

OUTSIDE IN AND INSIDE OUT

In 2002, 68% of all the offenders in the North West of England were unemployed, 44% had literacy needs, 57% had numeracy needs and 33% suffered from some form of addiction. These were the main issues that **IMPACT** Development Partnership (DP) set out to tackle. Since then, its work has been based on opening up communication between prisons and their local communities. Outside stakeholders have been invited into prisons, which until then had been perceived as being off-limits, members of staff are working both outside and inside prison and a holistic approach has been adopted to resettling prisoners in the outside world.

The activities of IMPACT reflect the European Employment Guidelines which place a strong emphasis on reinforcing social inclusion and preventing exclusion from the world of work. In its Recommendation (2004/741/EC) on the implementation of Member States' employment policies the Council stresses in its specific recommendations to the United Kingdom, the needs *"to pay particular attention to people living in deprived areas"* and to *"place particular emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy of the workforce and the participation and achievements of the 16 – 19 year olds"*.

"We are not asking for sympathy. We are asking for a helping hand. A chance to rejoin society equipped with an education and a change in attitude. A chance to better ourselves, a chance to earn an honest crust, rather than sitting behind the razor wire which we put ourselves behind", says Diesel an ex-offender who was assessed as being illiterate when he entered prison and is now embarking on a Open University degree course in English Literature. By bringing together a range of agencies



Diesel addressing the Thorn Cross Employment Fair

IMPACT has provided realistic opportunities for many other prisoners and ex-offenders to "better themselves". These partners include the National Probation Service, Job Centre Plus, Connexions, colleges of education and voluntary organisations and also the Confederation of British Industry and the Trade Union Congress. Together the partners are piloting a range of actions across two young offender institutions, three prisons and the regional Probation Services.

GETTING EMPLOYERS ONSIDE

IMPACT is addressing barriers to employment that result from employers' attitudes and stereotypes and, at the same time, developing a multi-agency

approach to case management that supports targeted intervention including skill training, job brokerage and mentor support

An estimated 5 million people in the UK have a criminal conviction and this is almost a sixth of total number of people in the British workforce. This potential source of labour is being underused as:

- 60% of ex-offenders had been refused employment due to their criminal record;
- Only 12% of private and 17% of public sector employers had knowingly employed an offender;
- 94% of employers did not include offenders in their Equal Opportunities policies.

Thus, IMPACT was particularly anxious that employers in the North West of England had a chance to learn about the skills and abilities that existed within the groups of people who were leaving the penal institutions in that area. The three main objectives that IMPACT set itself, in this respect, were the development of:

- An Employment Charter;
- A Strategy of Working with Employers and Offenders Together;
- A Recognised Portfolio of Achievement.

THE EMPLOYMENT CHARTER

The aim of the Employment Charter was to change some of the stereotypical views held by employers and offenders. Offenders believed that the Charter would go some way towards breaking down the barriers they had previously experienced when trying to gain employment. Then, employers once approached were supportive of the initiative and provided their comments on the purpose and content of this Charter.

It was eventually agreed that the Charter would be presented in two sections. The first part can be easily displayed in the reception area of the business concerned and demonstrates:

- the Prison Service's willingness to share accurate information about a prisoner's offending history and risk, as well as their suitability for employment;
- the employer's willingness to treat such information in a confidential and sensitive manner, whilst appreciating the specific difficulties ex-prisoners face in the labour market.

The second part, signed by the offender, HM Prison Service and employer is included in the Portfolio of Achievement (see below) as a demonstration of the offender's willingness to openly disclose their criminal record to the employer and to abide by the employment terms and conditions of their future work place.

The initial results are reassuringly promising. Employers admit to not previously considering ex-offenders for employment and have similarly not considered the likelihood that a percentage of their work force may already have a criminal record not disclosed to them. In the mean time, employers who have displayed

the Charter will be revisited to see if it has made a difference to their recruitment policies.

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS AND OFFENDERS TOGETHER

As part of this working together, IMPACT hosted a first ever Employment Fair at Thorn Cross Young Offenders Institution, on the 15th September 2005. This one day event was an opportunity for potential and existing employers to meet with offenders, all between the ages of fifteen and twenty one, and with Prison Staff. They had the opportunity to see for themselves the positive outcomes that can be achieved when people work together to help offenders gain employment.

Dennis Philips a manager in Timpson Limited, a shoe repair and key cutting company, felt the day had been a success.



Dennis Philips talking about job possibilities

“It gave me an opportunity to talk to offenders and for them to consider a career with the company,” he said and then added, *“as a company, we have had success in employing ex-offenders and one from this very institution, Thorn Cross, is still in our employ. Hopefully this whole process will provide very pro-active assistance for ex-offenders looking for employment”*.

The day was extremely important for the young offenders who could walk around and discuss their options with various employers and training providers. As Carl Kettle, noted *“it was such a worthwhile event. I spoke to employers and training providers who gave me some very useful information.”*



While James Riley, felt *“the whole day was really enjoyable. It was interesting to talk to people about job opportunities that I can look for when I get out”*.



The success of this Employment Fair means that it will be repeated in future years and in other Young Offender Institutions, as a way of bringing offenders and employers together and of breaking down barriers to employment.

INNOVATION MEANS PRISONS AND COMMUNITY TOGETHER

This is the full title of the IMPACT DP and it is an apt summary of the style of working that led to the production of the Portfolio of Achievement for offenders. There was a considerable risk involved in this project, as the Portfolio would represent an acknowledgement that a prospective job seeker had spent time in prison. At the same time, the Portfolio set out to demonstrate that the job seeker’s attitudes, behaviour and expectations had been changed by the learning opportunities and the support that he or she had experienced during

their time inside. However, members of staff of IMPACT were concerned right from the beginning about how employers would react to this new more open approach and this was very much reflected in the design of the project.

PLANNING AND PRODUCTION

A Working Party was established to oversee the whole development of the Portfolio. It had strong representation from employers but also included SOVA - an organisation skilled in job brokerage, different prison services such as psychology, colleges that were the main deliverers of education in prisons and Connexions - a government service providing careers advice and information on a range of topics to young people. Simultaneously, focus groups of young offenders were set up to advise on how their training and educational achievements might be best reflected in the Portfolio and for those with few qualifications and little work experience, the question of the Portfolio's coverage of "soft" skills was very important.

A work programme was developed that planned for all of the stages of the project and the methods of assessment for each of these stages. In addition, each Working Party meeting received a series of reports from:

- SOVA on how employers were reacted to the various prototype versions of the Portfolio;
- Staff who were involved in extending the content of the Portfolio;
- Staff who were working with young offenders to create individual Portfolios;
- Bill Spiby, Impact's Head of Business Management and Quality on developments within the Prison Service as a whole that related to the Portfolio.

This meant that progress was regularly reviewed and changes to the work programme were made on the basis of what had been learned in variety of different settings. This also meant that resources were reallocated as, and when, necessary.

THE POSITIVE OUTCOMES

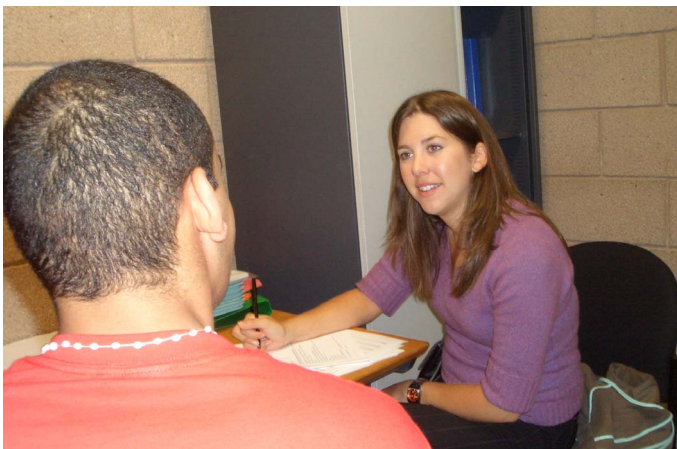
The final product of this entire process of risk taking, planning, assessing, testing, learning, adapting and fine tuning is a Portfolio of Achievement that is understandable and acceptable to employers. In the case of individual young offenders, they develop the following standard sections of the Portfolio with the help of the DP's Education Liaison Officers:

- Personal Details: contact information, driving licence if applicable and, photograph;
- Employment Record: tasks undertaken, possible references;
- Vocational Qualifications;
- Educational Qualifications;
- Character Appraisal: Four perspectives from the offender, personal prison officer, case worker/probation officer, and another key individual such as a vocational instructor or the prison chaplain;
- Personal Statement from offender: aspirations and personal attributes;
- Cognitive Skills: psychological programmes followed and evidence of efforts to address situations or circumstances that trigger offending;

- Photographic Evidence: demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviour on the basis that a picture paints a thousand words.

In constructing the Portfolio, an emphasis is placed on frank and honest statements and each Portfolio has a Certificate of Verification countersigned by a Prison Service representative.

This content seems to be very comprehensive and may well influence an employer but what do the young offenders think? Many are simply impressed with the presentation. Everything is contained in what seems to be a smart looking brief case. In fact when opened, it is a ring-binder with standard dividers for the various sections and it also stores multiple copies of the job seeker's CV and a copy



Thomas developing his portfolio with an IMPACT Case Officer

of that CV on disc so that it can be easily updated. Most of the young offenders felt that having the Portfolio in their possession would give them more confidence in dealing with employers, whilst others appreciated the whole process that unpinned its production. For example, Thomas Billingsley, one of the young inmates at Thorn Cross, felt that *“this whole scheme shows you discipline and gives you hope to succeed.”*

TAKING IT FURTHER

In essence, this Portfolio has broken new ground in that previous schemes had concentrated on qualifications and work experience and while these remain as key components, the Portfolio has one major, and to employers one very important, addition. It provides clear, certified evidence of the distance that offenders have travelled in their attempts to improve their attitudes, behaviour and “soft” skills.

Recently, the Prison Service in the North West of England was successful in three applications for the second round of EQUAL. So, over the new year or two, the Portfolio of Achievement will be tested and tailored for different target groups in:

- [IMPACT – Asset](#) with women trying to maximising the value of their family-related “soft” skills and with older offenders looking at the potential of life-long learning and retraining;
- [IMPACT – Ascend](#) with black and ethnic minority prisoners adding achievements on a cultural identity course into the Portfolio;
- [IMPACT – Changing Directions](#) with carefully selected sex-offenders who are now being trained as entrepreneurs and have previously been assessed for the risk of re-offending and their suitability for self-employment. Here the Portfolio may be primarily addressed to potential funders, such as bank managers, rather than employers and whilst it may be a sensitive subject to

address in the Portfolio, careful attention will be paid to arrangements for the supervision and support of these offenders after their release.

Bill Spiby is convinced that *“without the finance and the freedom to experiment that EQUAL provided, it would have been very difficult to gamble on our initial hunch in the way that we did.”* Now, IMPACT has success that demonstrates the value of the Portfolio of Achievement and shortly even more convincing evidence should be available from the three new Development Partnerships. IMPACT also has the figures to show if the scheme was applied more widely, each Portfolio would only cost £11 in cash and 6 hours in staff time. However, Bill Spiby feels strongly that *“whilst we don’t need a change of legislation, we need to change procedures and practices in prisons if the Portfolio of Achievement is to be used much more widely. If disclosure is to be framed positively, it has to be backed up with high quality education, training and support for all offenders taking part in the scheme.”*

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