

**Attend a job fair** to meet employers, recruiters, and schools. You may learn about a new field or opportunity that you didn't think of.

☆ Keep a record of all the places you have applied: online applications, visits made in person, initial phone calls, follow-up phone calls, interviews.

Submit **application forms**. The purpose of a job application form is to get an interview. Most hiring managers will review your application for 15 to 30 seconds. They'll want to see a form that's neat and complete.

Many job applications need to be filled out online. If you don't have access to a home computer, visit a local library or community center.

If you will be filling out a paper job application at a job site, bring notes about previous jobs and training, including employment dates, job titles, and former employer contact info. This is better than trying to remember the details and making mistakes.

#### Tips for filling out job applications

- **List your past jobs and describe what you did.** What skills did you develop? What things did you do during your shift?
- **Focus on what you have to offer.** Downplay the negatives.
- **List work experience from your personal life.** Were you a caregiver for your siblings, children, parents, or grandparents? What skills did you develop? Did you learn to communicate, resolve conflicts, manage people's health, or take care of finances?
- **Consider the skills they are looking for.** If they want good customer service skills, explain how you worked with customers in your past jobs.
- **Use examples from your personal life to explain your passion for this work.** Maybe when you were a young child, you took care of your sick grandmother. This inspired you to become an excellent home health aid.
- **Do not list your wages from past employment.** Instead, write "will discuss at the interview."
- **We suggest you list the jobs you held while incarcerated.** You gained relevant experience and skills. For in-prison jobs, you can list your employer as the state where you were incarcerated.

• **If they ask you for your "Reason for Leaving" give a positive reason, if possible, even if you were fired or let go.** Here are a few positive reasons for leaving:

- You relocated (you can say this if you left because you went to prison or were transferred)
  - You wanted a career change
  - You became a full-time student
  - The work was seasonal
  - You wanted to advance or make more money
- In some states, most employers are not allowed to ask about felonies on job applications. Some still do. **If they ask, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" we recommend that you check "Yes." Write, "Will discuss at interview."** If you lie, you may get the job, but you could get fired later if they find out.
- **The application may ask you for references, people who can vouch for you.** These should not be family members. Be sure to ask people if they are willing to be your reference before writing their names down. Good potential references include:
- Former or current employers
  - Supervisors
  - Teachers
  - Social workers
  - Religious leaders
  - People you volunteer with

**Resumes and cover letters.** Many job applications require a resume and cover letter. A resume maps out past jobs, your skills, and your interests. Your cover letter is an actual letter from you to the employer. It tells a short story about who you are—why you want the job, why you are a good fit, and what's important to you. Keep your letter to one page.

Writing good resumes and cover letters takes time. Examples of resumes and cover letters can be found in our forms section (see p. 159). Here are a few online resources:

- [hbr.org/2014/02/how-to-write-a-cover-letter](http://hbr.org/2014/02/how-to-write-a-cover-letter)
- [owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing](http://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing)



*I thought I'd be prepared because I had my resume in hand. As it turns out, you need several resumes, adjusted to different jobs, and the ability to write cover sheets on the fly.*

—Pablo

**Interviews.** Once you've submitted your job application, wait to be contacted. Hopefully, they will be interested in interviewing you. Most applications do not lead to interviews. Be patient. Continue to apply to other jobs until you have a job offer.

Many job seekers are nervous about interviews. They want to say the right things and make a good impression. Here are a few tips:

- **Practice.** [Indeed.com](http://Indeed.com) has a list of common interview questions that you can practice with a friend, counselor, or family member: [www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/top-interview-questions-and-answers](http://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/top-interview-questions-and-answers).
- **What to bring.** Bring your resume and contact information for your references. Bring copies of work licenses, your driving record, and your Social Security or immigration cards, too. Bring a pen and notebook to write down information.
- **Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early.** This shows you are responsible and eager to be there.
- **Wear nice clothes.** Wear something a bit more formal than what you would wear for the job.
- Consider your body language. Make good eye contact, stand/sit tall, and smile.
- **Test your equipment.** If your interview is online, test your video and internet connection beforehand. Make sure you're in a quiet place without disruptions.
- **Come prepared to ask the employer questions.** Here are some examples:
  - What is the organization's plan for the next five years?
  - How would I be evaluated, and in what timeframes? By whom?
  - What are the day-to-day responsibilities of this job?
  - What computer equipment and software do you use?

- When will a decision be made about this position?



*Interview tips? Look good, smell good, speak good.*

—David T.

**Talking about your criminal record.** You may have a hard time answering questions about your criminal record. Here are a few tips to increase your chance of getting hired:

- **Own it.** "At that time I was making some bad choices and I was convicted of [state your offense]." Address any concerns they have.
- **Redirect.** Steer the interview back to your skills and what you bring to the job. "I can see why that might concern you. But that was several years ago. Since then, I have had a solid work record. I come to work on time. I am a hard worker and quick learner."
- **Explain.** If your felony conviction is not related to the job you are applying for, you might say, "Yes, I was convicted of a felony, but it was not job related."
- **Keep it positive.** Talk about your current activities and future career goals. Mention education and job training, community work, and other activities. "I thought a lot about where my life was going, and I decided to make some changes."
- **Encourage the employer.** Remind them how much you want the job. "I am a good worker and I want to work, I just need an opportunity to prove my skills to an employer."



*If you're scared to tell an employer, hey, I've been to prison, just tell them. What's the worst thing they can do? Say no, we're not going to hire you. And you go to the next door. Knock on the next door. Say hey, are you hiring?*

— Tony C.

## Advice from an Employer

We reached out to Tanja, an employer who has hired many people who have been incarcerated. In the interview below, Tanja explains what employers are looking for. She gives advice about how to talk about your criminal history with employers.

### What are the most important qualities you look for in a job candidate?

For me, the most important quality is reliability. I also appreciate it when people are eager to learn and respond well to constructive feedback. The fit between the person and the position is also critical.

### How much do you need to say about your criminal background?

I think it really depends on the position. It is a mistake to come in and tell me your whole life. That is too much too soon. But being super vague will make me wonder if you are trying to hide something. For me, honesty is critical. I let people know I am not here to judge, and as far as I am concerned, they have done their time. What I care about is the present and the future. Can they do this job now? How much training and supervision will they need? What are their skills?

### What impresses you about candidates?

I am usually impressed when I see someone who has done their homework. They know what the position is, they Googled the company and they know what we are looking for. It is ideal to tailor your history to the position and capitalize on your skills. Link these skills to the job announcement and tell me how these skills will be used to help me. Also demonstrate enthusiasm

for what the company does. If it is the restaurant industry, tell me how much you enjoy the food and why. If you do not enjoy the food, find something you like about the company and share that with me.

### What questions should the interviewee ask the employer?

Do your homework about my company, the job description, and ask me questions as if you had the position. Ask for details about logistics: How many hours, what days and times do you need me? What qualities are you looking for in a worker? What would a typical day be like on the job? What are the opportunities for growth? Do you offer training, and if so, how does that work? Who will be my supervisor? What is their management style? These questions will make me believe you are serious about the job. In my case, I provide reentry services. I want to see you know the reentry process and that you are passionate about this issue.

### What questions can they expect in an interview?

- Why are you applying for this job now?
- What is your availability? Convince me that you will be available and reliable. Make sure you can make the work schedule work.
- What are your best skills? What skills would you like to develop?
- What were you doing before? This question can be tricky if you have a big gap in your resume. If you were just released, be honest, but capitalize on the skills you have that make you right for this position. Point me to your references and how they will assure me that you are worth taking a chance on.

employment based on a conviction, employers must consider:

- The nature and gravity of the criminal offense or conduct
- How much time has passed since the offense or sentence
- The nature of the job (where it is performed, supervision, and interaction with others)

If there isn't a direct relationship between the job and your offense, employers cannot legally use the offense to deny you employment. For example, it would be legal for a bank to deny someone convicted of credit card fraud or theft. But, it would most likely not be legal for them to deny someone who was convicted of drug possession.

Employers can still choose candidates with more or better experience, but irrelevant criminal history should not be a deciding factor. If you believe you have been discriminated against, you can file a complaint with the EEOC by mail, by telephone (call 800-669-4000), or in person at an EEOC office: [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov).

## Certificate of Rehabilitation

A criminal record can prevent you from getting a license in certain fields, including education, transit, and childcare. You may be able to get a Certificate of Rehabilitation. The certificate allows you to apply for jobs that require these licenses. It does not remove any offenses from your record, but it may allow you to get the license you need. See the Legal Matters chapter (on p. 92).

## Work Opportunity Tax Credits

If employers seem reluctant to hire you, you may want to tell them about the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. Employers who hire people with convictions receive a tax credit of up to 40 percent of the employee's yearly wages. The tax credit is only for employers who hire people who have left prison within the last year. You could direct them to this website: [www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wotc](http://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wotc).

## Federal Bonding Program

When interviewing for a job, you may also want

to tell the employer about the Federal Bonding Program. It is an insurance policy that protects employers from employee dishonesty or theft. They offer six months of free insurance for employees with past convictions. Learn more here: [bonds4jobs.com](http://bonds4jobs.com). Some states have bonding programs as well.

## Ban the Box

Some counties, cities, and states have laws that prevent employers from conducting criminal background checks until after an interview is conducted. This law is called "Ban the Box" because it prohibits employers from asking you to check a box on your application saying you've had a criminal conviction. These states have Ban the Box laws: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, and Vermont. Many other states and even more counties and cities have Ban the Box rules for government and city jobs. If you live in a place with a Ban the Box law and an employer violates this rule, you can submit a complaint against them.

The details of Ban the Box laws change from place to place. To find out more about your local protections and how to lodge a complaint, contact a local re-entry program. (See the resource directory on p. 135).

## Conflicts and Safety

If you are being harassed or discriminated against because of your race, gender identity, or sexual orientation, your civil rights are being violated. If you are comfortable speaking honestly where you are working, you can speak to Human Resources about what you have experienced. Sometimes it's better to seek help elsewhere.

There are resources that can support you. If you have been sexually harassed, you can contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800) 656-4673 for personal support. They can help you file a complaint.

It is a good idea to get a lawyer before starting a lawsuit. There are pro bono (free) lawyers who can help—see the Legal Matters chapter (on p. 92). If you are ready to file a complaint on your own, you may do so at the **US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division**.



## Your Legal Rights

### Equal Employment Laws

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is a federal agency that administers and enforces civil rights laws for the workplace in all states. Their guidelines address the following issues:

**Background Check.** Employers who wish to do a background check must also do the following:

- Get your written consent ahead of time
- Tell you if they plan to use the report for employment decisions
- Give you a copy of the report before taking harmful action (like not hiring or firing you)
- Inform you of your right to review and dispute the report

**Employment Denial.** In order to legally deny you