

Second Chance Hiring Has Become A Critical Need For Manufacturers

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Contributor

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People with prison records remain an often untapped resource for manufacturing recruiting efforts.

Hiring the formerly incarcerated has long been a values-driven pursuit of a small fraction of American companies. But now it is fast turning into a necessary pillar of effective recruiting, particularly in manufacturing where deficiencies in both the numbers and the skills of prospective employees are an increasingly daunting challenge.

Jeffrey Korzenik, chief economist for one of the country's largest commercial banks and author of *Untapped Talent: How Second Chance Hiring Works for Your Business and the Community*, saw the problem coming. "I kind of marked my calendar decades ago with the date the Baby Boomers would start to retire, because I knew that was going to be a challenge for the labor force," he said. "I thought, you know, how do we get people back into the labor force to solve our coming labor shortage? My conclusion was that social ills were the reason our workforce, our labor force

participation rates were so low: long-term unemployment, the opioid epidemic, and then justice involvement—and they’re interconnected.”

As he studied the problem, he realized there were already a small group of people working to solve it. He explained, “And then, frankly, by accident I started coming across employers who had figured out how to tackle this vast opportunity, find people who were ready to turn their lives around and were committed to do so, and then give them the tools they needed to thrive. I realized they all had the same model. So I started spreading that model, and the book is the culmination of that effort.”

PROMOTED

Chapter four of Korzenik’s book is entitled, “Success Is Not Random,” and the man whose name kicks off that chapter would agree. Dan Meyer is CEO of [Nehemiah Manufacturing](#) in Cincinnati. He started off his career with 15 years in corporate America, doing stints with companies such as Procter & Gamble and Bristol-Myers. Then it was time for a change.

“I started a company—I always wanted to start my own—called Changing Paradigms.” That was his first foray into contract manufacturing for national brands, including P&G. He sold the company in 2006 and began searching for what was next.

A devout Catholic, Meyer explained the driving factor: “My faith really drives everything I do.” That led to his founding principles. “Let’s come into the inner city and provide stable employment for those who need it most. I always say we knew the ‘why’ of the company before we knew the ‘what.’ He founded Nehemiah in 2009.

He already had a strong relationship with his former customers at P&G, so he told them he wanted to do it again. Co-manufacturing for them remains Nehemiah’s main business.

The plant was right across the street from the [City Gospel Mission](#). In Nehemiah’s year two, they asked Meyer if he would hire someone with a felony. He decided they had to give it a shot. “We hired one,” he said. “Then another, Then another. Each one was motivated, dedicated, hard-working, thankful for a job. Then we’d lose them.”



Those re-entering the workforce after incarceration need not just a job, but assistance with basic ...

Digging into the problem, the Nehemiah team discovered why. “You must have a job when you come out,” said Meyer. “But that’s 1A. 1B is how do I get there. And 1C is where do I live. All those barriers are daunting, particularly when you first come out.”

[Lester Young](#) discovered the same problems from the other end of the equation when he was released from prison after serving over 22 years. Now an accomplished speaker and author, he has just written his fifth book on the subject, *The Five Keys 2 ReEntry: A Handbook for Life After Incarceration*. “There are so many challenges a person faces after incarceration, and most people enter back into the workforce in survival mode and never get a true acclimation into the workforce,” he said. “I didn’t realize how I was going to experience the culture shock of going back into the workforce. It was a lot of emotions, a lot of anxiety, a lot of panic attacks.”

Nehemiah hired social workers to help employees with those problems and to get them the help they need. Today they have three full-time social workers serving 170 second chance employees.

Another manufacturer Korzenik featured in his book is [Butterball Farms](#), a specialty butter producer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A family business founded by the late Leo Peters in 1951, it’s now run by Leo’s son, Mark Peters, the company’s CEO and author of *The Source: Using the Power of Collaboration to Stabilize Your Workforce and Impact Your Community*. “About 35% of our workforce in total has been incarcerated at some point,” he said. “And that’s not just entry level. We’ve got some people that have been working for us for 20 years, who have really built a nice career with our company.”

It was in the mid to late 1990s when Butterball first started its second chance hiring, after participating in a local work-release program. “We had this great experience with these guys, and what started happening is they would get paroled, and [then] they’d quit coming to work,” Peters said. “We started asking some questions. Some of what we learned was pretty simple. If we knew they were going to be out on parole, we’d say that’s great... but we really need you to keep coming to work. You’re an important part of our workforce and we want you to keep coming back.

“No one had ever said that to them.”

That’s a point Young makes as well. “Learn first-person language,” he said. “Look at your application for words like felon and ex-con. They’re human beings—they shouldn’t be treated like they have leprosy. Don’t isolate, don’t discriminate. Be welcoming.”

“The number one indicator of someone going back into the prison system is whether or not they have a job,” added Peters. “And the second biggest thing is whether they go back to the same group of associates they had before they went in. We should be hiring people because it’s the right thing to do. Some of the people coming out of the prison system have the skill set, they have the dedication, they have the desire to work hard to change their lives.”

For those considering launching into second chance hiring but worried about potential risks, Peters offered what Butterball has experienced over the decades: “We have some people who were violent offenders. But we’ve never had any workplace violence or threats or any sort of unrest because of people that we’ve hired who have come out of the prison system.”

Meanwhile, the workforce challenges certainly aren’t going to fix themselves, as retirements accelerate for our largest generation, and we don’t have the numbers to replace them. “The message to employers is what worked for you in terms of talent acquisition and retention over the last forty or fifty years isn’t going to work going forward,” said Korzenik. “You have to react to this.”



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