

The Sextant



Navigating Your World

*GETTING OUT OF PRISON IS EASY.
THE CHALLENGE IS STAYING OUT!*

The first consideration an individual must contemplate when facing community re-entry after incarceration is whether he or she genuinely wants a different path in life.

Changing your life path requires work, dedication, and sacrifice. If an individual is unwilling to put forth the effort and work that is necessary to change his or her life path, then that person will probably find the exercise of trying to reenter mainstream society very frustrating.

People who do not genuinely want to embrace a new life path but feel some obligation to demonstrate that they are trying, perhaps only to appease the expectations of a spouse, family member, or parole officer, will arguably expend a great deal of energy manufacturing a plethora of excuses as to why the barriers to reentry cannot be overcome.

The myriad of tortured excuses provides a convenient rationalization for an individual to not try very hard toward changing their life path, and it justifies why he or she is in life where he or she is – a sort of victim, that has somehow been singled out and persecuted, at least in his or her own mind.

If you're happy with the path that you're on and it is producing the results that you want for your life, then accept your future as being the result of your efforts.

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However, if you are an individual who genuinely wants a new life path, but you wonder if putting forth the work and effort would just be an exercise in futility, worry no more. Hundreds of thousands of people who were released from prison and successfully re-entered mainstream society speak from experience. If you put forth the genuine work, sacrifice and effort, you can succeed.

Successful community reentry is largely dependent upon economics. Living in civilized society requires money, and among the socially acceptable methods of acquiring money is through gainful employment that is expected to provide a steady income stream.

There are many important elements that we must consider when seeking employment. We must seek employment opportunities for which we are qualified – not in our assessment, but rather, qualified in the employer’s judgment. There are numerous aspects of our education, experience, character, and persona that contribute to an employer’s assessment of our overall qualification for a particular position.

A single boilerplate resume sent to employers in disparate industries for a multitude of different positions is probably not very effective.

When an employer is recruiting to fill a particular position, that employer wants to locate an individual whose qualifications closely fit the particulars of that position.

Your resume needs to be tailored by industry and position. A successful employment search will likely require eight or ten variations of your resume, each customized to exploit those elements of your specific qualifications that appeal to the requirements and the particular contingencies of each opportunity.

In this day of the Internet and instant communication, many people have this delusion that filling out a couple of applications on the Internet or sending in a few resumes via e-mail each day qualifies as a sincere job search. It doesn't! A genuine job search requires a good deal more dedication.

Seeking employment, particularly in an economy where there are more people than jobs, requires a plan. Don't be discouraged though – there may be more people than there are jobs, but there are definitely more jobs than there are people *with a plan to find a job*.

If a person takes the time to create a genuine employment acquisition plan, he or she absolutely will locate gainful employment. On the other hand, if an individual is unwilling to put forth the effort to create an employment acquisition plan, then he or she can expect results that amount to little more than frustration.

Even worse, some people convince themselves that the limited results they realize from their lackadaisical search for employment provides them a convenient excuse that no one will hire them because of their background – suggesting that a felony conviction is some kind of total disability. It isn't a disability but it does present some unique challenges. However, no challenges that cannot be conquered if an individual is willing to press forward and not give up and quit. *Just don't quit!*

Decide which industries and positions are of interest to you. Begin with perhaps six industries and positions, and tailor resumes to each of those six positions. Emphasize your education, experience, and how your personality is best suited for the particulars of each specific position. When an employer reads your resume, you want them to see a match of your qualifications that fulfills the employer's needs – not just another person seeking a paycheck.

The preceding is probably decent and fundamental guidance for the majority of people seeking gainful employment. However, the individual who was recently released from jail or prison faces a unique set of challenges. The fundamentals mentioned above are still important, but there are several other considerations for someone who carries a felony record.

As previously mentioned, the first consideration is: Do you really want to change your life path? Do you really want to become a member of mainstream society? If you genuinely want to take a new life-path, then this process will not be a frustrating and painful drudgery. Rather, it will simply present interesting challenges that you can and will conquer.

A felony conviction or incarceration event does trigger some collateral damages, but a felony background is not a barrier to achieving a successful new life path.

Many people who are released from prison are fundamentally brainwashed to believe that becoming a card-carrying member of mainstream society is an almost impossible mission. That is a fallacy that is frequently proliferated by those who have been in, got out, and then came back – *the recidivists*.

Why would you even listen to an oratory regarding the challenges of community reentry from someone who failed at reentry? That would be analogous to taking financial planning counseling from someone who just filed a personal bankruptcy.

If you have the desire to take a new life-path, then the fulfillment of your desire is going to require change – a kind of *self-reinvention*. Change is difficult, especially after an individual is released from prison. All of the temptations and all of the old friends are readily available when an individual is released. In some respects, it is harder to get out than it is

to be in, but not because of the *barriers* to reentry. The reentry *barriers* are arguably overrated and are frequently exaggerated propaganda perpetuated by recidivists.

Whether you have been an inmate in a prison, work in a prison, or work in the community reentry profession, chances are that some of the people who have influenced your assessment regarding the *insurmountable* reentry challenges are people who got out of prison and then returned. Many recidivists offer a laundry list of tortured excuses as to why the felony conviction prevented them from reentering mainstream society.

With a national recidivism rate of roughly 65% to 70%, that means that thirty to thirty-five percent of individuals who got out never came back. Very, very few individuals in prison, individuals working in prisons or working in reentry have had a comprehensive dialog with those individuals who got out, genuinely re-entered mainstream society, and stayed out.

Genuinely re-entering mainstream society is an important distinction. Individuals who are released from prison and recidivate are not qualified to substantively contribute to a *how to make a successful community reentry* dialog.

The veracity and effectiveness of those who are released and immediately find employment in a reentry organization that is offering some kind of assistance or counseling for formerly incarcerated individuals is questionable. Those who start a community reentry non-profit organization right out of prison is also absent of authenticity. They have not done what all of their constituents are expected to do – *reenter mainstream society* and locate a regular mainstream job.

If the lifestyle of mainstream society is what you really want, stop listening to people who talk about successful community

reentry when they have no actual life experience in personal reentry, and start listening to that 35% who have succeeded at genuine re-entry into mainstream society. If a new life as a member of mainstream society is genuinely what you want, you absolutely can have it.

It seems that is always someone else's fault when someone recidivates, if you listen to the excuses some people offer when they return to prison. The police were targeting them, their parole officer had it out for them, the judge had a burr, etc.

There is a group of recidivists who refuse to accept personal accountability for their actions, and they justify themselves to everyone else by placing blame on everyone except he who stares back in the mirror.

If you are one of these individuals, you either don't genuinely want to be a member of mainstream society, which is completely respectable, or you are making excuses. If you are the latter, when you are alone and making an honest assessment, you know that all you are doing is making excuses to justify not doing the work and making the sacrifices necessary to engage yourself in mainstream society.

If a person wants to become a card-carrying member of mainstream society, it is simply a choice. The person who has made that choice to successfully reenter mainstream society will do it with or without any assistance.

No one is saying that it is easy or a cakewalk. It's hard. Life is hard. Conversely, if a person has not made the conscious choice, then there is no amount of assistance that will cause them to successfully re-enter mainstream society. Change begins with desire, and no one can trigger that desire except the subject individual.

An individual can be respected regardless of the choice he or she makes. But, for your sake, just make a choice to either become a member of mainstream society or make a choice not to become a member. You will save yourself a lot of frustration. And, if you don't make either choice, the default is that you will probably not succeed at reentry into mainstream society.

Some people seem to think that they can continue to play games on the side while functionally faking reentry. Re-entering mainstream society is not something about which you can be lukewarm. Either decide to reenter mainstream or decide not to reenter. Make your choice and go with it. But also realize that the benefits or consequences of your choice are the results of *your choice*.

If you *sort-of-try* to reenter, you're probably not going to be very successful, and the process will likely be annoying. Conversely, if you genuinely make the commitment, your likelihood of success is just about guaranteed. Several hundred thousand other people are absolute proof that if a person makes the genuine commitment to legitimacy, they can have a healthy life of normalcy, and the rewards will be representative of the effort they put forth.

Many of the people who fail at re-entry are unsuccessful because of their own impatience. Some people want instant gratification and are unwilling to do the work to get the prize.

No matter what you want out of life, or who you want to become, there is work to be done, and that holds true whether you are starting on even ground or from the bottom of the barrel. Additionally, as you embark upon climbing your mountain, each new step generally has prerequisites. You are not going to become a medical doctor without first taking a few courses in biology and chemistry.

Mainstream society incorporates a phenomenally wide field of endeavors. An individual can choose from literally thousands of different professional directions. There are some professions that may be limited because of a felony conviction. A few limitations from among thousands of possible career directions are not barriers to reentry.

Get beyond the propaganda of reentry and understand that the greatest barriers to reentry are those that we create ourselves – not some concrete prejudice against formerly incarcerated individuals.

Don't listen to the diatribes and excuses of those who have failed at reentry and attempt to rationalize their demise with long-winded oratories about how a felony conviction prevented them from having any life in mainstream society.

That isn't to say that there aren't some unique challenges associated with having a felony conviction. There are, but none that will prevent a determined individual from achieving the life that they want.

One major consequence of a felony conviction is the loss of credibility, regardless of the nature of the conviction. Even after you have served your sentence, completed your parole, and made complete restitution, in the eyes of the general public, you functionally have zero credibility as a result of a felony conviction and/or having served time in prison. That hold true unless you have taken deliberate steps to repair your integrity.

The vast majority of people are going to have a very natural skepticism of you, and they are going to have a low level of trust for you. Anyone who has conquered this credibility challenge knows this perception phenomenon – they have lived this. No, this is not double jeopardy, and it does not create some tortured argument for being a victim of

employment discrimination. It is just the way it is. People are not going to risk their own jobs and personal security to take a risk on someone they don't know from Adam, and whose most recent significant event in their life history was some kind of criminal behavior.

Anyone who hypothesizes that an employer's assessment of an applicant, which is based upon the applicant's history is unconstitutional or some form of discrimination is arguably pursuing such a crusade to rationalize the fact that they are unwilling to put forth the effort, sacrifice and hard work necessary to change, which results in them being judged on a more positive set of criteria.

Indeed, we felons can sit around sucking our thumbs because the conviction creates collateral damage and additional challenges, or we can suck-it-up, face and conquer those challenges, and move our lives forward.

The credibility and trust issue very definitely can be changed. However, it is not going to change by trying to change the perceptions of society, fighting for change in employment discrimination laws, or fabricating some tortured interpretation of the Constitution. Your credibility and trustworthiness will change as a result of the changes you make in yourself. Take responsibility for yourself and your actions, and you will begin the process of re-establishing your credibility.

Whether a person is a recently released ex-felon or a recent graduate from a university, people judge us based upon our last act. Right or wrong, you will be judged based upon your *most recent significant event* in your life, no matter who you are.

What events comprise the last chapter of your life? If the last chapter of your life was committing a crime, being convicted,

and spending time in prison or under supervision, then those are your *most recent significant events* upon which people will pass judgment.

Conversely, if the last chapter of your life incorporates maintaining a job, demonstrating that you are accountable, reliable, dependable, and trustworthy, then you will be judged heavily upon those attributes, even if you have less flattering previous events in your past. The key here is that you can change *your most recent significant event* – you can create a new last chapter in your life. Once you do this, you will have greater opportunity.

A major component to making a successful reentry and in achieving and maintaining a rewarding mainstream lifestyle is remaining focused on the long-term objective as opposed to only thinking about where you are in life today.

It isn't important what your first job is when you are released from prison, or whether or not you enjoy it. All that is important, and the primary objective of that first job, is simply to create a *new most recent significant event* in your life, and to write that new last chapter in your life to help dilute the previous chapter.

You only need to create a new chapter where you demonstrate accountability, reliability, dependability, and trustworthiness once. Just do this one time, and you will find and seize new and greater opportunities and rewards. Here is some advice that you don't want to hear. *Take the job that no one else wants!*

After you achieve a new most recent significant event in your life, you then work toward achieving another new most recent significant event, which supersedes the prior one. Eventually, you will find that you have created dozens of positive new chapters in your life. Each of the new chapters

dilutes those old chapters regarding your convictions. Eventually those old chapters are so diluted with positive progress that they become substantially insignificant dust in the wind.

A major key to creating these *new most recent significant events* is patience. It won't happen overnight, and it won't be a cakewalk. It will take dedication, time, and perseverance. It will be hard, and it will require work. However, the same is true for anyone who achieves anything significant in his or her life.

You only need to ask yourself if a legitimate lifestyle in mainstream society and all of the rich rewards it offers is something that you want, and if you are willing to put forth the effort and work to achieve it. However, don't say you can't have it because of a felony or prison background. That just simply is not true, and the evidence is the hundreds of thousands of people who comprise that 35% of individuals released from prison who never return as recidivists.

There is a public perception regarding a convicted felon. Whether it is right or wrong, the general public has a tendency to paint all of us felons with a single brush.

Given that the increase in prison population tracks the increase in illiteracy and high school dropout rate, this comes as no surprise. Candidly, mainstream society is sick and tired of having to live behind an ever-increasing number of walls, locks, bars, and security systems that protect their physical property and other intangibles such as their identity and credit.

Society's tolerance for felons has become thin. You need to accept the fact that people who have a felony conviction are simply going to be held to a higher standard. You can either rise to the occasion, or you can just roll over and wet yourself,

spending the rest of your life sucking your thumb, claiming that you are a victim of prejudice or discrimination. Let's all keep in mind that it was our own behavior that earned us a conviction. So, rise to the occasion. *Records are broken by those who dream beyond the barriers.*

Some people suggest that they will spend their life attempting to change the public's perception regarding convicted felons. Arguably, anyone who purports to dedicate their existence to such a crusade is using the public perception, and their crusade to change it, as an excuse not to put forth the effort to achieve a mainstream lifestyle.

None of us are going to change society or its perceptions to suit our particular needs. The path of least resistance would be to change ourselves - not society. The individual who has a criminal record is going to be held to a higher standard. Accept that fact and deal with it. That individual must reinvent him or herself.

Many individuals scrutinize their first job offer after release from prison based upon their age, experience, and education. People sometimes compare where they are in life with where other people of the same age are situated.

Using age to compare where two people are situated in life is not a valid barometer. If you are 35 – 40-plus years old and still haven't completed high school or earned a GED, then you simply have not done your part. Furthermore, it really doesn't matter how qualified you believe you are, how many college degrees you have or how much experience you have accumulated throughout your life. If you were recently released from prison or recently convicted of a felony, then nothing previous to your incarceration or conviction matters for the immediate future. It will later, but right now, it doesn't.

All an employer is going to look at is *your most recent significant event*, irrespective of whether you have other stellar credentials. Again, we are all judged on our last act.

In reality, you don't need a job – you need a break. You need to find a situation where someone can offer you an opportunity without them taking a risk. In short, you need to look for a job that no one else wants. If you're looking for a job that is advertised, you have hundreds if not thousands of competitors applying for that same job. When you are looking for a job that no one else wants, you have little or no competition.

The fastest way to find a job that no one else wants is to canvass construction sites and industrial parks or areas. Find a foreman and simply state the indisputable fact that you know he / she has a job on this site that people complain about every time it is assigned to them. Tell the foreman that that's the job for which you are applying, that you'll do a good job, and you'll never complain about it.

Look, this first job is not forever, and it is not your career path. It gives you an opportunity to get out into the workforce, interact with other people, and write that new life chapter – *create that new most recent significant event* to begin the process of diluting your unflattering history.

If you approach five foremen with this proposition, on average, you will have three job offers. If you don't believe me, just do it to humor yourself. But for certain, if you really want to embrace a new life path, this is a place to start. It is pretty much where I started, and every good fortune that I have experienced in my life during the past four decades since that first job is because I was willing to take that job that no one else wanted.

As an employer myself, I have no problem hiring individuals right out of prison. However, I am not going to take a risk and hire them into a position of trust whereby I could potentially have an exposure to loss. Regardless of whether a person has any criminal past, I generally would not hire *anyone* directly into a position of trust where they are going to have the keys to the vault.

I can open a door. What that individual does once they walk through that door is entirely up to him or her. If they prove that they are trustworthy, accountable, and dependable, and complete their assigned duties timely and accurately, then the probability of them receiving promotions and pay raises is absolute.

Don't expect to be hired into a position of trust immediately upon release. Whether you are trustworthy or not, if you were just released from prison, the perception is that your credibility is questionable. Only you can change that perception by earning trust through behavior and the passage of time. If you try to demand trust, it strains your credibility even further. Just be patient and earn it.

An alternative option to finding a job is to consider self-employment. This is a tough road to hoe, but it is a viable alternative.

Whether you want one or not, you are going to have a life journey. Where your journey takes you is up to you, and it is dependent upon the choices you make today, and the effort you put forth toward achieving your desired destinations.

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