



A fresh start

Barnsley-based concrete specialist Cidon Construction has developed a close working relationship with HMP Thorn Cross

A sector of the community desperate to find gainful employment and an industry crying out for new recruits... Can ex-offenders and construction help one another?

Paul Thompson reports

Construction has a recruitment problem. From boardroom to building site, the industry is desperately short of staff at all levels. Even in these testing times of pandemic, demand for skilled trades and labour on projects up and down the country has remained as strong as ever.

There is a host of reasons behind this dearth of skills but principally the construction industry has found it increasingly difficult to find new talent capable of filling the gaps left by those choosing to leave the sector – which is why construction companies cannot afford to dismiss any source available to them to bolster the workforce.

With programmes aimed at convincing school and college leavers that construction is an exciting and viable career choice working alongside moves to attract and train ex-service personnel for roles on building projects, the sector is increasing its efforts in attracting newcomers to the industry.

But there is a potential recruitment resource that one South Yorkshire-based contractor thinks construction is in danger of missing out on, to the detriment of both the industry and individuals.



Ex-offenders have a difficult time acclimatising themselves to the outside world and ridding themselves of the social stigma of having spent time in prison. The likelihood that they will get sucked back into a life of crime is statistically high.

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Cidon operations director, Steve Simpson

But give those ex-inmates an opportunity to develop a skillset, earn a decent wage and feel positive about their place in society, and the outlook starts to improve.

Steve Simpson, operations director at Barnsley-based reinforced concrete specialist Cidon Construction, is more than happy to help prisoners through their rehabilitation process. He is a proud advocate of the recruitment of ex-offenders and has put Cidon's money where his mouth is by taking on more than a dozen full-time staff members direct from prison.

"These are people who have made mistakes, there's no getting away from that, but that doesn't mean they should be written off. They have done their time. Often all they want is an opportunity to prove themselves. They have all been vetted for their suitability. We have absolutely no regrets about taking any of them on," he says.

One of the reasons behind Simpson's glowing recommendation of ex-offender recruits is the improved retention or 'churn' rate between those that have served their time and others that are recruited by other more conventional means.

"We have looked at different areas for recruitment but the ex-offender route has comfortably outstripped others. We don't want cheap labour; we want skilled trades and we are prepared to train and support those we take on in other areas of their lives to do that. More often than not they respond to that loyalty by staying with us," says Simpson.

This outperformance is witnessed across other contractors. Willmott Dixon has been working on helping ex-offenders find full-time post-custodial employment since it first dipped its toes into working with 'at risk' young people a decade ago. It too has witnessed a substantial reduction in drop-out rates across its catalogue of placements and training regimes for prisoners compared to other areas of recruitment.

"The likelihood is that these people will be long-term unemployed and there are challenges because of that. These are people that might never have held down a full-time job but the chance of a definable career path can help them move beyond their past life," explains Sarah Fraser, head of the Willmott Dixon Foundation – an organisation set up by the contractor in 2011 to "guide, monitor and collate the social and community investment activities" of its people.



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CIDON SAYS DON'T PRE-JUDGE

In the 20 years since its inception concrete specialist Cidon Construction has looked at various options to help staffing levels keep up with growing demand for its services across the north of England and Scotland.

School leavers, long-term unemployed, ex-servicemen and even a tie-in to help support ex-rugby league players have been part of the Cidon recruitment regime.

"We have gone down several avenues with varied levels of success," says director Steve Simpson. "I was sitting in traffic when an article about recruiting ex-offenders came on the radio and I thought 'why not?'"

With the bulk of Cidon's work being across Manchester and the north west Simpson was put in touch with HMP Thorn Cross in Cheshire via offender training and placement organisations Tempus Novo and Seetec.

Workshops run at Thorn Cross aim to get inmates reaching the end of their sentences ready for the challenge of holding down a full-time job on release. Together, the prison and Cidon have been able to assess a potential employee's attitude and suitability by working with them on site through a Release on Temporary Licence.

To date 12 ex-Thorn Cross men have gone on to full-time employment with Cidon. The immediate money-earning potential, plus the opportunity to build a long-term career has seen a placement with Cidon as something of a badge of honour, according to HMP Thorn Cross governor Daniel Cooper.

"Some of these lads have been in the prison system for a long time. They have families they need to support and so earning a decent wage is very important to them. Some of them will never have had the opportunity to build a career before," says Simpson, who claims that handing them that opportunity helps build a bond of loyalty between both employee and employer.

"They are really loyal lads. They have made a mistake, they know that. They also realise that we have shown faith in them that others have not. It doesn't work out every time unfortunately but that can happen regardless. Our work with Thorn Cross is proving very successful," he says.

► Figures on reoffending do not make pretty reading. According to prisoner charity the Prison Reform Trust almost half of adults – 48% – are convicted of another offence within one year of their release. Government data suggest that adults released from shorter custodial sentences have a reoffending rate of around 60% over the 12 months following their release.

But offer prisoners the opportunity to develop useful skills while in custody – and provide them with a true career pathway – and those numbers improve dramatically. Figures from the Ministry of Justice indicate that ex-offenders in employment are 9% less likely to commit further crimes. The downside for everyone is that just 17% of released offenders are in employment a year after completing their sentences.

And with the annual cost to the Treasury of reoffending at around £15bn, there are obvious financial incentives, on top of the societal benefits, to cut those numbers.

The Prison Service's New Futures Network (NFN) helps businesses and prisons develop partnerships to ensure offenders and potential employers are well matched. It is just one part of the government drive to improve the reoffending rates and the associated costs.

Daniel Cooper is governor at HMP Thorn Cross, a men's open prison and Young Offender Institution in Cheshire which has developed a close working relationship with Cidon Construction through the NFN. The collaboration has seen a dozen or so

inmates reach the end of their sentence and move straight into full-time employment (see box pg45).

Cooper explains that the training and education he provides at Thorn Cross is a vital factor in the successful reintegration of his inmates:

"By the time prisoners reach Thorn Cross they are nearing the end of their sentences and have been thoroughly risk assessed," he says. "This is their last stop before release and there is more of a 'college' approach built around encouraging the men to use their initiative and make full use of our facilities. In the minds of prisoners getting to an open prison is an achievement. This is their first step back into the real world and it is an important one."

For some of those prisoners that step represents their first real opportunity to build a career away from criminality. The importance of that is not lost on Simpson:

"It is important that we are able to offer them a viable career path. They have never had that. We don't try and dress anything up. When they come to us they will be working as labourers but once they are with us we want to find their ideal role in the organisation and offer them training to get to that point," he says.

But providing inmates with the skills to embark upon a new career is only part of the process of reintegration. It is when they are away from the construction site that ex-offenders are likely to need more support from their employer than other new recruits. The concept of a regular income and its

management can be alien to them and they can often encounter difficulties finding appropriate accommodation or transport.

Sarah Fraser recalls her first visit to a prison to deliver a workshop:

"I had my preconceptions completely blown away. These were people who from a very young age had been exposed to criminality, often through no fault of their own, and had developed skills to cope with that environment. I soon realised they would be more than capable of learning new skills," she says.

Skills development aside there is a more prosaic reason for companies to look at recruitment from prisons. Taking on more ex-offenders can help contractors meet Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) targets.

"It is definitely an area that clients are starting to ask about," says David Doherty, director of Bristol based construction recruitment specialist Options Resourcing. "We find that clients are looking at ex-offenders as part of their CSR commitments."

For Simpson and the Cidon team it is a little simpler than that:

"We need to sing about the positives these schemes bring rather than worry about the negatives. Hopefully, businesses will see just how well it has worked out for us and ex-offender recruitment will spiral on the back of it. But if we manage to persuade just one more company down this route I will consider that a success. It's about doing what is right for people." ■



Chief executive Rick Willmott speaks at the opening of Willmott Dixon's dedicated dry-lining academy at HMP Elmley in Kent