

field note *devah pager*

blacks and ex-cons need not apply

Jerome entered the local branch of a national restaurant chain in suburban Milwaukee. He immediately noticed that he was the only black person in the restaurant. An employee hurried over to him, "Can I help you with something?" "I'm here about the job you advertised," he replied. The employee hesitantly nodded and went off to produce an application form. Jerome carefully filled out the forms, which included checking the box marked "yes" in answer to the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" He was given a math test and a personality test and then instructed to wait for the manager. The manager came out after about 10 minutes, looked over Jerome's application, and frowned when he noticed the criminal history information. Without asking any questions about the conviction, the manager started to lecture: "You can't be screwing up like this at your age. A kid like you can ruin his whole life like this." Jerome began to explain that he had made a mistake and had learned his lesson, but the manager cut him off: "I'll look over your application and call if we have a position for you." The expression on his face made it clear that he would not be calling any time soon.

Jerome could have been any one of the hundreds of thousands of young black men released from prison each year who face bleak employment prospects as a result of their race and criminal record. Except in this case, Jerome happened to be working for me. He was one of four college students I had hired as "auditors" for a study of employment discrimination. His assignment was to apply for entry-level job openings throughout the Milwaukee metropolitan area, presenting himself as an ex-offender some of the times. For each job opening, a second black auditor also submitted an application, presenting equal educational qualifications, work experience and interpersonal skills. Everything was the same in the two cases except for the criminal record, which Jerome and the other auditor alternated presenting weekly. This one detail made a decisive difference.

After those applications in which Jerome reported a criminal record, Jerome was about one-third as likely to receive a call-back for an interview as was his equally qualified partner who presented no criminal record. Based on these results, a black ex-offender would have to apply for an average of 20 job openings to receive just one call-back—and that's just for an interview. Getting to a job offer would require still more effort and good fortune.

At the same time, I had a second pair of auditors—white students—applying to a separate set of job openings. The contrast between their outcomes and those of Jerome and his partner was striking. A white auditor who reported no criminal record was more than twice as likely to receive a call-back than a black auditor with no record. Indeed, the white applicant with a criminal record was more likely to receive a call-back than a black applicant without any criminal background. I was shocked that race could present a barrier to employment as large or larger than that of a criminal record, especially in light of the widespread belief that discrimination is a thing of the past (see "Is Job Discrimination Dead?" *Contexts*, Summer 2003).

I was not the only one dismayed by these findings. Though I did not discuss the study's results with the audit teams, they were well aware of how their reception varied by race and how it changed when they rotated into the criminal record condition. One of the auditors reported early on feeling discouraged and frustrated that he had received very few responses from employers. As a successful, bright, African-American college student, "becoming" a young black criminal was an extreme change, and the difference in treatment he received seemed to take a toll. With experience he (and the others) grew more comfortable with their assigned roles and became

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better at playing their parts, but it was clear from these initial responses how much even impersonal rejections can undermine self-confidence and motivation.

The white auditors were also sensitive to the treatment they received when they played an ex-offender, though in different ways. For John, it was the first time he had experienced direct discrimination. He was surprised that one characteristic could make such a big difference in how employers viewed him, and his reactions contained a mixture of disappointment and disbelief. Though for the most part John moved easily through the application process, he once mentioned that he felt “irrationally bad about [him]self” when he checked off the conviction question. He knew what employers were thinking of him, and he could not help but blame himself at the moment.

In all of my planning for this project, I had not appreciated how taxing these daily exposures would be for the auditors. I had expected to find that a conviction record and race made a difference, but I didn’t anticipate how the dismissive glances, the curt responses, and the invidious comparisons with peers made the discrimination so blatant. Beyond inequalities in employment outcomes, I saw that seeking work itself demanded differing amounts of effort and stamina depending on one’s profile.

Seeing the way these interactions undermined the self-confidence of my testers made me wonder what this experience must feel like for actual job seekers with disadvantages. Unlike my auditors, these people do not get paid to endure discouraging encounters and fruitless job searches, they do not get to share their frustration and seek support in daily briefings, and their experience is not limited to a six-month project. The psychological toll this can take on a job seeker, I came to understand, is dishearteningly heavy. For my testers, it was something they wrestled with and learned from. For real disadvantaged job seekers, it presents yet another obstacle to employment that they must overcome. ❧

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