



John Walker / The Fresno Bee

Mandingo Cain, left, executive assistant with Electronic Recyclers of America, jokes with plant manager Anthony Borges, as they walk through the Fresno plant Thursday. Cain had spent most of his teen years in and out of the juvenile justice system, but was able to turn his life around with the help of his current employer.

Doin' (full) time

Fresno business owners give former convicts a second chance for practical and altruistic reasons.

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

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The tattoo on Jason Carter's throat reads: "sober."

It's a badge of honor for the recovering drug addict and former prison inmate.

Unfortunately, most employers don't see it that way.

"They would take one look at me, and they didn't want to hire me. They didn't want me dealing with the public," said Carter, who spent nearly a year looking for a job after being paroled from state prison in 2005.

"I went everywhere, but no one would give me a job."

That is, until Carter met John Shegerian, a Fresno businessman with a zeal for making money, creating new ventures and giving people a second chance.

Shegerian's Electronic Recyclers of America is among several Valley employers willing to risk hiring people with prison records. Shegerian and others like him say they do it for altruistic and practical reasons.

"I tell CEOs and company presidents, 'Don't be scared. The people who are truly interested in turning their lives around will become some of your best employees,' " Shegerian said.

"They are on a mission to prove something, to prove that they can succeed."

Although employment experts say the number of employers hiring convicts is not growing significantly, the low unemployment rate, coupled with federal and state hiring incentives, could make it more attractive.

"I think we are on the cusp of things beginning to change," said Denise Ost, vice president of operations for Goodwill Industries of San Joaquin Valley.

"This is really an untapped labor market. And as the unemployment rates go down, employers are fighting over fewer and fewer employees."

Goodwill Industries works with 92 prospective Valley employers willing to hire former prisoners, many of whom have been convicted of drug-related charges.

"Employers tell us: 'Just give me someone who is reliable and will show up for work. We will teach them the trade or the skills they need,'" Ost said.

At Valley Hardware in Fresno, finding workers has been difficult. A help-wanted ad in the Fresno City College newspaper yielded just one phone call and one interview.

The Blackstone Avenue hardware store has better luck working with several social service agencies, including Goodwill, Poverello House and Fresno Rescue Mission.

Owner Agnes Braicich, who has hired ex-prisoners for more than 15 years, said it's also a good thing to do: "If we don't help people who have been in trouble, then they are going to be in trouble again."

Nationwide, public officials have been trying to make it easier for ex-prisoners to be hired. The reason: People with jobs and a steady income are less likely to wind up back in jail.

In California, about 120,000 people are paroled every year, state officials said.

Two years ago, San Francisco passed a law allowing applicants for public sector jobs to not disclose a history of criminal convictions. The measure passed, despite concerns from victims' rights advocates.

Other cities have similar laws, including St. Paul, Minn., and Chicago. The city of Fresno does not.

Employers who hire parolees are also eligible for tax credits from the federal government worth up to \$2,400. The credit is claimed during the employee's first year of employment.

California's Prison Industry Authority, the Department of Corrections and PRIDE Industries are doing their part -- holding forums throughout the state to talk about the benefits of hiring former prison inmates.

The Roseville-based PRIDE Industries creates jobs for people with disabilities and helps teach nonviolent parolees the skills they need to re-enter the work force.

Bill Sessa, spokesman for the Prison Industry Authority, said his agency also provides several vocational programs, including carpentry and underwater welding for inmates.

Graduates from the state's carpentry program qualify for an apprentice program with a Northern California carpenters union.

The PIA has a similar agreement with the city of Los Angeles.

Last year, of the 90 carpentry program graduates, about three returned to prison on parole violations.

"To us, it underscores the fact that one of the keys to rehabilitation is stability -- of having a home and a job," Sessa said.

"If they get those, they are two steps ahead in what they need to get their life turned around."

At Shegerian's southeast Fresno recycling plant, about a quarter of the 200 employees are either ex-gang members or have served time in state or federal prison.

The operation recycles up to 7 million pounds of electronic equipment a month and is a leader in the industry.

Shegerian's work in hiring former inmates and former gang members landed him a spot on Gov. Schwarzenegger's 10-member advisory council for the newly created Office of Gang and Youth Violence Policy.

He preaches the virtues of hiring ex-offenders to anyone who will listen.

"You don't have to hire 50, just open your doors to one or two. If more people did just that, it would make a difference," Shegerian said. "Just like I told the governor, we are leading the way in recycling electronics, and we want to lead the way in recycling lives."

Mandingo Cain, Shegerian's executive assistant, spent most of his teenage years in and out of the juvenile justice system in Oakland. But most wouldn't know it. He now dresses in a business suit.

"I lived the street life," Cain said. "The only thing I was headed toward was a life in prison."

Cain eventually broke away from his thug lifestyle and moved to Fresno, where his wife's sister lived. He got a job as a dishwasher at the former Bulldog Brewing Co., a restaurant created by Shegerian.

"He gave me a chance, and I worked my way from a dishwasher all the way up to chef," Cain said. "And now I am a father with three children and a licensed minister. I tell people who work here that you can turn your life around. It is possible."

Shegerian places a great amount of trust in his employees. Along with Cain, one of Shegerian's key people at Electronic Recyclers is assistant plant manager Jesse Gonzalez, who served three years in state and federal prison.

Like Carter, he spent more than a year looking for a job.

"I don't think people understand that it is hard to change if you don't have a job," Gonzalez said. "It is too easy to go back and do what you were doing before."

Even advocates like Ost at Goodwill admit that hiring parolees is not for every employer. It has to be the right fit.

"Obviously you are not going to place someone who has a problem with theft in a position where they are unsupervised and have access to a bunch of stuff," Ost said. "You have to look at the employer and what job are they looking to fill."

And not every convict succeeds. Some don't work out.

At Electronic Recyclers, some hires have been failures.

"You can't rehabilitate everyone," said Anthony Borges, plant manager. "They have to show a willingness to change, and sometimes that doesn't happen."

On average, however, Borges said the turnover rate for ex-prisoners is lower than the company's general employee population.

Still, not everyone is ready to hire ex-inmates. One of the biggest issues is liability: Employers don't want to hire an ex-inmate and have something happen.

Ost suggested that employers look to Goodwill and other organizations like it that work with ex-offenders for hiring guidance and support.

Larry Willey, owner of Willey Tile in Fresno, said trust is a huge issue. His family-owned company has employed as many as 10 ex-offenders in a staff of more than 100.

"Trust is something you gain around here," said Willey, a former Madera County sheriff's deputy. "And we are cautious. But I can tell you this, the people I have here I would put in my own home or my mother's home. And if I am unwilling to do that, then they won't be working for me."

Kathy Bray, president of Denham Resources in Fresno, has worked with Hope Now For Youth to help troubled youths find jobs. And while she admits there are risks involved in hiring ex-offenders, there are also rewards.

"Truth is, it does take a leap of faith on the part of some employers to hire someone who has been in trouble before," Bray said. "But people also see the bigger picture. If you want your business to grow and prosper, that can't happen in a community with a huge gang problem. This isn't just someone else's problem."

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Clifton Romar, an ex-offender who works at Electronic Recyclers of America in Fresno, sends computer monitor and TV tubes down the recycling line Thursday. The company's owner, John Shegerian, is among several Valley employers willing to risk hiring people with prison records. Shegerian says hiring ex-convicts can help them turn their lives around.



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John Shegerian, CEO of Electronic Recyclers of America, right, with plant manager Anthony Borges, back right, talks about hiring ex-offenders, such as assistant plant manager Jesse Gonzalez, left, and Jason Carter, commodities coordinator.



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Jesse Gonzalez, sitting in his office overlooking the plant Thursday, served three years in state and federal prison and spent more than a year looking for a job before being hired at the recycling plant.