

Another chance

Whether you've just been released from a lengthy imprisonment or you had a minor scrape with the law when you were younger, a criminal record can add another layer of anxiety to an already stressful job search.

Each year, federal and state prisons release more than 600,000 offenders back into society, and while a criminal record can make finding a job discouraging, it doesn't have to mean the end of your career — depending on how you handle it.

JoAnne Page, president and CEO of Fortune Society, a New York City-based nonprofit agency that aids prisoners with their re-entry into the workforce, says following these tips will help you overcome obstacles and get back on track with a successful career.

Don't assume you'll be disqualified

Certainly your record may automatically exclude you from some positions, especially government jobs requiring security clearances, military jobs, positions with financial responsibility such as insurance or banking, or jobs working with children.

However, don't assume every job is out of reach. Do some research. Check out each company's hiring policies regarding background checks and learn about the employment laws in your state, Page says.

Start small and work your way up

With the baggage that comes with a crimi-



nal record, you may have to start with a job that you're overqualified for and work your way to a better position.

"You really have to start on the first step of the ladder, and if you try to skip some, you're likely going to fall," she says. "You may need to settle for a job that's below your qualifications. It's important to have something to build upon, even if it's a minimum wage job."

If you want to return to your previous career, it's also likely that the business processes and tools may have changed since you left. You'll probably need to take some time off for extra training.

Prepare for rejection

Although many offenders develop valuable skills and experience during their incarceration, their re-entry into the workforce can be "a brutal transition," Page says.

"You have to be prepared to have a lot of doors closed in your face," she says. "Getting a job is hard. Getting a job with a record is much harder."

Do not get discouraged. All you have to do is find one decent job and move forward from there. If you get the job on the 41st try, the 40 previous rejections will not matter.

Honesty is the best policy

The No. 1 rule in applying for jobs: be honest.

It can be tempting to lie when an application asks if you've been arrested or convicted of a crime. But even if you are hired, chances are, your lie will eventually be uncovered.

One option is to write "will discuss in interview" on the application, which should give you a better chance of explaining your criminal record in person to the hiring manager. The more people have an opportunity to know you, the greater the chance they will like you and consider hiring you.

Getting a job with a criminal record can be difficult, but not impossible

"That lets you get in front of the interviewer and explain yourself, instead of getting rejected at the paper level," Page says.

Build trust

There is nothing more important than a strong work ethic and positive attitude, which will help you build your resume and get good professional references. If you work hard and build trust among your employers, your criminal record will become less important down the road.

Also, talk to people who've been down the same road as you. Hear their stories of rebounding from a criminal conviction and learn from their successes and mistakes.

"What builds hope the most is seeing someone like you who's now working and being there for their family," Page says.

Get help

Many nonprofit organizations and government programs help offenders become productive workers after release from prison. The experience and skills you develop in these programs can make a big difference in the success of your job search.

Fortune Society, for example, not only helps people in the New York City area, but also links individuals to similar re-entry programs in cities across the United States. For more information, visit www.fortunesociety.org or call (212)691-7554.

"You really have to start on the first step of the ladder, and if you try to skip some, you're likely going to fall. You may need to settle for a job that's below your qualifications. It's important to have something to build upon..."