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1 - Writing Resume: When You Have a Record *Page 1*

Writing a resume isn't easy for anyone — and it can be especially difficult for ex-offenders. This unit explains the various sections of a typical resume, provides examples ex-offenders can use as they write their own, discusses how and whether to mention their records, and offers tips to help them avoid the most common mistakes.

2 - Writing Cover Letter: When You Have a Record *Page 12*

Ex-offenders often struggle to write cover letters that are error-free, easy to read, and sincere. This unit walks them through the process, offering practical tips so they can avoid mistakes and make an impression more likely to result in a job interview.

3 - Sample Resumes /Cover Letters *Page 22*

The all-important task of writing a cover letter and resume presents unique challenges for inmates and former offenders. What can really help is having some appropriate models to look at. In this unit, we profile five ex-offender job seekers, providing the cover letters and resumes they used to get jobs — samples that give your clients practical ideas for how to present themselves in the best possible light.

4 - Before You Go: Preparing for an Interview When You have a Record *Page 35*

For ex-offenders, the excitement of learning about a job interview usually leads to questions without obvious answers: What will it be like? What do I wear? What do I bring? How should I sit? Stand? Shake hands? This unit addresses what ex-offenders can do to sell themselves as capable and dependable employees.

5 - Your Turn to Talk: Interviewing When You Have a Record *Page 46*

Job interviews are nerve-racking for most people — and especially for those with a criminal record. But it is possible to talk about the mistakes of the past in a positive manner. This unit, which includes a mock interview based on the advice of experts, shows how to answer the most common and difficult questions ex-offenders are asked.

5

Your Turn to Talk

What do you say?

You know that getting a job is key to your new life. To get that job, you've got to talk with a person who probably starts out being doubtful you're someone who will be trust-worthy and dependable. What you say and how you say it can either change that opinion, or reinforce it. Talk about pressure!

For most people, interviews are nerve-racking. After all, it's not easy to talk about yourself, especially when something as important as a job depends on what you say. When you have a record, an interview can become even more stressful. For one thing, you're not sure how to answer questions about your past. For another, while you've been incarcerated, you haven't been in the habit of speaking in a business-type manner. What's more, the stakes are high, as doing well during the interview is essential to getting that all-important job.

This unit is intended to help you talk about the record in your past and the job you want to be part of your future. We'll provide a list of questions often asked during interviews, as well as possible answers. Throughout, we'll also discuss how and why different answers might help or hurt your chances.

In other words, you're going to "sit in" on an interview with two ex-offenders. Next to you will be a guide showing you how you might respond when it's your turn to talk.

About the questions

Whether you're applying for a job at a restaurant or an auto body repair shop, in construction or landscaping, driving for a delivery service or as a commercial truck driver, as a salesperson or a convenience-store cashier, the sorts of things employers are looking for will be similar. That is, every job comes down to two sets of skills: work skills and people skills.

That's why employers ask the kinds of open-ended questions (those with no one right answer) included in the interview below. They want to hear you speak about your background so they can get a sense of how you would contribute to their business. What experience do you have? How much training? Can you be trusted? Will you be an employee who strives to do well or one who does just enough to get by? These are the sorts of questions interviewers will be asking themselves about you.



About your answers

Going into an interview, you have a choice to make about how to present yourself. It pretty much comes down to this: what's your attitude? Do you accept responsibility for what you did, and are you ready to get beyond it? Or are you a person who "can't get a break so might as well do whatever it takes"? After all, you have faced hardship. Some of it, maybe a lot of it, was your fault. But not all of it. Fact is, if you come across as bitter, angry, or dishonest — whether you have reason to be or not — you won't be seen as someone employers want to hire.

If, on the other hand, you present yourself as someone who . . . made mistakes, yes, but was strong enough to overcome those mistakes ... someone who truly wants a better life, a clean life, an honest life ... someone who has hope that with hard work such a life is possible — that, too, will come across in the interview. And that is the sort of person employers want to hire.

Still, maybe you don't have a lot of experience talking in a way that shows that. That's OK. That's what this interview is for. As you read the following answers — some that present a good attitude, others a not-so good attitude — pick out words (those employers most like to hear are in bold) you can truthfully apply to your own experience so you can present yourself not as the person you were, but as the person you want to be.

The 'interview'

Let's pretend we're sitting next to two ex-offenders interviewing for the same job at a warehouse, and let's also assume their work experiences are the same. We'll call them Pat and Dana.* As you'll see, they answer the questions very differently.

Interviewer: Thank you for coming in today.

Pat: Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you. I'm very interested to learn about this job.

Dana: No problem.

Note: First impressions are important. Here Pat comes off as polite and enthusiastic, but Dana seems cold and distant, a big turnoff.

How would you answer this question?

Interviewer: If you would, please tell me about yourself.

Pat: I work hard and I have experience operating heavy equipment, such as forklifts and pallet jacks. I'm able to lift 75 pounds repeatedly, I have a perfect safety record, and I enjoy working with others.

Dana: I've got two kids, a boy and a girl. I like to spend time with friends and work on my truck. I'm a good worker and people seem to like me.

Note: Employers ask this question as an icebreaker. And while they do want to get to know you, they are not particularly interested to hear about your family or hobbies. They want to hear about your work experience, education, and/or training — the things that will make you a success on this job. So Dana’s not making the most of this question. Pat, on the other hand, does a very good job focusing on skills (both work skills and people skills). It’s also great if you mention, as Pat does, specific skills.

How would you answer this question?

Interviewer: What did you do in your last job?

Pat: Maintenance work. It was only part-time, so I could have time to study for the GED. But I still learned a lot — how to fix a leaky faucet, light a furnace, that sort of thing. Those skills that come in handy anywhere.

Dana: I was the person people called to fix things, the maintenance person I guess you could say. It was all right, but I would rather be doing something like this.

Note: Both Pat and Dana’s last jobs were in prison and both wisely do not mention this fact. But you want your answer to be like’s Pat’s. That is, put anything you did in prison, whether it was working, studying, or learning a skill, in the best light.

How would you answer this question?

Interviewer: What was your salary?

Pat: The prevailing wage.

Dana: A few pennies — or that’s all it seemed like. They don’t pay you much in prison.

Note: Both Pat and Dana made the same hourly wage while incarcerated but you can see why Pat’s answer is better. This is not a lie; Pat made the prevailing (or “minimum”) wage in prison. As for Dana, while you do want to be honest about your past (more on that in a second), you don’t want to bring up your record when it’s not being asked about.

How would you answer this question?

