

## A different kind of job rejection

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Job hunting around the holidays carries with it extra challenges and huge doses of frustration for everyone.

But for a guy like Joe, a client, job hunting anytime is like the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology. He was the guy condemned to repeat for eternity the endless task of pushing a boulder up the mountain, only to see it roll down again.

You see, Joe has the additional barrier of a criminal record when he applies for work, something that represents more of a psychological deterrent to hiring for most employers than a hard skill deficit. Every time Joe applies for a job, he is pushing a boulder up a mountain in the form of a criminal record, often to see it roll down again and force him to start over.

The reality is that ex-offenders like Joe must overcome that additional obstacle merely to obtain a job interview. An obstacle that has nothing to do with job skills, attitude or employability, but has everything to do with a form of discrimination based on the negative stereotype of anyone cursed with a criminal record.

"Having a felony on your record is like having the mark of Cain on your forehead," says [Harvard University](#) sociologist [Bruce Western](#) in his book "Punishment and Inequality in America," from 2007.

Several weeks ago, Joe, a man in his mid-40s, came into our office looking for work again. He had been released from prison in August and his frustration level, caused by numerous job rejections, was growing. The unspoken reason for the rejections, in Joe's mind, was clear: the two years he spent behind bars for drug possession.

"I made a mistake," he says, "and I paid for it. Now all I'm looking for is a second chance and a job to prove myself."

My colleague, Stephanie, found a job opening online at a hotel in Stamford. She called the manager and persuaded him to take a look at Joe's resume, which emphasized his excellent communication and customer service skills as well as his impressive personal appearance.

Joe spoke briefly by telephone with the manager and he said he was looking forward to meeting Joe. The manager told Stephanie he would get back tomorrow to schedule an interview once Joe had completed the online application.

When he left the office, Joe was smiling. Maybe this would be his time to shine. Perhaps he had finally found an employer who would put aside the stereotype and judge him on his current abilities and attitude, not his past.

A day later, Joe walked into the office. Still smiling, still upbeat. The telephone rang. Stephanie answered it. It was the hotel manager.

"I'm sorry," he said, "But the corporation has a policy against hiring people with a felony record."

Stephanie looked at Joe and softly delivered the bad news.

"I'm sorry, Joe," she said. "But don't worry, we'll find something else. I promise."

Joe stared at Stephanie and then looked down at his hands. He stared at the opposite wall. The glazed look in his eyes reminded me of the "thousand yard stare" of soldiers who had seen too much combat.

Then slowly, tears began to form at the edges of his eyes. He buried the face in his hands and cried quietly for several minutes until he could regain control of his emotions.

Have you ever seen a grown man cry? It is the most excruciating experience you can imagine. It's like looking at the final moments of a head-on car accident -- you want to look away but can't.

We both tried to reassure Joe that we would find an employer willing to hire him, that tomorrow was a new day, and not to give up hope. But I doubt that he heard any of it. He stood up, all six feet three inches, nodded, smiled faintly and left.

As I sat there watching Joe melt down, feeling helpless to stop his pain, I wished that hotel manager who had rejected him for that job could be sitting next to me, witnessing this man's pain.

Note to employers: The next time you reject an ex-offender without granting him the opportunity to interview for a job, take a moment to consider the human being behind the job application and the consequences of that rejection.

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