

## Attitudes shift toward hiring applicants with criminal records

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Companies are becoming increasingly creative in the continuing effort to deal with talent shortages in the workplace. Some make conventional moves like raising wages and increasing employee benefit levels; for example, Amazon raised its minimum hourly wage to \$15 last year, and other large companies have extended benefits to cover part-time employees.

Not all companies are in a position to make such expensive moves. For these companies, the talent crunch means they must look for talent in new arenas, and one of those potential applicant sources can be individuals with criminal histories.

The practice of hiring people with criminal convictions is not a new concept, but it is gaining steam. The Society for Human Resource Management, an organization with more than 300,000 HR professionals, has joined forces with Koch Industries to create an initiative called “Getting Talent Back to Work.”

The initiative aims to give HR professionals the information needed to “confidently evaluate applicant criminal records, reduce legal liability and increase inclusive hiring from this untapped labor pool,” and it’s gained commitments to participate from a broad range of employers and trade associations. For employers who are interested but don’t know where to begin, SHRM has created the website [gettingtalentbacktowork.org](http://gettingtalentbacktowork.org), which offers a “toolkit” with extensive information—including statistics, tips and answers to frequently asked questions.

SHRM is not the only prominent organization that has been promoting the hiring of this underemployed population. The NAACP launched its “One Million Jobs” campaign earlier this year and has partnered with government entities as well as major corporations like CVS, Amazon, Aetna, Uber and Lyft to develop paths to employment through training and coaching for those about to be released from prison.

Beyond simply being open to employing someone with a criminal record, some companies build their entire business model around employing formerly incarcerated people. Local not-for-profit RecycleForce, for example, describes itself as a “social enterprise designed to reduce recidivism while safely recycling electronics in Indianapolis.”

The term recidivism refers to those who end up back in prison, and RecycleForce says it has successfully reduced that rate among its participants through a six-month transitional employment program that offers the opportunity to earn a paycheck while also developing important skills to enable individuals to successfully re-enter the workforce.

Another example is Televerde, a company that markets business-to-business sales-demand generation. The company relies on a call staff made up almost entirely of incarcerated women in

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Arizona and Indiana. Female inmates apply for the program, and those who are selected are thoroughly trained. Approximately 25% of the women continue to work for the company after release; others find jobs in related industries. The company claims a recidivism rate of less than 10%—well below the national average of more than 50%.

Why is interest in this issue taking on momentum? Low unemployment rates are typically the biggest motivator for employers, but there has also been an evolving mindset. Consider these facts found on SHRM's Getting Talent Back to Work website: More than 600,000 people are released from prison each year, and 75% of those will remain unemployed after a year. Combine that with the knowledge that the single most important predictor in recidivism is joblessness, and it can become a continual cycle once those individuals enter the criminal justice system.

Considering applicants with criminal convictions requires a change in mindset. While the EEOC has made it clear that criminal convictions should not result in automatic disqualification, there are still employers who haven't been willing to consider anyone with any sort of conviction history. The economic reality that many companies can't find people to fill jobs might start to change that approach.

Here's what the EEOC suggests: Consider each individual on a case-by-case basis. It might surprise you to know that, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 45% of people currently incarcerated in their system are there for drug offenses; for many employers, that would certainly not be a deal-breaker. To further entice, tax credits are often available that employers can benefit from by employing formerly incarcerated individuals.

Finally, there's the work ethic and loyalty that can arise from someone who's given a second chance. According to a SHRM poll, "More than 80% of managers and two-thirds of HR professionals think the value workers with criminal records bring to an organization is as high as or higher than that of workers without records."