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# Offender Job Retention

**A Report from the  
Offender Workforce Development Division  
National Institute of Corrections**

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\*The Offender Workforce Development Division (formerly the Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement) was legislatively established in March, 1995, within the National Institute of Corrections to encourage and support employment programs for adults in custody, under community supervision, and others with criminal records through technical assistance, training, and information services. For more information, see

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**National Institute of Corrections**  
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**Offender Job Retention**

Offenders contend with many similar barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment as do other chronically underemployed people, such as limited childcare, health care, and transportation (Murphy, 1999). However, the very nature of their offender status brings additional challenges, including the social stigma associated with criminal history, reporting requirements, and supervision fees. These complex circumstances have the potential to limit initial employment, threaten sustained employment, and endanger successful community transition.

Research shows a lack of employment may contribute to an offender's continued criminal activity. A frequently cited Texas study recognizes that an unemployed offender is three times more likely to return to prison than an offender who has a job (Eisenberg, 1990). The New York Department of Labor cites statistics compiled by the Division of Criminal Justice showing 83% of offenders who violated probation or parole were unemployed at the time of violation (State of New York Department of Labor, undated). Additional studies show that low levels of personal, educational, vocational, financial achievement, and in particular, an unstable employment record, are among the major predictors of continued criminal conduct (Andrews, 1995). There is compelling evidence to support the position that unemployment contributes to recidivism or the failure of offenders to successfully transition to the community. One study of offenders released from Texas prisons shows that 74% ranked employment as their number one post-release problem (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 1990).

In order for employment to be a protective or resiliency factor against continued criminal activity, the employment itself must be maintained over time. Practitioners, such as offender employment specialists, recognize this concept as job retention, or positive attachment to employment over time. The goal of job retention for people who are difficult-to-employ is remaining in the workforce over time, which is not a simple task. It can also be distinguished from the narrower goal of helping people to retain a particular job (MDRC, 1999).

Although practitioners are generally aware of the importance of offender job retention, many researchers have historically neglected the topic. However, people involved with welfare-to-work initiatives have inadvertently conducted research on offenders through evaluating the outcomes of their programs and services. Interest in job retention and advancement among welfare recipients heightened in 1996 among government officials, social service providers, academics, and the general public when Congress enacted Public Law 104-193, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation

Act. The legislation changed the focus of the welfare system from one of income support to employment (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

In 1998, to build knowledge about helping welfare recipients sustain employment and advance in the labor market, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued planning grants to help states implement and refine their employment, retention, and advancement strategies (Fishman, 1999). However, when studying the welfare to work population, research offered few specific or definitive approaches that define best practices in supporting low-income workers in the labor market (Giloith, 1998).

Given the limited amount of research on offender employment, in 2000 the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (OCJTP), devoted its own resources to gathering information regarding offender job retention. NIC conducted a literature review, which revealed the lack of a logically developed body of knowledge specific to the job retention of offenders. Further, NIC facilitated multiple focus groups of practitioners, offenders, and administrators to determine the topics most relevant to offender job retention.

OCJTP also developed a survey consisting of twenty-three, closed-ended questions on several employment and retention related topics including assessment, case management, follow-up, and relapse. The survey was administered to 512 practitioners who participated in the September 2000 distance-learning via satellite broadcast of NIC's Offender Employment Specialist Training. The survey data was analyzed by February of 2001 and examined what practitioners believe to be the most critical retention factors, important retention obstacles, and common job loss indicators. This information will be useful for practitioners who want to develop intervention strategies designed to improve offender job retention.

The survey findings are presented below in the context of career development theory, assessment, case management, and relapse prevention. Furthermore, each section contains highlighted retention strategies that relate to each topic and correspond with the survey results.

## Theory

Based on career development theory, it is of little surprise that offenders struggle with job retention. Donald Super (1957), an expert on developmental theory, asserts that people seek career satisfaction through the work roles in which they express themselves. Through these expressions people are able to implement and develop their vocational self-concepts (Zunker, 1994).

For example, in the growth stage, from birth to 14 or 15, children form their self-concept, develop capacity, attitudes, interests, needs, and form a general understanding of the world of work. Many offenders grow up in homes where one or both parents have been incarcerated or perhaps simply have no working adult role model, thus missing crucial stages and developmental tasks that would have contributed to their vocational self-

concept. Moreover, having negative adult role models may hinder children from developing positive attitudes about work and responsibility. Children may routinely enter the illicit market rather than the legitimate labor market when criminality is perceived as acceptable adult behavior. (Watts, 1996).

During the exploratory stage, from 15-24, young adults “try out” their choice of occupations through classes, work experience, and hobbies. They collect relevant information, make tentative choices, and develop related social and problem-solving skills. However, many offenders drop out of high school and deny themselves the experience of vocational education classes and interaction with experienced teachers and vocational counselors. They often find themselves in unsafe and unhealthy environments that do not model, reward, or reinforce behaviors that would promote positive job retention.

Super suggests that vocational self-concept develops through physical and mental growth, observations of work, and identification through working with adults. As experiences become broader in relation to awareness of the world of work, a more sophisticated vocational self-concept is formed. The aforementioned OCJTP survey data reveals that practitioners believe the most important offender job retention factors can be linked with the development, or lack of development, of vocational self-concept. These factors include:

- employment in jobs that match an offender’s skills and interests (cited as important by 55% of the survey respondents);
- offender’s level of social skills (41%);
- offender’s problem solving skills (38%); and
- realistic expectations of the work culture by the offender (37%).

Using career development theory, practitioners can impact job retention by:

- Developing offender vocational self-concept by modeling and instructing to appropriate work place behaviors, social skills, and problem solving skills;
- Assessing offender skills, interests, strengths, and talents;
- Engaging in dialogue regarding realistic expectations of the work culture;
- Incorporating the expectation of workplace behaviors throughout employment programs to promote understanding and familiarity with workplace norms;
- Creating opportunities for those with very basic skills and limited work experience to build incrementally their education and job skills; and
- Developing effective mentoring programs.

### Assessment

The degree of competency and knowledge that individual offenders possess regarding critical job retention factors, such as social skills, problem-solving skills, and realistic

work expectations, can be identified through the assessment process. Assessment that occurs throughout the offender's interaction with the criminal justice system, beginning early in the incarceration, and continuing as the offender leaves prison and re-enters the community, is most conducive to ultimately achieving positive job retention outcomes. The OCJTP survey results show practitioners report assessment has a strong impact (cited by 47% of respondents) or some impact (32%) on job retention. Assessment can include an evaluation of offender skills (assessment of this type conducted by 44% of respondents), needs (39%), and interests (37%). Practitioners gather assessment information through formal assessment instruments (30%) and interviews (53%).

Using assessment and facilitation skills, practitioners may improve job retention by:

- Creating an environment that promotes offender discussion of personal motivation and values; and
- Encouraging the development of a future-orientation that considers how behavior impacts future consequences, and the achievement of career goals.

Other uses of assessment that relate to job retention include an evaluation of job match congruency and job quality. Low skilled jobs in general, tend to create poor job attachment, that is, it is easy to quit or be fired (Kramer, 1998). Most offenders, if employed at all, find jobs in the secondary labor market, which includes jobs that pay little, provide minimal job security, and allow few, if any, opportunities for advancement. Large percentages of offenders find jobs that lack important benefits and require nonstandard or changing hours (Rangarajan, 1998). As a result of all of these contributing factors, many offenders will neither like the jobs they find nor be very successful in keeping them (Reno, 2000).

Meta-analytic research lends support to these concepts by finding that the largest single effect size, resulting in reductions in recidivism of approximately 35%, is employment-focused programs in which clients secure meaningful jobs (Lipsy, 1995).<sup>1</sup> It reasonably follows, that in order for jobs to be meaningful to offenders, employment must be consistent with their motivation, values, goals, interests, and skills.

Arrest and incarceration are the third most commonly reported obstacles to job retention in the OCJTP survey responses (cited by 44% of respondents). Research shows a strong job quality effect on economic and non-economic criminal behavior, with one study finding that job quality reduced the likelihood of criminal behavior among a sample of released high-risk offenders (Uggen, 1999). In other words, entry into high quality jobs may increase social controls, decrease the motivation to commit crime, and alter the relative attractiveness between legal and illegal activities. Improving offender job quality should also impact job retention.

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<sup>1</sup> Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure for calculating the average strength of association between variables (the mean effect size) across previously completed research studies (Rubin, 1993).

Using assessment, practitioners can improve job retention by:

- Assisting offender decision making regarding appropriate job match, which accounts for skills, needs, and interests;
- Improving offender job quality; and
- Allowing for flexibility regarding issues of timing and integration of interventions, such as a need for training to co-occur with job placement.

### Case Management

In this context, case management is defined as a method of providing services whereby a case manager assesses the needs of the offender and the offender's family, and then coordinates and monitors a package of multiple services to meet the specific, often complex, needs of each offender. Case management rests on a foundation of professional training, values, knowledge, theory, and skills used in the service of attaining goals that are established in conjunction with the offender (National Association of Social Workers, 1992). Such goals include:

- enhancing developmental, problem-solving, and coping capacities of offenders;
- creating and promoting the effective and humane operation of systems that provide resources and services to offenders;
- linking offenders with systems that provide resources, services, and opportunities; and
- contributing to the development and improvement of social policy (National Association of Social Workers, 1992).

Many case management models include activities that allow case managers to identify and address the most commonly reported offender job retention obstacles, such as:

- substance abuse (cited by 68% of respondents in the OCJTP survey),
- limited transportation (63%),
- limited knowledge of workplace culture (34%), and
- limited support meaningful to the offender (29%).

The case management activities that are used to address obstacles typically include:

- assessment,
- service planning,
- linkage,
- monitoring,
- advocacy, and
- skills training.

Other promising job retention and advancement services include on-going support and reassessment, career counseling, mediation, and re-employment assistance (Houston, 2000).

The OCJTP survey respondents indicate that case management is very important (77%) or somewhat important (13%) for offender job retention. Many well-established offender employment organizations, such as New York City's Center for Employment Opportunities and the South Forty Corporation; Washington State's Corrections Clearinghouse and Pioneer Human Services; and Chicago's Safer Foundation include case management in their programs. Further, intensive case management models include creating professional relationships with offenders and encouraging one-on-one personal attention by the case manager (Kelly, 1999).

Practitioners understand that offenders do not exist in isolation, and that they eventually come home to families and communities. Those involved in an offender's life are often a determining factor as to whether the offender will succeed once released. Therefore, job retention strategies that are designed to deal only with offenders and employment in isolation are likely to fail. Practitioners must be equipped to address a variety of issues beyond the immediate needs of the offender and be prepared to provide on-going, family-centered support.

Establishing strong, professional, working relationships between caseworkers and offenders is critical to achieving positive outcomes. In order for this relationship to be successful, caseworkers must be perceived by offenders and the families they serve as both available and responsive (Dozier, 1994). This requires that caseworkers react in a timely and supportive manner to what offenders say and how offenders act. Interactions with offenders and their families should be characterized by what one researcher described as social continuity (Wahler, 1994). That is, the interactions must be predictable, appropriate, and welcomed over an extended period of time to establish a pattern on which offenders and their family members can depend and anticipate.

The success of caseworkers to impact job retention depends heavily on their consideration of each offender's unique needs, responses to unexpected problems, and tenacity in navigating bureaucratic and judicial hurdles to achieve the most needed services. (Glisson, 1992). Practitioners are well aware that offenders struggle with complicated life circumstances and encounter a myriad of challenges regarding job retention. The OCJTP survey respondents would like to assist offenders in their job retention efforts by making the following changes to current employment programs:

- providing emergency stipends and incentives (reported by 85% of the respondents as a change they would like to make to their employment programs),
- providing pre-employment skill training and intensive employer follow-up (59%),



- providing intensive offender follow-up (52%),
- providing work-related soft-skill training, such as problem-solving (43%), and
- conducting more in-depth assessments (40%).

Using case management, practitioners can improve job retention by:

- Creating long-term relationships between staff and offenders that allow for identification of offender personal and family issues;
- Making alternative sources of ongoing support available for offenders;
- Establishing referral systems and improving access to community resources that address commonly encountered offender job retention obstacles, such as substance abuse and transportation;
- Expecting offender responsibility and accountability; and
- Modifying employment programs to respond to unmet offender needs.

The Post-Employment Services Demonstration (PESD), focused on case management as a way to move welfare recipients from finding jobs, to assisting them with keeping jobs (Rangarajan, 1998). PESD case managers were assigned to treatment group members when they found jobs. These case managers provided counseling, assisted in resolving benefit issues, service referrals, support services (work-related payments), and job search assistance in order to help participants remain employed.

Although focus groups demonstrated that PESD participants valued the one-on-one treatment, the program did not increase employment levels or earnings, nor did it reduce welfare receipt (Murphy, 1999). This may have occurred because case management services began after participants secured initial employment. Research shows that the most effective case management bridges pre and post-employment (Rangarajan, 1998). Study results show that OCJTP survey respondents provide case management services both pre-and post-placement (61%), exclusively pre-placement (5%), and exclusively post-placement (34%).

Additionally, PESD did not provide a structure for differentiating among services based on need. Case managers were required to contact all treatment group members, regardless of whether they wanted or needed services. Not all offenders need or use all services. The challenge of identifying those offenders who would benefit from specific services could be accomplished through the use of a triage instrument.

Triage, which is a concept borrowed from the medical field, assigns degrees of urgency as the primary method of determining the order and treatment of wounds and illnesses (Oxford American Dictionary, 1999). Of the practitioners responding to the survey, 78% reported they would use a triage instrument if it were available to assist in delivering appropriate services; 14% said they would not, and 8% already do so.

Research supports the triage concept regarding service provision by finding that:

- increased service intensity improves employment rates,
- spreading resources too thinly reduces program effectiveness, and
- systems need to be developed to identify those most in need of assistance (Kelly, 1999).

If given the opportunity, 77% of survey respondents reported that they would indeed provide more intensive services to those with higher need, while 23% would provide the same service level regardless of offender need. Further research and demonstration of the positive effects of triage may help increase the matching of service provision to service need.

Related to the issue of providing services based on level of need, is the length of time that services are provided to offenders. Programs may need to consider providing consistent long term support and interventions to reduce continuing jeopardy posed by complex offender needs such as legal assistance, interventions for domestic violence, service for persistent mental health issues, and complex child and family caretaker responsibilities (Kramer, 1998). The OCJTP survey shows that practitioners are continuing to follow-up with offenders after they obtain employment for:

- one week (reported as the offender follow-up period by 10% of respondents);
- one month, six months and one year (13% each);
- three months (14%); and
- none (26%).

The OCJTP data further finds that job loss is often occurring early after initial employment is secured, primarily within the first three months. It therefore appears that there are critical windows for delivering retention services. A body of knowledge that has long addressed the relationship between critical windows and interventions is that of crisis intervention. A crisis is an upset in a steady state (state of equilibrium) that poses an obstacle, usually central to the fulfillment of important life goals or to vital need satisfaction (Caplan, 1964). Using this framework, offenders who encounter high-risk situations that threaten job retention could be considered to be in a state of crisis and in need of crisis intervention.

Research shows that timely intervention in crisis situations is particularly beneficial because it allows practitioners to reach offenders when their receptiveness to interventions may be the greatest (Kaplan, 1993). After a crisis has subdued, practitioners can then further take advantage of anticipatory guidance, which is an activity of major preventative significance. Anticipatory guidance involves assisting

clients to anticipate future crises that might develop and to plan effective coping strategies they can employ to avoid being overwhelmed in the future (Kaplan, 1993).

Using triage and extended case management, practitioners can improve retention by:

- Allowing for individualized attention and tailoring of services, as opposed to providing the same services to offenders regardless of their personal histories, strengths, and skills;
- Re-assessing offender needs because the nature of these needs, as they relate to retention, will change over time;
- Using techniques, such as anticipatory guidance, to prepare offenders to cope with future high-risk situations that could result in job loss.
- Understanding critical windows occur in the job retention process, when offenders are particularly susceptible to job loss. These may be opportunities to improve offender job retention through interventions.

### Job Retention Relapse Model

In his 1985 book, Relapse Prevention: Maintenance Strategies in the Treatment of Addictive Behaviors, Alan Marlatt describes relapse as a breakdown or setback in a person's attempt to change or modify any target behavior. He further explains that the purpose of relapse prevention is to prevent the occurrence of initial lapses. If a lapse were to occur, preventing further escalation to total relapse becomes the primary goal. With some modifications, this model can be adapted to fit the process of offender job retention. For example, the target behavior is maintained employment, the initial lapse is the occurrence of signs that typically indicate impending job loss, and total lapse is job loss itself.

The OCJTP survey responses are encouraging in regards to the suitability of using the relapse prevention model to guide job retention efforts. For example, practitioners report that they observe signs of an offender's impending job loss at the following rates:

- sometimes (50%),
- often (33%),
- never (13%), and
- always (4%).

They further report observing relatively consistent and specific indicators of impending job loss, including expressions of job dissatisfaction by the offender (reported as a relapse indicator by 84% of respondents); increased substance abuse (83%); offenders who cannot be located (81%); chaotic family life (81%); missed appointments (80%); offenders who are staying out late at night (72%); and family expressions of concern (69%). Of these indicators, increased substance abuse and offenders who cannot be located are most consistently reported as the strongest indicators (91% and 89%

respectively). The observance of these indicators, the differentiation among indicators regarding how likely job loss is likely to be, and an examination of the relapse prevention literature, lends additional support for adapting the relapse prevention model to offender job retention.

The relapse prevention model, commonly used in the treatment of addictive behavior, provides further parallels to offender employment and job retention:

- People who are addicted often return to treatment before maintaining sobriety, just as offenders often need re-placement before maintaining extended employment;
- Relapse potential is highest in the first thirty days, just as offender employment is most often lost in the first thirty days;
- High-risk situations trigger relapse, especially frustration, anger, and personal conflict, just as they trigger behavior likely to result in job loss;
- Motivation and commitment are key to maintaining sobriety, just as they are critical to maintaining employment;
- Motivation alone is not enough to avoid relapse. Perceived self-efficacy often plays a crucial role in long-term sobriety, just as with offender employment (Tarlow, 2001).

Achieving sustained employment involves the use of skills and behaviors with which many offenders have little or no experience. However, it is important to remember that many offenders have latent strengths. These strengths may be temporarily obscured, even to themselves, by the gradual erosion of self-confidence and self-efficacy over time. Therefore, practicing behaviors and anticipating reactions to high-risk situations are essential to task accomplishment, goal achievement, and strengthened problem solving, and coping skills.

Successful experiences, even in simulated situations, foster belief in having the ability to effectively carry out a task (Hepworth, 1993). A strong research-based case exists that the degree of positive expectation people have in their ability to perform tasks effectively determines:

- whether they even try to cope with given situations,
- how much effort they will expend in attempting tasks, and
- how long they will persist in the face of obstacles or aversive circumstances (Bandura, 1977).

An employed offender's dedication to problem solving, in the face of obstacles and frustrations, is critical to job retention success.

Problem solving approaches, such as cognitive restructuring, enable offenders to work through difficult situations and ultimately support job retention goals. Cognitive restructuring teaches offenders to examine their own thinking, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Furthermore, cognitive restructuring focuses on accepting that self-statements, assumptions, and beliefs largely govern emotional reactions to life's events. Gaining awareness of dysfunctional, self-defeating thoughts and misconceptions that impair personal functioning, and replacing them with beliefs and behaviors that are aligned with reality, lead to enhanced functioning (Hepworth, 1993). The combination of successfully completing tasks, overcoming obstacles, and enhancing problem solving is a powerful formula for increasing self-efficacy as it relates to job retention efforts.

Using the relapse prevention model, practitioners can improve job retention by:

- Including cognitive assessments and interventions;
- Encouraging offender to identify their own high-risk situations, or relapse triggers;
- Improving offender's sense of self-control and self-efficacy by rehearsing responses to high-risk situations; and
- Providing swift and significant re-employment assistance.

### Relapse Prevention Plans

The cornerstone of relapse prevention is to assess high-risk situations and teach offenders strategies for coping with them. A high-risk situation is defined broadly as any situation that poses a threat to the individual's sense of control and increases the risk of relapse. (Marlatt, 1985). Intervention plans can be created to focus on the handling of high-risk situations and obstacles in an effort to prevent lapses from escalating into total job loss relapse. The plans should consist of manageable and discrete actions. Many offenders often feel overwhelmed and are unable to break their ultimate goal into constituent parts that are less intimidating. Even smaller goals that are formulated with a high level of specificity can be complex and involve multiple actions that must be completed in proper sequence (Hepworth, 1993). Practitioners may be well advised to become familiar with a problem-solving model to guide offenders through the behavior changes that may be needed to improve their job retention.

Using relapse prevention plans, practitioners can improve job retention by:

- Adopting a particular problem-solving model to assist offenders with building relapse prevention plans;
- Analyzing and minimizing obstacles that may be encountered;
- Having offenders rehearse or practice relapse prevention behaviors;
- Enhancing offender commitment to carry out plans; and
- Conveying both encouragement and an expectation that the offender will carry out the plan.

## The Future of Offender Job Retention Efforts by Practitioners

As practitioners shift their focus from job placement to job retention, it follows that a shift from job retention to career advancement will most likely occur. Job retention and career advancement, frequently considered together as post placement concerns, are conceptually separable (Kramer, 1998). Neither should be limited to post-placement intervention status, rather they should be a part of the culture of employment programs from the earliest pre-placement days. Ultimately, both job retention and career advancement efforts may vary as greatly as the offenders they are designed to serve.

Currently, NIC offers curricula, free of charge, to practitioners who have an interest in improving offender employment and job retention. Contact the National Institute of Corrections Information Center at 800-877-1461 or [asknicic@nicic.org](mailto:asknicic@nicic.org) for the following:

### **“Building Futures”: Offender Job Retention for Corrections Professionals.**

This 36-hour program covers the skills, strategies, and resources to address job retention issues and increase employment success of people with criminal records. Request item 018596.

### **Career Resource Center Curriculum.**

This self-paced and/or group facilitated curriculum may be used by jails to train volunteers and prisons in training inmates to help transition people with criminal records back into the labor market through career planning and job search assistance provided through the facilities' career resource centers. Request item 020931.

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