

A critical appraisal of the experiences, barriers and misconceptions which surround the recruitment and employment of prison leavers amongst UK SMEs in the midst of labour shortages

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1. Introduction

The UK has challenges in the Labour market, from both aspects of supply and demand, however, it is the supply of labour, which is getting the most focus, due to the fact that throughout the last four years the labour supply has shrunk, recording its lowest growth since the 1990's (Wilson, 2024). The shortages have been created because of several events. Labour shortages have a vast and far-reaching impact on the economy as well as organisations; struggling to fill customer orders, whilst showing care for their employee's health and wellbeing (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, CIPD, 2023). The UK Government's spending is partly funded by taxes from individuals and is determined by the number of individuals in employment, and a reduction in these taxes will mean the UK Government have less to spend on public services (Stobierski, 2021). Additionally, organisations are struggling to meet customer demands and some staff are feeling overworked, a consequence of labour shortages, which is causing individual stress and anxiety, which has now culminated in the UK having the highest rate of workplace sickness absence for over a decade (Christian, 2023). Organisations and the UK Government are using a number of different approaches to address the challenges that labour shortages create, such as raising the base pay for workers and utilising creative methods of recruitment (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2021). Two organisations who have adopted creative methods of recruitment are Timpson's and Greene King. Ten percent of Timpson's workforce has been recruited from Prison Leavers (PLs) (Timpson-group, 2024) whilst Greene King in 2022, committed to recruiting 300 PLs by 2025 (Greene King, 2024).

Given that the UK is in the midst of a labour shortage, this research will explore the barriers that are preventing SME employers from exploring PLs as a source of labour. Building on the researchers pre-existing professional network, the results of this research will be presented at various HMPPS recruitment open days to provide recruiters and organisations with valuable information when considering the potential employment of PLs.

2. Literature

Labour market shortages is not an issue that can be owned by any one group, such as the Government or Employers, however, it is imperative that all parties involved in finding a solution to the shortages, work together to overcome these challenges, as the Labour market is extremely important to the economic growth of the UK as well as the communities where the organisations are based (Stewart

and Reid, 2022). Whilst the UK has challenges in the Labour market, from both aspects of supply and demand, it is the supply of labour, which is getting the most focus, and with good reason; between 2020 and 2023, the labour market has shrunk, recording its lowest growth since the 1990's (Wilson, 2024). Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, Economic Inactivity and NHS waiting lists, have been highlighted as a main contributor to the labour shortage challenges (CIPD, 2021). Gutierrez (2023) found that the introduction of Diversity and inclusion policies targeted at recruitment and retention can have a positive impact on organizational performance, which is why companies and managers must consider switching to a more diverse and inclusive workplace and invest in diversity management to bring about many positive outcomes for the organisation. However, The Open University (2023) suggests that employers aren't investing in specific groups, including the underrepresented, and if employers continue to overlook these groups, they are missing out on recruiting a rich source of hidden talents. One form of an underrepresented group that organisations can access to support them to overcome some of their labour shortages is PLs. According to research undertaken by Working Chance (2023), employers across all sectors are seeing the benefits of hiring individuals with a criminal conviction and the number has doubled to 24% of all employers, an increase from 12% in 2016.

Working Chance (2023) also suggests that hiring PLs, makes sense for employers on so many levels. They state that it's very positive for the business, the individual, their family, and wider society due to the reduction in re-offending. The research undertaken by New Futures Network (NFN, p3. 2023) supports this and suggests that organisations can become more diverse and inclusive, save money on recruitment costs, and recruit great talent due to the variety of skills and experiences that exist amongst PLs. However, despite this, there is still a number of barriers present, with the most prevalent being; stigmatisation, the PLs have a criminal conviction, the PLs will re-offend whilst in the workplace, it will damage the organisations brand / image, it will impact the organisations liability insurance, the nature of the offence that has been committed and that other employees will be fearful of the PLs in the workplace (Working Chance, 2022). Given that the UK is in the midst of a labour shortage, this research will explore the barriers that are preventing SME employers from exploring PLs as a source of labour.

3. Research Objectives

To demystify the stereotypes, stigma and misconceptions which surround the recruitment and employment of PLs, via the creation of a step by step framework for SME employers to follow when considering employing individuals with experience of the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

4. Research Methods

The researcher will be following the interpretivist approach as it is best suited to the creation and meaning of knowledge gained through the experiences of individuals within their social settings (Saunders et al, 2023). Interviews will be conducted with three different groups; SME employers who have experience of recruiting PLs (n=6), SME employers who are considering the employment of PLs (n=6) and individuals who have 'lived experience' of the CJS (n=6). Interviews will be structured differently to establish a process to capture the experiences, feelings, and emotions of each group, with the overall objective being the capture of rich data.

5. Practical importance of the study

The hope is that on conclusion, the research will help to minimise the stigma and misconceptions that are held by certain individuals in relation to the recruitment of PLs into their organisations, whilst

supporting others who may not have considered this type of recruitment before, to understand a process as well as the benefits of tapping into this rich source of labour.

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