

Inmate employment: The increasingly influential role of generic work skills

Although prison labour originally played a punitive and deterrent role, it eventually came to serve the more practical purpose of teaching offenders marketable trades that would increase their chances of post-release employment.<sup>(2)</sup>

More recently, correctional employment has come to be viewed as a potentially influential means of contributing to offender rehabilitation and re-integration into society. Although correctional employment typically focuses on concrete skills, it may also contribute to the development of positive work attitudes and behaviours (such as motivation and responsibility) that are transferable to post-release employment and life situations.

The correctional work environment has been recognized as a place where offenders can practise the skills they have acquired from programming intended to modify criminal attitudes and behaviour. As such, there is growing recognition of the potential rehabilitative value of correctional employment for offenders - it may contribute to skill development, attitude changes and eventual progress toward rehabilitation.

This article lends further support to this "new" role for inmate employment by focusing on the non job-specific generic skills that can be acquired through institutional employment and then transferred to a variety of real-world employment and social situations. The benefits of correctional employment Research has shown that many offenders have little, or sporadic, work experience apart from correctional employment.<sup>(3)</sup> Offenders have also identified employment problems as contributing to their criminal behaviour and view employment preparation as vital to their post-release success.<sup>(4)</sup>

Correctional employment is currently seen as having a number of positive outcomes, apart from teaching specific job skills. For example, the institution benefits from increased structure in inmate daily schedules, increased inmate activity and better overall inmate adaptation to prison life.<sup>(5)</sup>

The rehabilitative function of correctional employment has also been reported by researchers, staff and offenders. In addition to marketable job skills and work experience, correctional employment gives offenders the opportunity for personal development (such as learning responsibility and self discipline) - which can contribute to their rehabilitation.<sup>(6)</sup>

These positive outcomes may also have a positive impact on society in general. A positive work ethic may improve the likelihood of offenders obtaining post-release employment<sup>(7)</sup> which may, in turn, facilitate their re-integration into the community and decrease the likelihood of further criminal acts. Correctional employment and rehabilitation Many Correctional Service of Canada rehabilitative programs focus on changing offender attitudes and beliefs that support antisocial behaviour. These types of programs are based on social learning theory, which suggests that it is possible to modify previously-formed beliefs.

These programs operate with the expectation that attitude changes will help offenders re-adjust to their communities and ultimately reduce recidivism. Correctional work gives offenders the opportunity to use

the skills they learn in these programs (such as anger management) to deal with demands and pressures that they might face in the real world.

The combination of steady employment and participation in programs designed to modify criminal attitudes may, therefore, contribute to the development of the work habits and values necessary for successful community employment.

For example, early research on correctional employment and recidivism found that successful probationers were more than twice as likely (as probationers who were unsuccessful on release) to use the skills they developed through correctional employment.<sup>(8)</sup> Work attitudes and behaviour Perhaps the most important things learned by offenders during correctional employment are non job-specific generic skills, attitudes and behaviours that develop through work experience and can apply to many different jobs. These generic skills are particularly important to offenders because they typically have held few jobs in the community and may, therefore, have a great deal to learn from any employment experiences.

Although work experience certainly contributes to overall employability, general work attitudes (such as motivation) and behaviours (such as the ability to cooperate with colleagues) that develop through work experience, and may be transferable to various jobs, are arguably more important.

This study examined work attitudes and behaviours in a sample of 128 offenders selected from seven Service institutions.

One attitude relevant to offender correctional employment is motivation. Research has shown that offenders who are personally satisfied with their "job" and feel that their work makes a contribution believe that they have more hope of reform.<sup>(9)</sup> If work is seen to have no meaning or importance, work motivation is unlikely to develop.<sup>(10)</sup>

Offender scores on intrinsic job motivation (which assesses the extent to which a person wants to do well in his or her work to achieve inner satisfaction) were comparable with, although slightly lower than, those obtained from two samples of British blue-collar workers.

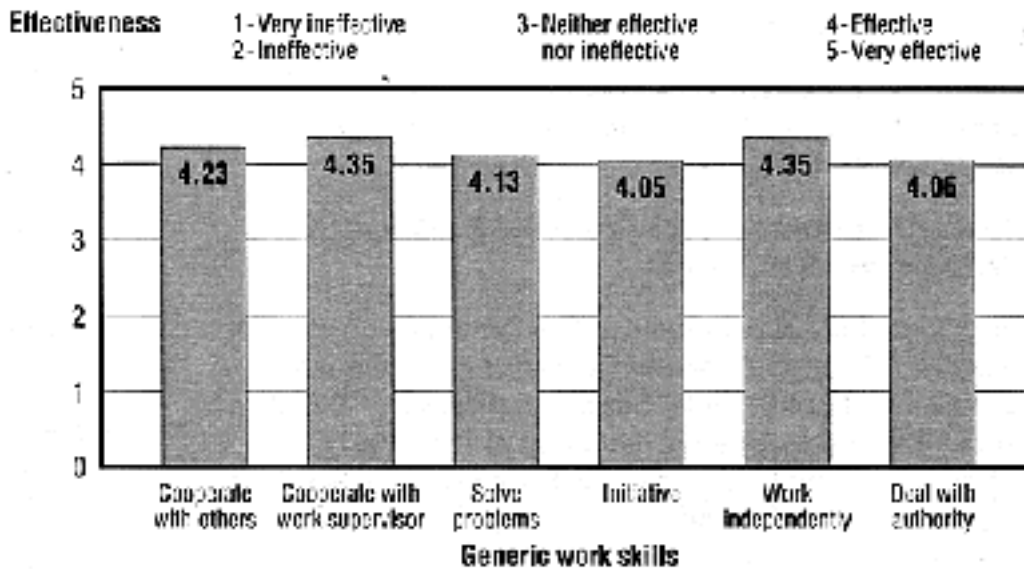
Offender perceptions of the meaning fullness of their jobs and the extent to which they feel responsible for work results were also lower than, but comparable with, community sample scores.

Work behaviours were examined based on a set of generic skills deemed important by real-world employers.<sup>(11)</sup> Offenders were asked to rate their effectiveness in:

- cooperating with other workers in the shop;
- cooperating with their work supervisor;
- solving problems;
- showing initiative at work;
- working independently; and
- dealing with authority.

Since the results were based on self-reports, they were adjusted for socially desirable responses, which is the extent to which people try to present themselves positively and the degree to which their responses are self-deceptive. Overall, offenders felt their performance was effective (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Offender Self-report Ratings of Generic Work Skill Performance**



Further, the higher an offender's intrinsic job motivation, the more effective they rated themselves on the various work behaviours. Similarly, the more meaningful they perceived their job to be, the higher they rated their effectiveness in showing initiative at work, working independently and dealing with authority. The more responsible they felt for work results, the more effective they rated themselves in cooperating with their supervisor, showing initiative at work and dealing with authority. Implications The average offender scores for the various motivation measures are comparable with, although somewhat lower than, those obtained by employees from real-world industries. More important, offender motivational attitudes appear to be related to some generic job skills that are transferable to other work environments. This suggests that offenders may be developing positive work attitudes and behaviours that may assist them in finding post-release employment.

Although the concrete skills developed in the shop may be important, many offenders will be unable to find employment in a similar setting after release. Therefore, if correctional industries can provide work experience that will help offenders develop attitudes and skills that are transferable to various work situations, it may increase their chances of finding post-release employment.

Given this potential impact of positive work attitudes and behaviours, correctional employment policy should perhaps be directed toward training work supervisors to encourage the development and enhancement of these attitudes and behaviours among offenders.

Previous research<sup>(12)</sup> has shown that correctional work supervisors have an effect on offender work attitudes. Enhanced training for supervisors would, therefore, be a valuable unification of correctional programming and correctional industry.

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