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The *Sorting yourself out* guide to **Applying for work** (with a criminal record)

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Nacro's *Sorting yourself out* guides set out how prisoners and ex-offenders can help themselves to sort out the problems they may face on release.

This leaflet tells you how to disclose a criminal record. It assumes you have to disclose your record. You do not have to disclose your record if you are not asked about it. Unless it is exempt from the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974*, you do not have to disclose your record if it is 'spent' under the Act.

Under the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (ROA)*, most convictions become spent, or forgotten, after five years. Prison sentences of up to six months become spent after seven years. Prison sentences of up to two-and-a-half years become spent after 10 years. These periods are halved if you were under 18 when convicted. If you have any questions about the Act, contact Nacro's Resettlement *Plus* Helpline (see page 8).

If your convictions are not spent, they *may* show up at a later date on a Basic Disclosure (see 'Exempt jobs and disclosures' on page 2). For up-to-date information on the introduction of Basic Disclosures, please contact Nacro's Resettlement *Plus* Helpline (page 8). If you seek work which is exempt from the ROA, any conviction, whether spent or unspent, along with cautions, reprimands and final warnings *may* show up on a Standard or Enhanced Disclosure (see 'Exempt jobs and disclosures' on page 2).

Applying for jobs in the right way – even if you have to disclose a criminal record – will give you a better chance of getting the job. This leaflet tells you how to do this.



Exempt jobs and Disclosures

Criminal record checks called Standard Disclosures and Enhanced Disclosures were introduced in March 2002. Basic Disclosures, which only show unspent convictions, may be introduced at a later date.

Standard and Enhanced Disclosures cover areas of work exempt from the ROA. These include health work, private security work, the law, accountancy, and working with

children and old, sick or disabled adults. Enhanced Disclosures usually show the same details as Standard Disclosures. Occasionally they may show other information from local police records.

If you have been convicted of a serious crime or several crimes, you may have great problems finding work in these exempt fields. For further advice, contact Nacro's Resettlement *Plus* Helpline (page 8).



How to disclose

Many employers will still consider you if they do not think the conviction is relevant, even though some employers will turn you down if you disclose a record.

The right way to disclose

You will improve your chances by disclosing in the right way. You need to reassure employers that you are not a risk, and that your crimes are in the past. Therefore, if your record is old, you can point this out. If your record is more recent but the crime was committed a long time ago, you can point this out too.

If you were found guilty when young and you have grown up and taken on a family, home, job and other duties since then, which mean that you have too much to lose by getting into trouble, you can point this out also.

If the record is not relevant to the job, you should say so. If you owned up to the crime or pleaded guilty, then you could say so. If you committed the crime because you were having problems at the time and these have been sorted out, you could explain this.

If the crime sounds more serious than it is, you could explain this too. All crimes cover a wide range of behaviours from the minor to the very serious.

If the reasons behind the crime would help to minimise its seriousness, you could highlight this. For instance, a frightened person who in defence hits someone who threatens them is not as blameworthy as someone who causes serious injury with intent.

However, you must be careful to ensure that your explanation does not sound like an excuse. An employer will not want to know.

You should try and put yourself in the employer's position. Ask yourself how what you say would sound if a stranger said it to you.

If you have more than one conviction, you can give details in a way that will not put the employer off straightaway. For example, if any or all of the convictions can be grouped together, you can say 'I have x convictions for (offences) between (dates). For my last offence I was sentenced to ...'. If you have a long criminal record and/or recent convictions, you will need to make a very strong statement about how you have changed and do not intend to offend any more.

In making such a statement, if it is true, you can say that you regret the offence, will not re-offend, are keen to work, and are sure you can prove yourself to be a trusty and hardworking employee.

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How to disclose

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However, you must not allow your record to take over an application, covering letter or interview. You must put across the message that you are applying for the job because you can do it.

In the example of a letter opposite, the applicant has made a positive statement and then, having disclosed their conviction, provided some reassurance about it.

When you disclose

If an employer is going to ask about records, it is likely to be at **application stage**. Where an application form asks about a criminal record, it might be best to put 'see covering letter' and in the letter give a short account of the offence and your attitude to it. Alternatively, you can say that you will discuss this at the interview.

If you have served a prison sentence which has left a gap in your work history, you can write on the form: 'not in employment' or 'unavailable for work due to personal circumstances', and give details in the covering letter or at the interview.

The advantage of disclosing at the **interview** is that the employer has the opportunity to see the person behind the conviction, but bear in mind that it takes a lot of confidence to disclose at this stage.

However, the employer might out of the blue ask about criminal records or require you to disclose at the **job offer** stage. If you have not already been asked, you should be prepared to deal with this to reduce the chances of a job offer being withdrawn.

Example of a covering letter

Dear Mr Holroyd

Caretaker vacancy

I am applying for the post of caretaker. As you will see, I think I have all the skills you are looking for. I have worked in all the areas listed in the job description and have more than two years' supervisory experience. I will make a good conscientious employee and I am sure that my former employer will testify to this. I was always at the premises before 9 o'clock and was never late. In my two years with the company I only lost two days through sickness.

I have however convictions for theft which are now more than five years old and arose from financial hardship at the time which no longer applies. The convictions are 'spent' under the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974*, although I am aware that I have to disclose them for this job. Since this troubled period in my life, I have turned things around. I met my partner soon after my last conviction and settled down. We now have two children. I have been in more or less regular employment since the last conviction.

As my application makes clear, I have a good work record and hope you will judge me on this rather than my past, of which I am not proud. I am of course prepared to discuss this at interview.

Yours

Making a strong application

As well as deciding on the best way to disclose your criminal record, you will improve your chances of getting a job if you follow these pointers:

- **Spend a lot of time applying for a few jobs rather than a little time applying for lots.**

For many jobs, employers tend to get far too many applications. As a result they try and weed out as many applications as quickly as possible to reduce the pile. Applications which get weeded out first include those that have been filled in too quickly, that have been poorly written or have not been completed in the way the employer has asked. An applicant who fills in a few forms carefully is more likely to be interviewed for at least one job than the person who fills in many forms quickly.

- **Concentrate on applying for jobs that you are most likely to get.**

It is best to focus on those jobs that you are most likely to get – those that you have the right skills, qualifications and experience for. In general, you can expect most employers to spot very quickly if you do not have the qualities they are looking for.

- **Make every word count.**

Do not complete an application form in a single session. Rather, on a copy of the form or spare paper, you should write out what you want to say, amend it, rewrite it and amend it however many times it takes until you get it right. Every word should count. If a deadline for a job is not for some time, use that time to get the form right.

- **Show that you can do the job.**

You need to give examples to show that you can do the job on offer. Don't just say you can do a job – provide proof.

- **Make your application look good.**

Applications should usually be typed or, if that's not possible, very carefully hand-written. All forms and covering letters must be in good English, free from spelling and punctuation errors. Information must be clearly laid out.

- **Give employers what they want.**

If you are asked to complete an application form, you should not send a CV instead. If the employer provides a person specification, you should address

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Making a strong application *continued*

it point by point. An employer wants to know how and why you consider yourself able to fill their vacancy. You should tell them clearly and give them no reason to reject you at the initial sift.

- **Pay attention to detail.**

Many applications fail because people have misspelt the name of the employer or incorrectly addressed the envelope. Basic mistakes such as these undermine confidence in you, especially where accuracy, organisation and attention to detail are important.

- **Prepare for interviews.**

You should make sure that you know where the interview will take place and that you can get there in good time. You should think about what you might be asked and be ready to answer questions clearly and confidently. If you have a job description, the questions may be based on the person specification or be more general, such as ‘Why do you want this

job?’, ‘Why did you leave your last job?’ or ‘Tell me more about yourself’. You should dress smartly.

- **Know the organisation.**

If you get an interview, you can improve your chances by finding out about the employer: what they do, what they believe in, and so on, then using this knowledge in the interview. If the employer is a large firm or organisation, they may have a website or have an annual report and brochures they can send you.

- **Get out and about.**

Many jobs are not advertised and recruitment takes place informally rather than through the completion of an application form. The more effort you put into keeping in contact with friends, relatives and people you used to work with, the more likely you are to find a job. Training and voluntary work (see page 7) can be a useful way into work too.



Still can't get a job?

If this leaflet does not work for you, you should consider further measures to improve your chances of finding a job.

It may be that factors such as a long time without a job, a lack of confidence or skills that is stopping you from finding work. If this is so, you should consider training or voluntary work.

If you get on to a good training scheme you might find that, as well as learning new skills, you will be working with staff who might be able to get you a placement with an employer. In some cases this may lead to a paid job. Once you have that first job, it will be easier to secure other jobs if your work is good.

You may be able to join a training scheme under the Government's New Deal programme. Contact your local jobcentre about this.

You might also be able to improve your skills through voluntary work. You can also get a good reference through voluntary work and it will bring you in contact with other people, which might lead to a job. Around four out of 10 people find work through personal contacts.

You can find out about local voluntary work through your local volunteer office and through adverts in local papers and in libraries. You may also be able to undertake volunteer work under the New Deal programme.



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For further information

A more detailed leaflet for people working with prisoners and ex-offenders called a *Resettlement practitioner guide to applying for work (with a criminal record)* is available from Nacro Publications (see below).

Single copies are free. Multiple copies are 75p each.

Nacro Resettlement Service

This information has been produced by Nacro's Resettlement *Plus* Helpline, part of Nacro's Resettlement Service, which provides information and advice for prisoners, ex-offenders and people involved or working with them. If you want to find out more about how Nacro's Resettlement Service can help you contact **Nacro's Resettlement Plus Helpline**, 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU. Telephone **020 7840 6464**.

Further copies of this guide are available from Nacro Publications on 020 7840 6427, fax 020 7840 6444.

Single copies are free; multiple copies, 50p each.

For details about all Nacro's advice material, check on our website at www.nacro.org.uk/publications/adviceleaflets.htm

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