

# Clean Sheet: From Prison to Employment

*Experience shows that ex-offenders make good employees, with a very wide variety of talent between them. **Christina Williams** outlines the work of Clean Sheet, an organisation that invites offenders and ex-offenders, as well as employers, to join as members. The Clean Sheet Team encourages and trains the ex-offenders to enable them to find employment with the employer members.*

The cost to society of reoffending is in the region of £15 billion per year. Nearly half of adults (48%) are reconvicted within one year of release. For those serving sentences of less than 12 months this increases to 64%. Employment for ex-offenders is one of the key drivers in reducing reoffending, with individuals between a third and a half less likely to reoffend if they have a job. With over 11 million people in the UK with a criminal conviction, supporting these individuals into work is not yet

mainstream practice among all employers in the UK. Clean Sheet works to change that and already has a national network of over 140 employers that break down the stereotypes and support ex-offenders into employment. The charity supported 312 members into work in 2018.

*“I have been offered a really amazing job at an NGO. I went for a different job but during the interview they ended up asking me if I would*

*consider a better opportunity based on my skills and unique experiences. As soon as I left the building I burst into tears. This has been one year to instantly forget but ... I’m going to be on a really good wage and doing very interesting human rights work ... It’s funny because I counted today that I had applied to 614 jobs since January the 3rd. I had 24 replies, 3 interviews ... I cannot thank you enough for your continued support and advice. For someone like me who tried to forget the mistake I made over 18 years ago,*



Virgin and many employers recognise that ex-offenders make good employees

Photo: Photo: NatWest

*it's reassuring to know that not everyone is judgemental"* (A Clean Sheet Member, on finding work after a year-long search).

The job-hunting process can be gruelling. Putting yourself out there, time and time again, not knowing if this will be your future employer or one of many more interviews that lead nowhere. It takes perseverance to build yourself up and have the confidence to keep applying for jobs in the face of repeated rejection. Yet for Clean Sheet Members, in addition to going through the trying process of finding work, they face the added stigma that is associated with being an 'ex-offender'.

Some of our Members join us while they are still in prison, approaching release. Others join us from the community, and some do so after many years of fruitless searching for employment. They have been unable to find a job due to society's perception about what it means to have a criminal conviction. One Member said *"Needless to say... I'm at a loss for words. When I think back to where I was 12 months ago... heck, even 3 months ago. I genuinely wondered if I would ever find permanent work"*.

Clean Sheet is focused purely on supporting ex-offenders into work, so our work has an immediate and ongoing impact on individuals and the wider society. We want to see people released from the cycle of reoffending, through employment and social reintegration.

In Isaiah 58: 6-12<sup>1</sup> the Lord calls us to "set the oppressed free... share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter". We are called to serve, as Jesus did, and "not to turn away from your own flesh and blood". It is not for us to condemn our brothers and sisters, but to build them up in love as Christ has loved us. This is the

Christian motivation for our organisation. While the work that Clean Sheet does is not openly evangelistic, it is still transformational.

There is of course the obvious financial benefit of having an income; being able to pay for a roof over your head and food on the table. However, this alternative route to earn money means that someone who has been to prison does not have to re-offend in order to provide for themselves, which ultimately leads to a reduction in crime, fewer victims and a safer society. A job provides stability and a routine, a new sense of identity – either in being the breadwinner for the family again, or through the specific nature of the job. There is a sense of achievement every day when someone can go to work and can use their skills and develop new ones. The social aspect of a job cannot be underestimated either. To have a new circle of accepting colleagues and friends, and to feel part of a community once again can be life-changing. *"It has been a godsend and has changed my life entirely, I feel I'm a person again. I feel I'm worthy, an individual, a provider, an employee and somewhat accepted (though not fully) by most people and society"* (Clean Sheet Member).

That is why Clean Sheet was founded in 2010. We are an independent national

charity, based on Christian values, with one simple purpose – to offer people with criminal convictions the hope of a better future by finding real, permanent employment.

Work-ready serving prisoners and ex-offenders are referred to Clean Sheet from our existing partnerships with prisons and community-based criminal justice organisations. Our criteria are very simple. Members must have a conviction and be ready for work. Once they complete our

Membership Module, we establish contact with the Members in the community and allocate their log-in details to our secure online Employers Directory. They can start to apply for work straightaway with the help and encouragement of the Clean Sheet Employment Team.

Our Employment Team supports our Members one-to-one with phone calls and emails. They get to know our Members and help them search for work that matches and reflects their skills. Our team form genuine relationships with our Members. They are not there simply to tick boxes and help them find work, but to encourage them and help to build their confidence – reassuring the Members that there are employers out there who will value their skills and ultimately, that there is hope.

*"Through the help you gave me, the hope you inspired... You can never understand just how much it means to me and what a shining light your whole team was when I needed it more than ever"* (Clean Sheet Member). This quote epitomises how our team genuinely cares for each of the Members whom they support. Alongside the encouragement and advice, our Employment Team Advisers also help the Members to search for opportunities on our national Employers Directory, with over 140 employers sharing their current vacancies.

So, what is a Clean Sheet Employer?

A Clean Sheet Employer is an organisation which believes that everyone deserves the opportunity to start again with a clean sheet. They put this belief into practice by agreeing to actively consider Clean Sheet Members for employment, within the law, the terms of the individual's licence and their own Recruitment Policy.

Some of our Employers are already very proactive in their approach to hiring people with convictions; and registering with Clean Sheet extends the reach of their offer to our

## **'We want to see people released from the cycle of reoffending'**

Members, letting them know that they can apply without their conviction being a barrier to their application.

However, for other employers, this might be the first time that they have actively considered employing someone who has a previous conviction. In this instance, we can offer additional support and share their vacancies with Clean Sheet Members in a tailored way to best suit their application process. Recently, we are seeing more businesses approaching us wanting to be proactive in hiring people with convictions and to share their vacancies with our Members. We could not help people in the way that we do without the support and inclusion of our Clean Sheet Employers. It is exciting to collaborate and further break down the stereotypes, supporting more people with convictions into long-term employment.

### Why should I become a Clean Sheet Employer?

The benefits to being proactive in considering applications from people with convictions go so much further than Corporate Social Responsibility and showing that as a company, you care. While this is so important, and we are truly encouraged by the growing number of businesses who

join us each month, there is also a strong business case to be made.

92% of inclusive employers say how their approach has enhanced their reputation and value as a brand, leading to a direct increase in income as a result. People with convictions are grateful for a second chance and the opportunity to prove themselves; thus they become hard-working, loyal employees. So not only has this approach helped to win new contracts, but because staff retention rates increase, employers spend less money on recruitment costs and training new staff.

Our Members are also incredibly skilled and the array of different employers we have across all industries reflects the variety in the range of skills and abilities that Clean Sheet Members have. Just recently Members have secured jobs working in catering, warehousing, engineering, customer service, construction and administration, to name just a few.

Being open-minded and looking past the stereotype opens your company up to a vast talent pool of skilled individuals to whom you might otherwise not have access. Not only does this go some way towards addressing the skills shortage that a number of industries are currently facing, but these individuals could

have exactly what you are looking for in a new team member. One of our Employers comments on his experience of hiring a Member:

*“We have been pleased by the way he has rapidly become part of the team [here]. He has been prompt and reliable, happy to work on any task, be it in the warehouse or on the road, and gets on well with his co-workers. In summary, he has quickly become an asset to the company, and we look forward to developing his skills with us over the coming months.”*

There are people who could become an ‘asset’ to your company too if given the chance. Whether you are a small family-run business or a national organisation, registering as a Clean Sheet Employer is a proactive step that you can take to enrich your business as a whole and make a real difference in someone’s life.


To learn more about how you can get involved, please visit the Clean Sheet website at [www.cleansheet.org.uk](http://www.cleansheet.org.uk) 



Photo: Clean Sheet

1 Isaiah 58: 6-12 (NIV) “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness[a] will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. 12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”



**Christina Williams** is the Business Development Manager at Clean Sheet. She develops relationships with both existing and new employers on a local, regional and national level, to increase the employment opportunities available to Clean Sheet Members. She also meets with Clean Sheet’s partners, regularly representing the charity both inside prisons and in the broader business community.