policy and practice from agencies such as Forward, Nacro, Unlock or Clean Sheet. Or they can speak to other businesses who already employ ex-offenders and people in recovery - they will have overcome internal challenges of buy-in, operations and compliance and could share a ready-made 'route map'. Agencies such as Forward and Bounce Back can also provide direct employment and brokerage solutions for those looking to employ ex-offenders but who lack experience and expertise of working with this group.
- **Maximise the opportunities offered by supply chains** – Employers should also utilise their supply chains to make powerful contributions to social value and to corporate social responsibility. This should include a challenge to recruitment agencies to change their policy and practices, which often includes a blanket rejection of people with a criminal record.

Criminal justice policy makers and Prison Governors

- **Make real jobs the central goal of the service user journey** - Currently, every ex-offender is assessed (sometimes multiple times by multiple providers operating in custody) but not everyone is given access to the full range of interventions that could support them to make positive changes in the future. Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS) need to improve the user journey experience and make it simpler and more consistent across the country, so that prison leavers better understand what support they are supposed to be getting and what options are available to them. Ex-offenders should be asked key questions on first assessment that relate to positive employment outcomes on release – for example, 'Do you have a driving licence?'
- **Better inform the employment market** - Publish aggregated data on releasing patterns of prisons: employers and partner agencies can then plan, resource and target recruitment and training against real-time information.

Government

- **Establish clear responsibility for employment outcomes** - Various Government programmes now support education, training and employment for ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction (including the new Prisoner Education Framework, the Community Rehabilitation Companies under Transforming Rehabilitation, the National Probation Service and the Department of Work and Pension's Work and Health Programme). Across this range of programmes, there needs to be clarity on who is ultimately responsible for employment outcomes, and on the funds available to commission results for those outcomes.

- **Support and incentivise employers** - Putting employment outcomes for prison leavers as a priority critically also means creating the right eco-system for employers to see this as a business opportunity. That could include incentives (such as tax breaks), easy navigation and information, and access to experienced employers and recognised specialist agencies.

Ex-offenders and people in recovery

- **Be clear on disclosure** - Ex-offenders and people in recovery need clear advice about disclosure before leaving prison or completing their sentence. They need to know their rights and to prepare and practise their disclosure statement. Often the most important thing employers want to see is remorse and that people have moved on.
- **Make the most of any training or work experience previously obtained** – It's important when engaging with an employer or agency who knows their criminal record for ex-offenders or people in recovery to make sure they count the work they did in prison. These are key skills and important experience that count when applying for work.
- **Take inspiration and motivation from others** - Finally, we are calling on prisoners, ex-offenders and those in recovery from addiction to hold on to their hope and motivation and to draw inspiration from the examples of peers who have moved forward in life with permanent jobs, a family, friends and a sense of community.

“On leaving prison after eight years, my prospects weren't good. I thought, ‘Who's going to employ an ex-offender?’ But then I found Blue Sky and I've never looked back. Best thing I've ever done.”

“I now live free from drugs, alcohol and crime in a beautiful flat, with a full-time job and a girlfriend. I feel so positive about my future and know that I will continue to move Forward with my life.”

Contact us



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