

(Inc.)

## **Should You Hire An Ex?**

*Most can agree that ex-convicts need a second chance—But should you be the one to give it to them?*

Mel O’Leary knew what he wanted when he started custom blow molder company Meredith-Springfield in 1983. Like most business owners, he wanted his Ludlow, Massachusetts-based business filled with dependable workers who punched in on time and caused as little trouble as possible. Today, he boasts 50 of those kinds of workers. What O’Leary didn’t know in 1983 was that a good portion of them would be ex-cons.

O’Leary always felt hiring a former inmate made about as much sense as taking the contents of his register, walking into the street and emptying it down a dirt-ridden drain. But when sheriffs of local Hampden County came to him in 2001, it was the beginning of O’Leary realizing how much ex-cons can save you, not just in money, but in headaches.

“The sheriff’s office asks me for an appointment one day,” he says. “When they told me for what, I already was sure my answer would be no. But out of common courtesy I thought I’d hear them out.” What O’Leary heard was a presentation far different from the image in his head. No murderers, rapists or prisoners going from solitary to working at his company. “I was relieved to hear I would be getting deadbeat dads and small-time drug dealers, which meant a much smaller possibility of violence. They also pledged to have a routine monitoring and supervision of the prisoners,” says O’Leary, whose company’s yearly revenue is \$8 million. “The prison provided the transportation and promised to deliver them on time, clean and sober,” he says. “Honestly, there were times when I didn’t know if my workers who weren’t ex-cons could live up to that.”

Reluctantly, O’Leary agreed to try out one prisoner and immediately understood how important this program was to the sheriff and the people under him. “The sheriff’s department wanted this program to do well,” he says, “so it wasn’t their intention just to let any prisoner into it. We got to interview prisoners just as we would any other job candidate and I was impressed by how prison educational programs had prepared them well to be solid workers.” So much so that O’Leary went from having one prisoner to start, to now having the total since the beginning of his participation rise to 47. O’Leary is quick to point out that part of the reason it’s been so many is because the ex-cons don’t always stay forever. “70% of our workers are unskilled or semi-skilled,” he says, “so many of the ex-cons use us for their resume and move on to better jobs. But I have to tell you, all but four prisoners ended up staying out of trouble since I started getting involved. It’s a good feeling.”

For his wallet, too. With statewide tax breaks for every ex-con a company takes on, O’Leary is thrilled to have money taken off his tax burden while helping in the rehabilitation process. In fact, tax credits exist in several states for hiring ex-cons, and others are near passing it, including Illinois, which would offer \$600 in credits a year if

the governor signs the bill that was passed by state lawmakers. The federal government recently offered the Work Opportunity Tax Credit for ex-convicts of low income families, resulting in a tax credit of up to \$2400 per worker. Although it went on hiatus at the beginning of 2006, there is a distinct possibility of it returning. Regardless, O'Leary feels he's gained as much in insight as any savings, now even going over to the local prison to teach classes in job interviewing.

"I've never had an ex-convict steal from me or do anything violent in all the time I've been a part of the program," he says. "I've lost nothing and gotten great tax breaks and hard work. Even two of my team leaders are ex-convicts. I wouldn't put them in those positions if they weren't worthy of my trust."

## Sidebar

### Misconceptions About Hiring Ex-Cons

- 1) **They'll bring trouble and baggage** – O'Leary says it's just the opposite: "They screw up at all and they go back to prison. They want to use this job as a springboard, not have it send them back to the life they're trying to escape."
- 2) **They'll have poor attendance** – O'Leary points out that the prisoners have had a much better collective attendance than his average worker. "They're the first ones volunteering for overtime, too."
- 3) **They won't be respectful of authority** – "Ex-cons are some of the best listeners I've ever seen," says O'Leary. "The prisons put them in programs that have them highly skilled for the job. They take pride in their work because good work is rewarded in prison."
- 4) **They have to be constantly supervised** – "I've got two ex-cons supervising others. They're used to having to be accountable for their actions or suffer the penalties."