



Through the gate

Employment support at Wandsworth Prison

by Julie Hadman

“I never knew what a normal way of life was.” From the age of nine, Jason fought addiction. For most of his life he has been in and out of prison. But, with the support of an innovative employment service at Wandsworth Prison, he has turned his life around. Today he has a successful career in IT.

“What drives me today is not just doing something for myself and my immediate family, but I’m giving something back to the community that I stole from,” says Jason.

Only a third of released prisoners have a job or a place in training or education. Yet having a job has been shown to be the single biggest factor in reducing reoffending.

New research by Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health has found that most employment schemes for offenders place too much emphasis on learning skills and not enough on what actually helps people to get and keep jobs. Too few have direct links with local employers, offer support that continues ‘through the gate’ between prison and the community, or help people once they start work to stay there.

Wandsworth Prison is trying to change all this by getting people into real jobs when they leave prison and by providing ongoing support for both offenders and employers.

“This is not a role that prisons have taken on before,” explains Julian Hosking, Deputy Head of Learning and Skills at Wandsworth Prison. “Prisoners went through the gate and were passed onto other people. My experience has actually shown that what someone leaving prison needs is continuity.”

Wandsworth Prison in South West London is one of the largest prisons in Western Europe with a population of 1,650. It takes prisoners from local Crown Courts with around 60-80 passing in and out of the prison each day.

Between 120 and 140 prisoners are released each month. Approximately 25% of these go straight into some form of employment. Some will have jobs through the prison employment scheme which links up with local employers, and others will have found work through the prison job club or family and friends. In some cases, the prison will have negotiated with employers to keep a prisoner’s job open for them while they serve their sentence.

“Our aim is to ensure that each prisoner leaves with qualifications and an opportunity to find sustainable employment. We focus heavily on trying to get a proportion into employment directly from custody,” says Julian. He approaches both local employers who are recruiting and human resources

departments of large companies to encourage them to take on former offenders.

“Employers are actually very receptive,” he says. “We have a couple of [employment] agencies now, who will always entertain a call. If they have an opportunity and the person is qualified, they will definitely consider them. That’s really what you’re asking – you’re not asking people to take priority, you’re asking for someone with a criminal conviction to be taken at their face value as you would anyone else.”

Julian provides support for former offenders for at least 6-8 weeks, then as and when people want to get in touch. He will also provide support for their employer for as long as they need it. Initially he will be in constant contact with the employer by phone to ease any concerns they may have about employing an ex-prisoner.

Participation in the job club and employment scheme is voluntary. Julian says that a lot depends on how receptive a prisoner is to change and what barriers they have to overcome. Many have a great fear of failure and rejection. They may face peer pressure from other prisoners and may never have had a nine-to-five job before.

“It isn’t just about saying if we give you this qualification you can go out and earn money,” he says. “The majority of the guys are very bright, but have never studied, never read books, because their lives took a turn where they didn’t. They are sharing an 8ft x 10ft cell with two other people, trying to study something new in a place that is seldom quiet. The guys that get out there, qualified, ready to work show a huge amount of resolve and determination.”

Former offenders have to work twice as hard as anybody else to get a job and three times as hard to keep it, says Julian. “50% of our guys going into work maintain employment for up to six months. Some people will fail and leave their jobs within four weeks because of their own insecurities, not because of their keenness to reoffend and end up in custody. But when you get someone at the right time, you can achieve masses. The skill is catching those people at the right time.”

Jason agrees “The ‘want’ has really got to be there. I really wanted to change and came to a point where I thought there’s more to my life than this.

“I could have folded at many of the obstacles, but I haven’t. I refused to. Thanks to such a great network of support, I have got through. On my last sentence, I wrote out an action plan of where I wanted to go within the next year. I wrote out a list of commitments for myself and certain agencies that were involved with me as well as the prison service. I said, ‘I’m willing to commit myself. Are you?’”

During his sentence, Jason completed a computer networking course with the PICTA (Prisons’ Information and Communication Technology Academy). This scheme operates in 32 prisons around the country. The training programme at Wandsworth was developed by Cisco Systems, an international IT network company, which has an office nearby. The company has been so impressed by the work at Wandsworth that it is now piloting a scheme where its staff will mentor prisoners.

On leaving prison Jason began a six-month work experience with a local university. A year later he is still working at the university providing IT network support to their halls of residence.

“It’s an amazing job,” he says “I love every bit of it. I’ve never loved a job the way I love this job. I’m learning daily. Not just about the job but people skills and management skills”. In his spare time he is doing further training to develop his technical skills.

“The biggest thing is building a career. I didn’t want just a job. I’m thinking long term not short term, about a future for my children – their education, their wellbeing. I don’t want my children growing up and going down the route that I did,” he says.

Julian explains, “People who are in custody are often very damaged – things have gone wrong in their lives. I am not dismissing or justifying crime but things – families, associates, addiction, decision-making processes – something in their lives has gone wrong which has led them down a path”.

“I never knew what a normal way of life was,” says Jason. “I suffered from addiction from the age of nine. That was a major thing with my offences and mental health as well. Things happened in my life. I didn’t really have a father to guide me. I chose my path. If I knew what it was going to be like, I don’t think I would have gone down that path but that’s where I ended up.”

“Prisoners do feel guilt,” says Julian. “It is a bit of a myth that they don’t. They don’t come up with I’m innocent. They seldom ignore the fact that they feel quite guilty about what they have done and often will express that in quite emotional ways.”

Jason agrees “I felt guilt many a time. I have been in Wandsworth 14 times. I am not proud of it. I was a mini-crime wave. There was many a time when I was glad to get locked away. And I lived with that on my soul. I still live with that on my soul and I will take it to the grave.”

Prisoners, especially those with mental health problems, face many barriers to finding employment, from stigma and discrimination to competing on an open job market with people who have more skills and experience. They also have to learn to cope in the outside world with the challenges of everyday living such as managing a household budget.

“It’s about rebuilding your life in every aspect,” says Jason. “The first week I got out of prison, I went and spent £70 on shopping and came home with about 300 packets of crisps. I didn’t have a clue. I never knew how to do a week’s shopping in all my life.”

The vast majority of prisoners have mental health problems. Yet many are routinely excluded from vocational activities in prison because they are assumed not to be capable of working.

Julian explains that while people with severe mental health and drug problems often get very good support in prison, those with less severe problems do not get the support they need and are left spinning in a cycle of repeat offending.

“Sustainable employment, housing and support can break that cycle,” he says.

“Employment services should be made accountable for getting results”, Julian believes. “Soft skills, such as c.v. writing, are crucial to getting work, but if you are serious about stopping social exclusion from employment, services that get involved have to be made accountable for the serious output of putting people into work.

“No time is ever wasted because each step someone makes to change, they will learn something from it. As long as people engage there is hope. The danger is when people become ‘lost souls’. And lost souls are not only a tragedy for society but they also represent a huge danger – because if you are a lost soul and have criminal tendencies you have nothing to lose. That’s why nobody should be forgotten.”

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