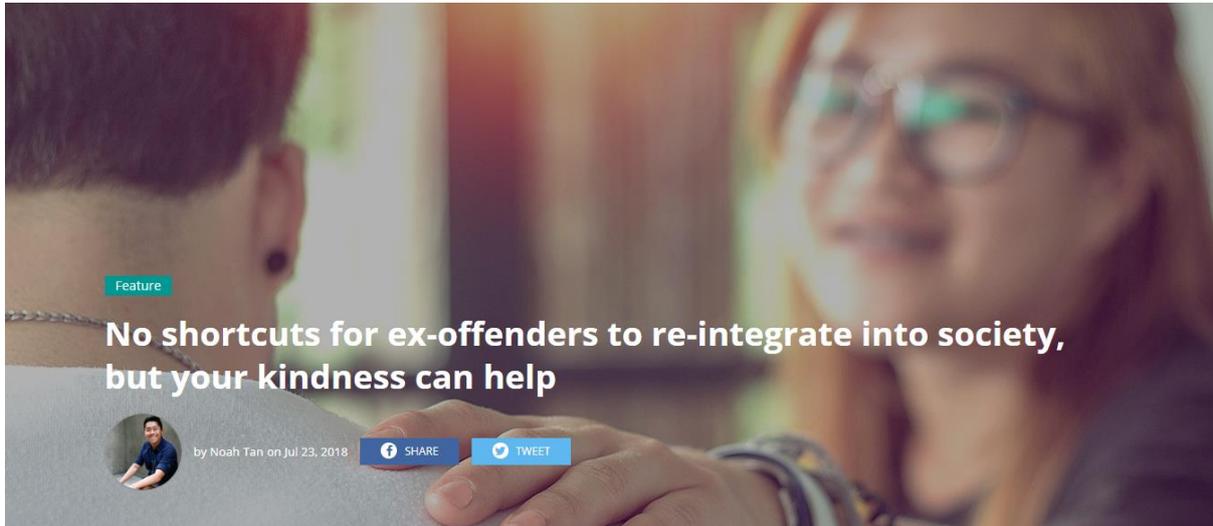


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With a wife and six-year-old son to support, Justin knew that it was important he got a stable, full-time job quickly.

Armed with a diploma in facilities management, Justin started sending out his resume to prospective employers in the hopes of landing at least a management role in the industry.

Five months and 36 rejected job applications later, Justin remained unemployed. And, with his bills mounting, he was growing desperate.

Text:

No shortcuts for ex-offenders to re-integrate into society, but your kindness can help

By Noah Tan

For Justin (not his real name), the first six months following his release from prison in 2015 was tougher than anything he had to go through during his five-year incarceration for smuggling.

With a wife and six-year-old son to support, Justin knew that it was important he got a stable, full-time job quickly.

Armed with a diploma in facilities management, Justin started sending out his resume to prospective employers in the hopes of landing at least a management role in the industry.

Five months and 36 rejected job applications later, Justin remained unemployed. And, with his bills mounting, he was growing desperate.

"It got to a point where I dreaded waking up in the morning, because then I would have to open my emails just to find out that my applications had been rejected or ignored," Justin told The Pride. "My wife had to work part-time to help with our monthly expenses, and I had to borrow money from my family and friends in order to get by. It wasn't a good feeling, but I had no choice.

"I was very demoralised...I felt inadequate as both a father and a husband. I told myself that I was unable to get a job because the job market was bad, but at the back of my mind, I wondered if my (criminal) record was preventing me from getting a job."

For a brief moment, Justin was tempted to go back to a life of crime in order to earn some quick and easy cash. He even considered a lucrative job offer which involved smuggling contraband items into Singapore.

However, Justin eventually decided against taking up that offer as he "didn't want to let his family down a second time".

On the advice of a family friend, he decided to temporarily lower his career expectations, and started applying for junior-level jobs instead.

This change in tack proved effective – within a month, Justin found a job at an SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) as an operations and facilities executive.

"The pay wasn't as high as I had hoped for initially, but it provided me with a stable income," said Justin. "In fact, if I was careful with how I spent money, I was even able to save a bit every month."

Determined to give his family a better life, Justin worked doubly hard at his job, and proved himself to be one of the best employees in his company. As a result, he was promoted to a supervisory role and given a healthy increase in salary – barely a year after joining the company.



Today, the 36-year-old is a senior facilities manager, a proud father of two – his daughter was born late last year – and a successful example of how ex-offenders can re-integrate into both the workplace and in society.

However, the challenges Justin faced following his release from prison remain common for many ex-offenders.

From struggling to get a job, to being unable to reconnect with their families and friends, to feeling left behind by societal and technological advances, there are a myriad of possible pitfalls that could derail an ex-offender's attempts to re-integrate into society.

As such, ex-offenders should not think that the process of re-integration will happen overnight, says Elvis Overee, the deputy director of ISCOS (Industrial & Services Co-operative Society Ltd), a social co-operative that helps ex-inmates and their families.

"It's very common for somebody who's been in prison to take some time to adjust back to society once they're out," Overee said. "There can be many reasons why an ex-offender might fail to re-integrate, and it might then lead them back to a life of crime.

"Nonetheless, we will still support that individual no matter how many times they falter, because we believe there will eventually be a point of change for them."

One of the biggest challenges ex-offenders often struggle with following their release is securing a job they want. While it is not impossible for them to do so, Overee cautions against setting their expectations too high.

"A lot of ex-offenders want things very quickly, and more often than not, they'll compare themselves to other ex-offenders who might be holding a good job with high pay," Overee explains.

"So, our advice is that firstly, ex-offenders should manage their expectations, and secondly, try and see the positive side in situations. Thirdly, we always tell them to take up any job which can help them get some basic income first, because that's important for survival and will help to ease any financial burden or worry.

"Finally, we tell them that securing their ideal job is not impossible – with hard work, a willingness to learn and upskill, as well as possessing a good work attitude, they can work their way up to a job they desire."

Overee, however, admits that it is normal for employers to adopt a more "wary mindset" when they come across an ex-offender, especially if they have not dealt with one before.

But he insists that these fears and worries are uncalled for, and suggests that "encouragement and motivation" is generally the most effective approach to take when working with an ex-offender.

"Through our experience, a lot of ex-offenders require motivation, and if you provide them with that, they can perform to the fullest of their potential," Overee says.



"If I'm an ex-offender, I'd likely think that people would look down on me and adopt a defensive attitude. However, if I feel appreciated, then I'd naturally want to give more to the company."

Ultimately, though, for ex-offenders to be truly re-integrated, kindness and understanding would be required from all facets of society.

"It's very important to extend kindness to ex-offenders because we believe every touch point with them is crucial," says Overee. "Each experience they have when meeting someone – be it neighbours, family, friends, or the man on the street – will shape their lives and paths towards reintegration.

"It's a collective effort, and by helping ex-offenders, you're helping not just them, but their families as well. Therefore, it benefits society as a whole. They've paid their dues for the mistakes they made. It's a new start for them, so let's treat them no differently as we would anyone else."

For Justin, the unconditional support and kindness he received from his friends and family during his lowest point following his release from prison was crucial in helping him turn his life around.

"I think my life would have turned out differently if my friends and family shunned me after I got out (of prison)," he mused. "Instead, they supported me in so many ways...emotionally, financially...it provided me with the foundation for me to start anew.

"There was no judgement or suspicion. I couldn't find it in myself to let them down again after the kindness they showed me. In fact, their support gave me the motivation to succeed in life so I can thank them properly in future."

To find out more about how ISCOS are supporting ex-offenders and their families, visit their website [here](#).