

EXPLAINING YOUR CONVICTION

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Explaining Your Conviction

Many ex-offenders are faced with explaining their past to a potential employer. If you are not prepared, you will find yourself in a tough spot. Your first reaction may be to lie. But if you do, the employer may find out about it later. They won't fire you because you are a convicted felon, but they may fire you because you lied on your application or during the interview.

Give the employer a chance to hire you. We think honesty is the best policy, so it is important to know “when” you should talk about possible barriers to employment, but more importantly, you must learn “how” to talk about your criminal history. The basic rule is to talk about your conviction only when asked. Do not volunteer information and use only the answer you have prepared. Practice your response using this 3-step process:

Step One

State the facts. Tell the story using words that the interviewer will understand, but not take offense. Never use penal or health and safety code violations. Do not use street terms or slang. Remember, this is a brief statement which gives the interviewer an idea of what you are talking about without going into detail.

Step Two

Take responsibility for your actions. Tell the interviewer that you paid your debt to society and what you are doing about the situation now. This makes you appear in control and working towards the future with the company you are asking to hire you.

Step Three

Now move on with a statement about why you want to work for the employer and the skills you have to offer. This is also a great place for your personal commercial!

Other Tips

1. Look the employer in the eye. You don't want to look evasive or shifty.
2. KISS (Keep It Short and Simple). Don't make your conviction explanation the largest part of the interview. You are there because you can do the job.
3. Tell the employer about tax credits that they may receive for hiring you.

Here's an example:

"I'm glad you asked me, because I want to be up front with you. When I was younger, I was involved with some people who were using drugs. I made some bad decisions in the past, and I paid my debt to society. During that time, I was chosen to work in furniture manufacturing and found I really enjoyed it. Now I'm ready to get to work and prove that I can do a good job. That's why I'm applying with you, because I have heard that your company manufactures quality furniture. In fact, you can save on your federal taxes through the Work Opportunity Tax Credit program when you hire me."

Here's another example:

"I'm a little nervous talking about it, but I want to be honest with you. Three years ago, I was involved in an altercation in which a person was hurt. I'm sorry it happened, and I am paying restitution for it. The situation made me see that I needed to change, so I've taken some positive steps in my life. I no longer drink, and I've completed a workshop in anger management. Now I want to get a good job so I can prove that I am a productive and reliable employee and a responsible citizen. And, because I haven't worked for a while, I can offer an employer tax incentive for hiring me. Are you familiar with the Work Opportunity Tax Credit?"

Practice

Write out your explanation here. Then put it all together and practice it in front of a mirror or with someone else so you sound believable and honest.

Step One:

Step Two:

Step Three:



TIPS FOR THE EX-OFFENDER

Dealing with potential employers is never an easy task for client with criminal records. Ex-offenders who lie on the application may get hired, and then fired if their record becomes known. Those who are honest may feel like they never even get a chance. Although there is no magic formulas for dealing with this sensitive situation, the following hints may be helpful.



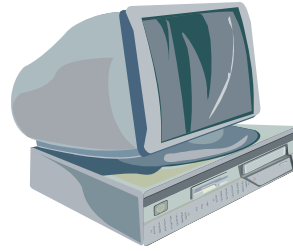
To tell or not to tell. It's up to you but we recommend honesty. On the application put "will discuss in interview" rather than a lengthy explanation of past convictions. In an interview, keep explanations short and stress what you learned in prison and what your skills and assets are. Be positive!

Gap in employment due to time served. If you had a job in prison, list this. Under salary, write "minimum wage." After all, a dollar a day was the minimum wage! Again, be positive and stress that through incarcerated, you haven't been lazy.

Reason for leaving. Avoid negative words like "went to jail" or "paroled." Instead put "relocated" or "contract ended." Either are true.

The interview. Relax-be comfortable discussing the conviction. Practice ahead of time. Maintain eye contact, this shows you have nothing to hide. Again, keep explanations short and focus on what you have to offer the employer. Believe in yourself and it will show.

APPLICATIONS



1. Don't lie about your experience or qualifications. Even if it helps you get the job initially, you can be fired if and when the truth becomes known (and it usually does).

2. Never volunteer information that might be considered "negative" by employers (i.e. criminal record, substance abuse history, job terminations). If you are asked in the application about these things, put "will discuss."

The purpose of an application is to get to an interview for the job of putting "will discuss" instead of the possibly damaging information, you are forcing the employer to either give you the interview to get more information (which is the goal anyway) or eliminate you without really knowing why. If you are a qualified applicant, most employers won't do this.

Remember: when you go to fill out an application, you should be groomed and dressed as if you were going on an interview. Sometimes you will be interviewed on the spot. When you file an application don't forget about it and hope the employer calls you. Follow-up! Usually after 5-7 days. A phone call to check on the status of your application is recommended. In fact, the best advice any job seeker can get is "Don't give up!" There will probably be many "no's" before you get a job, however, if you're willing to work at getting a job you will be successful. Good luck!

PHONE SCRIPT

For Classified Ad:

Hello, my name is _____. I'm calling about the (job title) _____ position advertised in (name of newspaper & edition) _____. I've had (number of years, or use "a lot" instead of a specific number of years) _____ of experience in this field and would like to set up a time for us to get together and discuss this job in more detail.

For Cold Call:

Hello, my name is _____. I'm calling to see if you have any openings for (job your interested in) _____. I've had _____ of experience in this field and would like to set up a time for us to get together and discuss this job in more detail.

If they don't have openings:

Would it be possible for me to come down and complete an application in case any positions become available? Do you know of any (job title) _____ openings in the area?

Remember:

- ✓ Be polite. Whether you get the results you want or not, thank the person for taking the time to speak with you.
- ✓ Be prepared to answer questions about your background and/or experience.
- ✓ Have a pen and paper handy to take down information or directions.
- ✓ Be prepared to set up an interview.

RESUMES

Two types of Resumes:

Functional resumes describe your skills, abilities and accomplishments that relate to the job you're applying for. Employment history is less detailed than chronological resumes.

Reverse chronological resumes list jobs you've had. Your most recent job is listed first, your job before that is listed second, and so on. Each job has employment dates and duties.

Tips for preparing a Functional Resume:

- Study the duties for the position you're applying for. Identify 2 or 3 general skills that are important to the job.
- Review your background and experience list. Find talents and accomplishments that demonstrate your ability to perform the job skills.
- List your talents and accomplishments under the job skills they relate to.
- Use simple, short, active sentences.

This applicant was recently released from custody and is applying for a position using the functional resume.

Michael Doe
312 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90001
(213) 555-5555

Experience

DRIVER

Rezenberger Incorporated, Downey, California ***December 2004 to Present***

Duties include transporting Union Pacific train conductors to stations on routes between San Diego to San Luis Obispo, California. **Skills/experience gained:** time management in high pressure, tightly managed time frames; driving eight-passenger van; map reading.

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Computer Works, Hollywood, California ***November 2003 to October 2004***

Duties included selling computer products to businesses over the phone. **Skills/experience gained:** effective rapid verbal communication; sales techniques, ability to understand products and describe items; typing 20 words per minute to input customer data; using Word Perfect computer programs.

Janitor/Janitorial Supervisor

United States Government, Victorville, CA ***July 2000 to September 2003***

Duties included supervising five individuals in specialty floor finishing, stripping and buffing in industrial setting. **Skills/experience gained:** using Hupp 21 industrial stripper and Buf 2000 buffer machines; using industrial chemicals, including ammoniated wax stripper, flo-mop speed stripper, neutralizer rinse, and caustic concrete cleaner; ability to lead team, manage personnel issues, and delegate duties in high-pressure setting.

Furniture Assembler

Unicorp, Lompoc, California ***November 1998 to July 2000***

Duties included assembling plastic and metal furniture components. **Skills/experience gained:** progressive and eyelet metal stamping; designing shells with difference diameters, various markings, side piercings, slant beaded threads and special markings; further experience in injection molding and precision assembly.

EDUCATION

High School Diploma

Kennedy High School, Los Angeles, California

June 1978

CERTIFICATES

Class A fork-lift driver's certification, (obtained November, 2004)

Certificate of Completion, 10 week Anger Management Skills course (obtained August, 2000)

FUNCTIONAL RESUME WORKSHEET

First and Last Name

Address

Phone/email

OBJECTIVE

SKILLS

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Job title, company name, city and state

Dates of employment

Duties and responsibilities

Job title, company name, city and state

Date of employment

Duties and responsibilities

EDUCATION/TRAINING

Name of School

City/State

Certificate/Area of Study

Completion Date

Name of School

City/State

Certificate/Area of Study

Completion Date



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of an interview is to allow the employer to get to know you better. Each question asked is designed to give them insight into your skills, abilities, and attitudes. The following are the most often asked questions.

1. Would you tell me about yourself?

This opening statement requires only a brief reply. The interviewer is already familiar with your background through your application and resume. The interviewer is now asking for an indication of your self-confidence and your ability to handle yourself under pressure. Mention those things which you are most proud of and comfortable talking about; however, keep them job-related (skills, abilities, and work experience)

2. Why do you want to work here?

This question gives the employer an idea of what really matters to you. Did you bother to find out any information about the company? Employers want to feel special or “chosen.” Make them feel as if you have exercised discretion and good judgment in selection them.

3. What are your strengths and/or weaknesses?

What an excellent opportunity to sell your skills? Identify those personal qualities that make you special. Give examples of your accomplishments. The question regarding weaknesses is a chance for the employer to observe how you handle yourself under pressure. Do not bring up weaknesses which would cause an employer to question your job performance. Discuss a weakness which could be seen as a strength in the area you want to enter. For example, getting bored with repetitive tasks could be seen as a strength on a job in which one’s duties are always changing. Turning negatives into positives is a good rule of thumb.

4. Where do you see yourself in three to five years?

Employers ask this question because they are interested in goal-oriented people. Have some direction or goals in mind and be ready to talk about them.

5. How do you spend your spare time?

This question is posed to determine if you use your time constructively. Do not mention pastimes which carry negative or boring connotations-shopping, watching TV, movies, etc. Describe positive or interested activities. Good examples are sports, physical fitness, reading, education, and visits to museums.

6. How are you qualified for this job? Why should I hire you?

In this question, the interviewer want you to explain how your background, experience, training, and personal qualities relate to the responsibilities of the job for which you are applying. You can answer this question by listing the qualifications. Don't be afraid to add personal qualities in addition to skills and abilities.

7. What did you like/dislike about your last job?

Mention some aspect of your previous job that you find similar to the position for which you are interviewing. Promote a personal trait of yours by saying, "What I liked most about this job was having the opportunity to use my skills." Remember a wise man once said, "If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all!"

8. Do you have any questions for me?

This is your chance to let the employer know that you are looking for the right place to put your skills to work. Remember that you are interviewing the employer as well as being interviewed. Some sample questions might be:

Does the company have any plans for future growth?

When do you expect to make a decision? Or, when can I expect to hear from you?

Do you have any more questions about my qualifications?

How would you describe a typical day on the job.

Employment Development Department

Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and Welfare-to-Work Tax Credit

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) can help you get a job!

If you are in one of the "target groups" an employer who hires you can receive a federal tax credit of up to \$8,500. This tax credit may give the employer the incentive to hire you for the job!

These are the nine groups of jobseekers who can qualify an employer for the WOTC:

- A. Qualified recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).
- B. Qualified veterans who are receiving Food Stamps.
- C. Qualified economically disadvantaged ex-felons hired no later than one year after conviction or release from prison.
- D. High risk youth ages 18 through 24 who reside in a federally designated Empowerment Zone, Enterprise Community, or Renewal Community.
- E. Vocational Rehabilitation referrals.
- F. Qualified summer youth ages 16 through 17 who reside in a federally designated Empowerment Zone, Enterprise Community, or Renewal Community and have not previously worked for the employer seeking this tax credit.
- G. Qualified Food Stamp recipients ages 18 through 24.
- H. Qualified recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- I. Long-term recipients of TANF/Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).
(Individuals who began work on or after January 1, 1998.)

If you are in one of these groups, let the employer know that you are a member of a WOTC qualifying group. You and the employer must complete the necessary forms on or before the day you are offered work, so you should let the employer know when you first apply or when you are being interviewed.