



Work in progress

A history of drug addiction isn't the ideal preparation for the job market. Yet it doesn't have to be an albatross either. **Tara Craig** reports on the path to finding work for recovering drug users.

'Skills shortage' comes a close second place to 'credit crunch' as a phrase beloved – and overused – by the media. But despite the lack of talent in the British workforce today, employers are still running shy of hiring those with a history of drug use. And the irony is that, while they are rejecting these applicants, they may well be unwittingly harbouring established staff with similar problems.

Former or recovering users have a host of issues that can hamper efforts to find – and keep – work. In emotional terms, many suffer from poor self-esteem. They may have moved away from home, alienated from their family and friends, with little of a support network. They will almost certainly be lacking in role models within the world of work.

Many will fail at the interview or even application stage, struggling to get beyond employers' preconceptions. Drug worker Gina points out that female ex-users face even harsher and more ingrained preconceptions – "employers assume that they have been working girls". Gina says that ex-users have been asked at interview about previous convictions, although legally this shouldn't be brought up until the reference stage of the application.

In terms of education and work experience, the majority of long-term users will have been caught up in the world of drugs while competitors for work were plotting their career moves. They are likely to have literacy and numeracy problems, and will have issues adapting to work structures such as hierarchies and time-keeping.

Ex-users keen to find work may rush into employment within months of becoming clean, only to find their enthusiasm backfiring on them. Those on methadone programmes are particularly vulnerable. While the methadone will reduce their chances of overdosing, it may restrict their ability to think with emotion or to feel empathy for colleagues and clients – a real problem in the harm reduction sector to which so many ex-users gravitate. At a logistical level, methadone collection times may conflict with working hours.

Drug worker Andy Zapletal is convinced that only total abstinence will work and that those on methadone programmes are not fit for work. Zapletal also notes that there is a much broader range of work available to those who are abstinent. One of his key concerns is that while taking NVQ courses in substance misuse is an effective route into the workplace for ex-users, it may be too easy a route, encouraging people to begin studying or working before they are ready.

For many ex-users the harm reduction sector is their only option – this is their area of expertise. But Gina points out that even here their background can be a hindrance. Ironically, users are as susceptible to preconceptions as non-users – some refuse to have an ex-user as their case worker.

Organisations working to get ex-users, among others, into long-term employment, argue that there is potential for them to move into more mainstream work. According to Susie Maley, director of programmes and implementation, Business Action on Homelessness (part of Business in the Community), "the big employers tend to be pretty sanguine about employing ex-addicts".

She adds: "We have worked with a number of ex-addicts, and that has never been a reason for rejection. The only time their history of addiction will stop them from getting a job would be if key workers decided that they weren't ready for work, that they hadn't been clean long enough." Key workers help clients declare their convictions and addiction issues – employers are made fully aware of the situation and history. Once in the workforce, clients are allocated a 'job coach'.

How much information about past drug use has to be revealed at interview stage? Employment law expert Yvonne Gallagher says: "The Disability Discrimination Act excludes drug addiction from the scope of its protection and so employers are allowed to

ask questions relating to a current or former addiction. But employers should be aware of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, which allows individuals to refuse to supply information in connection with spent convictions. Individual consent is always required if copies of medical records are required. North London-based charity LEAP (Local Employment Access Projects) aims to help the disadvantaged develop "the skills and motivation needed to supersede their circumstances and fulfill their potential". LEAP courses focus on 'soft skills' – those which define how they interact with other people – and graduates are matched with vacancies at partnering organisations, often key players within the retail sector.

Chief executive Tunde Banjoko believes that LEAP's courses are ideal for ex-users: "It's the characteristics of ex-users that make it hard for them to find and keep work – the stresses and strains of work often lead them to revert to familiar coping mechanisms. But when helping our course graduates into work, we don't promote their 'weak points' – we tell employers about our experiences with these people. We emphasise that they are good people who have gone through a period of unemployment."

Those on methadone programmes are particularly vulnerable.

Mark Johnson, himself a recovered addict and now a special adviser to both the National Probation Service and the Prince's Trust, set up tree surgery business Treewise (which has since been sold) in 2000, with the intention of employing as many former and recovering addicts as possible. Johnson is convinced of the business sense of employing users, and mentions addressing delegates at a recent conference for government human resources professionals.

"I said to them: 'How many of your staff do you really know? How many of them binge drink at weekends? How many of them smoke dope? Your risk assessment doesn't cover that. But I can give you ex-users with criminal records – you know their history and you can manage the risk'."

"Employing an ex-user is like employing two people – they are on time, responsible, and very, very grateful." He feels that ex-users are being penalised for their honesty – discriminated against for having a history that other employees may have been able to keep hidden. His advice to ex-users is to learn how to spend a day at work, and to understand that they have to start somewhere, that their dream job won't appear automatically.

Dean Stalham is arts co-ordinator with the Koestler Trust, a charity working to promote the arts in prisons. A crack cocaine addict until beginning a prison sentence in 2004, Stalham now works full-time and is a published playwright. He believes that support and openness are essential to a successful move into work for anyone with a history of drug abuse. "Luckily for me, I have support, friendship and understanding in the workplace – without those, who knows? You have to be open with your colleagues. You have to gain their trust – and never abuse it. One step back and the situation could spiral out of control".

Opinion is divided as to whether ex-users stand a fair chance of finding, and keeping, gainful employment. While it does seem to be possible, much will depend on the achievements of the ex-user prior to their drug usage. And becoming part of the workforce will involve considerable commitment on the part of the ex-user – ideally, complete abstinence, well-managed expectations and a great deal of willpower. Above all, support networks are needed, and long-term support in particular, whether from job coaches, friends, counsellors or employers.

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