

# Overcoming Criminal Convictions

For many people who are just out of incarceration or have a record of criminal convictions and are applying for a job, the most difficult part is facing the question on job applications and in interviews, “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” Or, if an employer needs someone with your energy and skills, he may say, “I see that you checked ‘yes’ on the felony question. Can you please tell me about that?” What will you say? Whether you are answering the question on the application or during an interview, your choices are the same. It’s easy for an employer to check out your background, so it is in your best interest to be honest.

## Step 1: Own it.

Take responsibility for your actions. Show the employer you are owning up to your behavior. Placing blame on someone or something else (“It wasn’t my fault...” or “I didn’t know...”) is the worst thing you can do.

Suggested openers could be:

- “In the past, I made some bad choices.”
- “In the past, I made bad judgments.”
- “In the past, I made a bad decision.”
- “In the past, I did something I shouldn’t have.”

Next, very briefly (no more than 2 sentences) explain what the conviction was for.

## Step 2: State the positive changes you have made since the conviction, such as:

- Completed GED
- Completed a Critical Thinking Skills course
- Paid restitution
- Participated in counseling or treatment
- Maintained aftercare

## Step 3: Talk about new goals you have and how that part of your life is over.

- “I now have new goals in life.”
- “I’m very focused on establishing a successful career.”
- “I’m moving forward and am willing to work hard to make it happen.”
- “I can’t undo the past, but I learned from it and won’t repeat the same mistake.”

## Step 4: Move on...and talk about your qualifications for the job.

- You are there because you are trying to get a job, not to talk about your past.
- Talk about what qualifications you have related to the job (examples: welding skills, construction experience, computer knowledge, bookkeeping background).
- Tell the employer what other skills you possess that would make you a good employee (examples: team player, can get along with people, can follow directions, will show up for work as scheduled and on time).

## Step 5: Once you get the job...

- Word may get out that you are an ex-offender. Stay professional—never discuss your past with fellow workers.

**Don’t lie • Don’t give details • Don’t get defensive • Don’t volunteer information  
Keep answers brief and to the point!**

*Information compiled from ND Dept. of Corrections and MN DOC Adult Offender Pre-Release Handbook  
Job Service North Dakota is an equal opportunity employer/program provider.  
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