**8 - “A critical appraisal of the experiences, benefits, barriers and misconceptions which surround the recruitment and employment of prison leavers amongst UK Employers in the midst of a labour shortage”.**

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**Introduction / Literature Review**

The United Kingdom (UK) is in the midst of a recruitment crisis, with a large number of employees struggling to fill vacancies and fulfil production and service quotas in order to meet customer requirements. These recruitment challenges, if not overcome, can negatively impact an organisation’s brand and profitability and in the worst case, render them no longer able to operate. (CIPD, 2023).

According to the British Chamber of Commerce’s (2022) quarterly recruitment outlook, 82% of organisations reported recruitment difficulties in quarter 4, compared to 76% in quarter 3, which suggests the recruitment challenges are worsening for organisations.

There is a number of key reasons for the UK labour shortage, one of which being that the labour market has recovered faster and outstripped the available labour supply since the end of the pandemic in 2021, which has led to organisations throughout the UK competing for talent in a tight labour market (House of Commons Library, 2023).

In addition to the reason highlighted, there is a number of other causes that are having an impact and aiding the recruitment crisis.According to the ONS (2022), in quarter 3 of 2022, the number of economically inactive people with a long-term illness surpassed 2.5 million for the first time. One potential issue that could be supporting the rise in this number is the waiting lists within the National Health Service (NHS), meaning people have to wait longer to see a doctor or have surgery. Impacting, the overall length of time they are unavailable to work. Ironically, the waiting lists are partially caused by the recruitment crisis within the NHS, due to the service struggling to recruit enough doctors and nursing staff to meet the needs of their patients (Royal College of Nursing, 2022).

Early retirement is also cited by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2022) as a contributor to the recruitment crisis.Their research suggests, that there was an increase in retirement due to a large number of older workers suffering from ill-health, increasing their wealth due to the absence of spending opportunities during the pandemic, and the move to remote working which they suggest, did not suit older workers due to a lack of socialisation.

Brexit has also been highlighted as a main contributor to the labour shortages problem. The House of Commons Library (2023) suggest that new immigration rules post-Brexit may have exacerbated the situation.Brexit brought an end to the free movement laws that allowed labour to move freely between EU states. When the UK left the EU in 2019, this no longer applied and now means that an EU citizen wanting to work in the UK, would have to apply for a visa.

As a result of operating within a tight labour market, UK employers are having to adapt and change their approach to recruitment practices in order to remain competitive.One such approach is to recruit Prison Leavers (PLs), who have already left or are about to leave the Criminal Justice System (CJS).There are currently 86,602 individuals being held in 122 prisons spread throughout England and Wales as of the end of July 2023 (Gov.uk,2023).On average, there is 60000 PLs released each year from the CJS, and currently only 19.8% (11880) of these individuals will enter employment by the end of 6 months from their release (Gov.uk, Justice data, 2023).This means that 80.2% (48120) PLs are still without employment at the end of the first 6 months of leaving the CJS.Therefore, it could be suggested that the outlook for PLs gaining employment is rather bleak, However, with the current annual cost of re-offending in the UK being £18.1 Billion (UK Parliament, 2022) and the rate of re-offending amongst adult PLs standing at 25% (15000, based on 60000 leaving the CJS) (ONS,2023), it is evident that more work needs to be done to bring the HMPPS and employers closer together to provide successful outcomes for PLs attempting to gain employment upon or within 6 months of their release.

There is a host of benefits as a result of recruiting PLs and applying due diligence throughout the process and working closely with the HMPPS.According to Working Chance, (2023), 92% of organisations that currently employ PLs, have cited that this recruitment initiative has helped to enhance their reputation, helped them to win contracts, and even awards (Working Chance, 2023).

According to Working Chance (2023) in the last six years, the proportion of employers who would not hire someone with a conviction has reduced significantly, from half to just over a quarter. However, despite this, there is still a number of barriers present, with the most prevalent being; the PLs have a criminal conviction, the PLs will re-offend whilst in the workplace, it will damage the organisations brand / image, it will impact the organisations liability insurance, the nature of the offence that has been committed and that other employees will be fearful of the PLs in the workplace (Working Chance, 2022a).

Despite some organisations believing that a PL may re-offend whilst in the workplace, no such evidence exists, (Working Chance, 2022a), but there is lots of research that suggests that employment is one of the surest ways to prevent PLs from re-offending (Gov.co.uk, 2023).

**Research Objectives**

Recruiting PLs has a number of benefits for organisations (Working chance, 2023), but there still seems to be a number of misconceptions that exist for employers which is preventing them from tapping into this valuable resource, despite some of them struggling to recruit staff.

Therefore, the aims of the research are,

To explore UK employer’s experiences of recruiting and employing prison leavers. To examine the actual and perceived benefits and barriers amongst UK employers with regards to the recruitment and employment of prison leavers To critically engage with the misconceptions which surround the recruitment and employment of prison leavers, from the perspective of both, employers, and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

To create a framework / briefing paper, for employers, that can be utilised to inform the process of the recruitment and employment of Prison Leavers

**Research Outcome**

This research project will provide employers and the HMPPS with valuable information that will allow them to understand each other’s needs, when supporting PLs into gainful employment.The framework will allow organisations to follow a clear pathway, when recruiting PLs and help them to address any concerns or misconceptions that they may have in this area.

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