



WORKING CHANCE

Unlocking women's potential

PROGRESS & PREJUDICE

**SHIFTS IN UK EMPLOYER ATTITUDES TO HIRING
PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS**

AUTUMN 2022



ABOUT WORKING CHANCE

Working Chance is the UK's only employment charity exclusively for women who have criminal convictions. Since 2009, we have helped thousands of women to develop their confidence, skills, and self-belief and build a brighter future for themselves and their families. We partner with employers across the UK to match women with the right opportunities. We work with policymakers and employers to break down the stigma, stereotypes and barriers that stop many women with convictions from securing employment and progressing in careers. And crucially, we help keep society safer - because employment has been shown to be one of the main drivers in reducing reoffending.

“Be open minded, there's a whole lot of skills that these people have gained and a whole lot of experience that might not be as conventional, it might not be the traditional path of finishing school and university and then getting a job straight away. They might not have necessarily lived that life, but they have lived their whole life and they've seen different things and experienced different things and what I found is they had a lot more worldly experience, what they may lack is the confidence.”

- MALE EMPLOYER, 30

We commissioned this market research into employer attitudes towards hiring people with convictions because previous research, notably in 2010 and 2016, showed the worrying extent of employer prejudice against people with convictions. We wanted to know whether things were getting better, and to understand what was deterring employers from hiring people with convictions. Understanding the assumptions and perspectives of employers helps us and others to work alongside them. We can then improve knowledge of why diverse recruiting practices - that include people with convictions - benefit organisations.

METHODOLOGY

We commissioned NfPResearch to carry out this research for us. 1,000 professionals were surveyed, all of whom had responsibility for hiring staff as part of their role. The sample covered a range of demographics, industries and sectors, as well as a range of size of organisations. Most of the sample were male, white British and between the ages of 35 to 54. 42% were sole recruitment decision makers and either a head of department or CEO. Of those we surveyed, 20 then participated in an interview to help us gain deeper insights into the issues; the quotes throughout this report were taken from these interviews. To encourage honest answers, respondents were not told which organisation, or type of organisation, had commissioned the research.

There have been two key studies in recent years into the attitudes of employers towards hiring people with convictions: 'Prejudged: Tagged for life', commissioned by Working Links in 2010, and a YouGov survey commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in 2016. Our questioning mirrored selected questions from 2010 and 2016, so that we could get a clearer picture of whether attitudes had changed.

TERMINOLOGY

In our survey questions we asked about attitude towards, and experiences of hiring, 'ex-offenders'. 'Ex-offender' is not Working Chance's preferred term as it focuses on the offending rather than the person, but we chose to use that term in order to compare our data with previous studies. Throughout this report we have referred to people with convictions.

KEY FINDINGS

The good news...

- The percentage of employers who say that they would, hypothetically, recruit someone with a conviction has increased. It's now 45%, compared with 25% in 2010.
- Twice as many employers now (compared with 2016) see that there 'could be advantages' to hiring someone with a conviction: 24% say there could be advantages, compared to 12% in 2016. The top three potential advantages they saw were: people with convictions would provide different perspectives; it would help to tackle skills and labour shortages; it would improve the organisation's diversity and inclusion record.
- The number of employers knowingly recruiting people with convictions is twice as high as in 2010.¹
- 86% of employers who had previously recruited someone with a conviction reported a good experience.
- In the last six years, the proportion of employers who would not hire someone with a conviction under any circumstance has reduced significantly, from a half of all employers to just over a quarter (50% to 27%).

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¹ As it becomes increasingly common to ask whether or not someone has a criminal record, organisations are more likely to hold data on this. It is therefore unclear whether more people with convictions are being hired, or whether data collection is more normalised, and so employers have more awareness of this.

The less good news...

- 30% of employers say they would **automatically exclude a candidate who declared an unspent conviction** – even though only 15% said it was their organisation’s policy to immediately reject applicants declaring criminal records. This suggests that some hiring managers are making decisions based on prejudice and not in line with their own organisational policy.
- People with convictions have the lowest interview to hire conversion rate, out of a range of groups generally considered to be disadvantaged in the labour market.

HIRING MANAGERS ARE MAKING DECISIONS BASED ON PREJUDICE AND NOT IN LINE WITH THEIR OWN ORGANISATIONAL POLICY

WHY ARE SOME EMPLOYERS RELUCTANT TO HIRE PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS?

Of the 270 employers in our sample who said that they **would not hire someone with a conviction**, the key concerns given that would ‘definitely’ affect their decision were, in order:

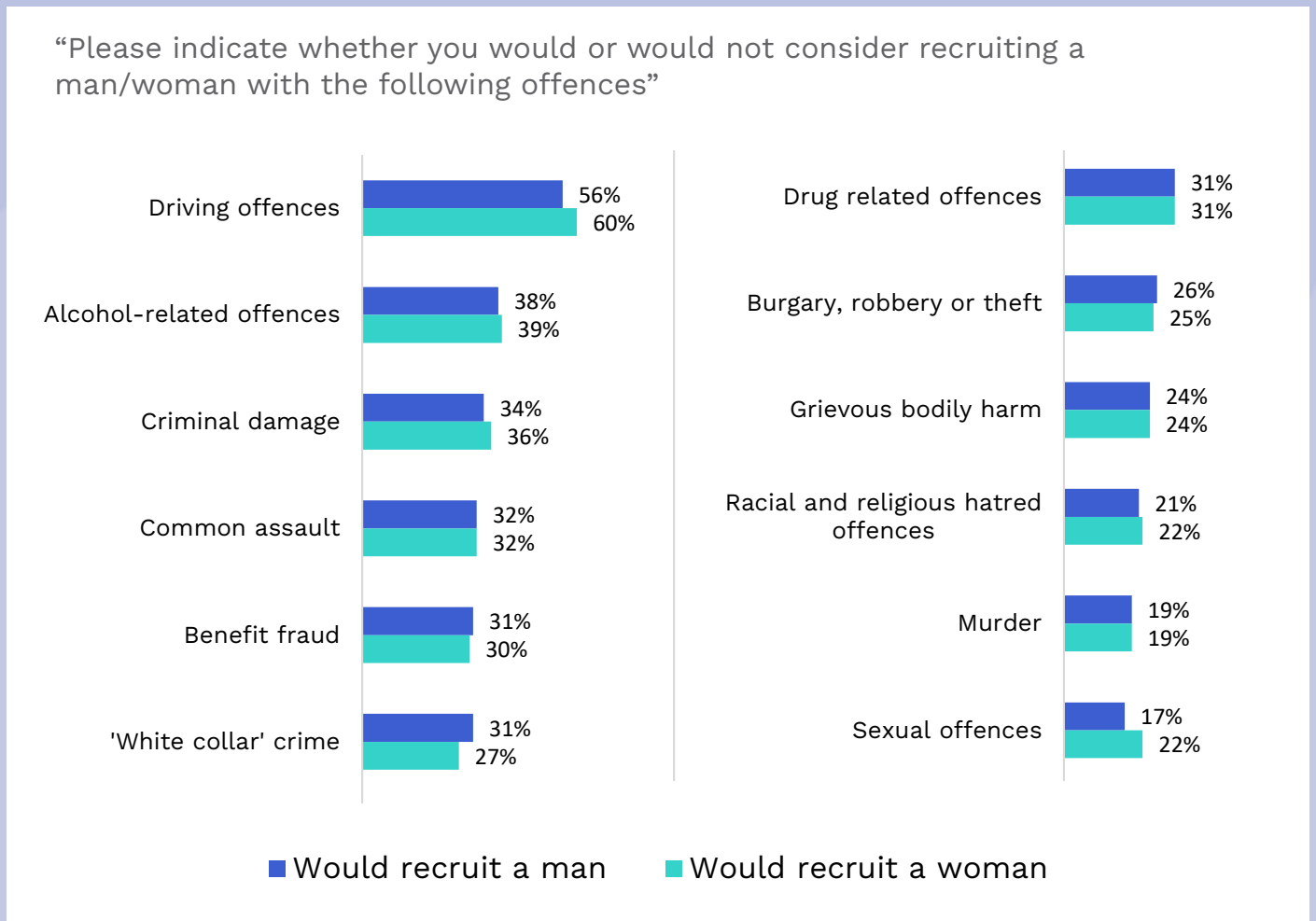
- It might affect their organisation’s liability insurance
- It would be against their organisation’s policy
- The nature of the offence(s)
- The risk of the person reoffending.

However, when we add in concerns that would ‘slightly’ have an impact on the decision to hire, the picture changes and risk of reoffending goes to the top of the list, making it reasonable to conclude that overall, risk of reoffending is the key deterrent. This suggests that some employers hold a belief that some people are inherently more criminal than others (thinking ‘if they’ve done it once they may do it again’), as opposed to the view held by practitioners who work with offenders that offending is often connected to specific contextual factors and life experiences.

Almost three-quarters of employers who were reluctant to hire people with convictions were definitely (31%) or slightly (42%) concerned that doing so could damage the public image of their organisation, suggesting that more work is needed to measure public and customer attitudes towards organisations that pro-actively employ people with convictions.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SPECIFIC OFFENCES AND GENDER

Employers were least likely to employ people who had committed sexual offences, followed by murder. They were most likely to employ people with driving offences or whose offending was related to alcohol consumption. The gender of the applicant made virtually no difference – it was clear that the nature of the offence was the key factor.



THE EFFECTS OF LABOUR SHORTAGES

The end of free movement following Brexit, the pandemic, international sector-specific labour shortages, and a significant increase in early (post-50) retirement have combined to create serious ongoing labour shortages in the UK.

41% of employers in our research said that the effects of the pandemic had made it harder for them to fill vacancies, and 37% said that Brexit had made it harder.

When asked how labour shortages might affect their attitudes to hiring people with convictions, a very mixed picture emerged.

- 44% of employers said that the labour shortages made no difference to their attitudes to hiring people with convictions.
- 30% said this would make them **more** likely to hire them.
- 25% said this would make them **less** likely to hire them.

Digging into the reasons for these responses was outside the scope of this research, but we might speculate that when recruiting is hard, some employers respond by broadening the pool they are willing to consider, while others become more concerned to make the right hire (because of the cost of getting it wrong and having to go back out to market) and are therefore less likely to take what they see as a risk.

WHEN RECRUITING IS HARD, SOME EMPLOYERS RESPOND BY BROADENING THE POOL THEY ARE WILLING TO CONSIDER

SIZE OF ORGANISATION

We found that larger organisations (defined as those with more than 500 employees) appear to have a higher proportion of candidates with convictions going through their recruitment processes than smaller ones.

We asked: To your knowledge, have you interviewed/hired any ex-offenders [see note on terminology on page 3] in the last year?

	All employers	Up to 500 employees	500+ employees
Interviewed	27%	24%	33%
Have hired	25%	21%	32%
NA / Not sure	56%	61%	47%

The data suggests that larger organisations are more likely to have a diverse approach to recruitment - but it might be that larger companies are more likely to have processes in place to gather information about who is applying to them.

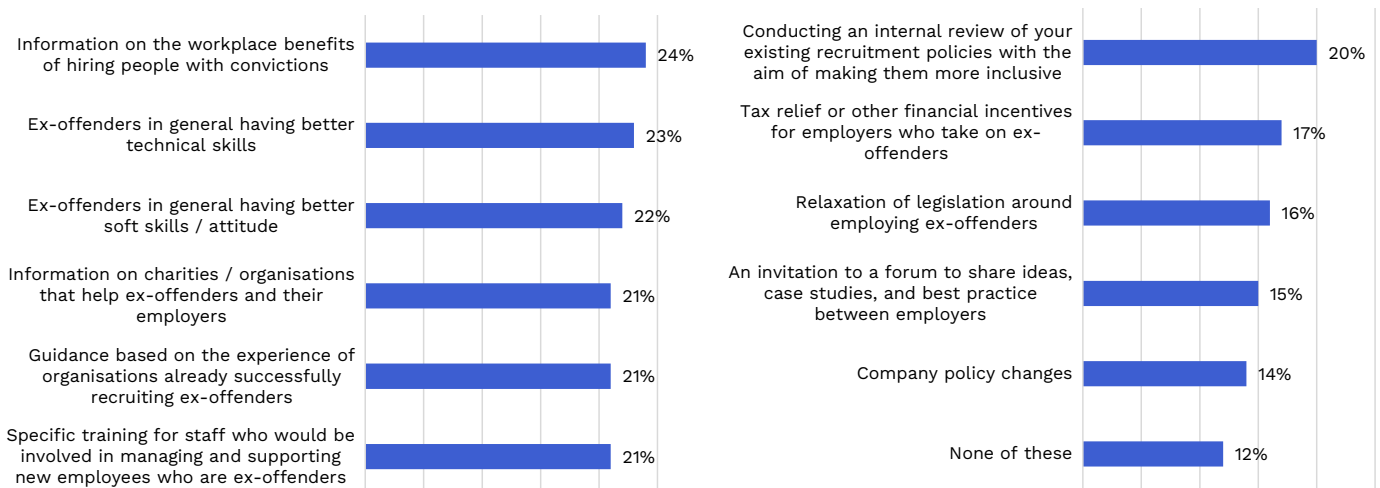
“Employers need to be more open minded. I have had some colleagues tell me that they don’t want to consider employing people with previous convictions, because they are worried about the repercussions. It is just easier not to. But we are experiencing labour shortage, so people are shooting themselves in the foot when they do that. Also, if every company bars people with convictions from working, then these people are going to get no hope and no chance and they will just go back to offending. So, I think that’s what my colleagues need to learn really, they need to be more open-minded and understand there are resources to help you there. You can actually get help and support from people if you want to understand more about the law in this area. You can also get Human Resources to step up to the plate as well.”

- MALE EMPLOYER, 54

WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE MORE EMPLOYERS TO INCLUDE PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS?

We asked every employer who took part in the research to tell us what would encourage them to change their hiring policy and practice to include people with convictions.

“Which, if any of the following, would be of most benefit in helping your place of work recruit more ex-offenders?”



As the table shows, the most popular choice was information on the benefits for employers of hiring people with convictions. In 2023, drawing on our 13 years of working with employers and with women with convictions, we will be launching a guide to fair and safe recruiting, and stepping up our work to demonstrate to employers why it makes both business and ethical sense for them to broaden their recruitment pool to provide opportunities for people with convictions.

CONCLUSION

We are heartened by the good news this research reveals - that UK employers are becoming more open-minded and changing their recruiting practices. But there's still a very long way to go before the question of whether to hire people with convictions doesn't need to be asked, because it's the norm - just as it is to seek to fill other diversity gaps. Forward-thinking organisations understand that staff who come from a broad range of backgrounds make an organisation more vibrant and in touch, bringing in a range of perspectives and life experiences, rather than all fitting one tired mould.

Hiring people with convictions makes sense on so many levels. It's one of the main ways to prevent reoffending because it offers not only an income but also an opportunity for a person with a criminal record to show what they're good at and be appreciated, to have a shared purpose with others, and to have structure in daily life. A person who starts to believe that their life is worth something and that they have something to give is far less likely to return to crime. And it's not just the employer and the individual that benefit: the cost to the state of reoffending is £18 billion a year, plus our society is safer when offending is reduced.

One in six adults in the UK has a criminal record. Employers who assume that these people are a risk to their business and have nothing to offer are losing out by failing to tap into this under-utilised talent pool.



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