
Volunteer Career Services In A Prison

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Purpose:

Volunteer career services in a prison provide a valuable benefit given the substantial career support needs of people approaching re-entry to society after incarceration. This intervention describes how to contribute career counseling expertise in this meaningful way.

The article, Volunteer Career Services in a Prison, by Ron Elsdon, originally appeared in NCDA's web magazine, Career Convergence, at www.ncda.org. Copyright © February, 2016. Reprinted with permission.

Materials Needed:

Resources for the conventional job search class series include: "Step Ahead Workbook: Career Planning for People with Criminal Convictions" (Goodwill/Easter Seals and iSeek Solutions, 2013), a DVD from Cambridge Educational (2008) on job interviewing for ex-offenders is helpful, as is material from the ex-offenders section of the careeronestop web site (careeronestop web site for workers with a criminal conviction).

Content for the nontraditional career path/self-employment class series, which includes handouts and exercises, is based on the book How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption Elsdon, R. 2014, Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

For approaches to class evaluation see the chapter by Erickson, R. and R. Elsdon "Designing, Developing and Measuring Effective Career Development Processes and Systems" in Building Workforce Strength: Creating Value through Workforce and Career Development, ed. Elsdon, R., 2010, Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Procedures:

Not surprisingly, emotional aspects are particularly significant for those approaching re-entry. Conviction, incarceration, and the prospect of formidable barriers to financial self-sufficiency are daunting. Offering hope that it is possible to re-engage with work by weaving affirmation of personal potential throughout is central. This includes emphasizing learning occurring in prison; including work experience, educational activities, and interpersonal skills.

Group delivery accommodates well the many people seeking career services support. The content currently consists of two series of classes, the first series of five classes addresses conventional job search. The second series of four classes, expanded in scope at the request of participants, addresses nontraditional career paths/self-employment. To accommodate prison scheduling, classes are delivered in two-hour modules once a week. To encourage interaction, class size is limited to twenty-five people. The conventional job search series helps participants build self-understanding, learn how to explore opportunities, and how to communicate capabilities. It addresses particular needs of this population, for example, how to discuss in an interview employment gaps due to incarceration.

The five classes cover:

- Skills, interests, strengths, and values
- Exploration/networking, and education as a bridge
- References, job applications, and resumes
- Interviewing
- Mock interview practice in small groups

The series of four classes addressing nontraditional career paths/self-employment cover:

- The what and why of a nontraditional career path/self-employment, benefits and challenges, building self-understanding
- Making the path sustainable so it lasts
- Creating a foundation to start – practical steps
- Moving forward to launch and implementation

Participants complete a template over the four sessions, creating an outline of their nontraditional career/self-employment path. In the fourth session each person reviews her or his approach with a small group. As a result participants both gain insights from others about their own endeavors and contribute input to their peers.

Process Questions and Follow-Up:

Participants complete an evaluation at the end of each class series. This evaluation includes both qualitative and quantitative questions, based on the first three levels of the Kirkpatrick framework: reaction to the classes, knowledge gained, and behavior change.

Theoretical Rationale and/or Research Base:

Content for the conventional job search classes includes that described in Goodwill/Easter Seals and iSeek Solutions. 2013. Step Ahead Workbook. Minnesota: Minnesota Department of Corrections. Retrieved from <http://www.iseek.org/exoffenders/workbook.html>. The content for the nontraditional career path/self-employment class series is based on Elsdon, R. 2014, How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption, Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Limitations:

Flexibility is important when working in a prison setting as there are challenges:

- Difficulties with the fingerprint approval process to secure initial clearance
- When there is fog the prison closes to visitors and classes are cancelled, so avoid early morning, fog-prone times
- Participants come with a wide range of experience and backgrounds
- Competing commitments mean participants sometimes miss sessions
- Volunteer donations of materials such as books are restricted, so content is best provided in copy form
- Electronics such as computers or cell phones are not allowed on prison premises so class support material includes handouts and aids such as white boards
- Inmates do not have access to the Internet while in prison, so web links are for future reference
- Contact with participants after their release is prohibited (volunteers can work with people in prison or outside but not both), so evaluation processes need to be self-contained within the class series

Some observations and benefits are as follows:

- Participants bring much experience and insight that strengthens the classes. Providing career services in this setting is rewarding, fulfilling, and appreciated
- Institutional support from the re-entry affairs coordinator and staff is critical to the success of these initiatives
- Class evaluations help in refining the content and nature of career services
- Cultural differences complement the class experience

Practice Settings:

- ☐ College Counseling
- ☐ Counselor Education and Supervision
- ☒ Mental Health Agency/Private Practice Counseling
- ☐ Rehabilitation Counseling
- ☐ School Counseling