

Second Chances in Hospitality: Analyzing the Employment Prospects for Rehabilitated Offenders

Purpose—Although the unique job characteristics of the hospitality industry present opportunities for the inclusion of rehabilitated offenders, which bring societal and economic benefits, this area remains underexplored in the hospitality literature. This study addresses this gap by examining the factors influencing the employment of rehabilitated offenders and analyzing the conditions under which their employment can be successful.

Design/methodology/approach—The research framework transitions from broad to specific. Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study conducted interviews with expert panels, including representatives from the government's correctional services; senior hotel managers; and academics in criminology, sociology, and hospitality management.

Findings—The study indicates that senior managers generally support hiring rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry primarily due to labor shortages. However, perceived reoffending risks vary across departments. Criminology and sociology experts analyzed these findings, identifying conditions for successful employment in hospitality.

Social implications—Socially, the findings highlight the potential for the hospitality industry to play a crucial role in the reintegration of rehabilitated offenders, thereby reducing recidivism while promoting social inclusion. This scenario can lead to a more inclusive society where individuals with criminal records are given a second chance to contribute positively.

Originality/value—This study identifies challenges in employing rehabilitated offenders and examines managerial perspectives. It transitions from general observations to specific insights from senior managers and academic experts, enriching the understanding of career dynamics, human capital, and labor markets in hospitality. It also offers practical guidance for integrating and recruiting individuals with criminal records.

Keywords: Rehabilitated Offenders, Hospitality Employment, Stigma, Desistance

1. Introduction

The prospect of integrating rehabilitated offenders into the workforce is emerging as a potential alternative to labor market dynamics, especially within the hospitality and tourism industry. This sector, known for its dynamic and labor-intensive nature, is currently experiencing severe labor shortages, a problem exacerbated by global disruptions (Magnini et al., 2024). The American Hotel & Lodging Association revealed that in the United States, 87% of hotels report insufficient staffing levels, with housekeeping positions being the most severely understaffed at 43% (McKinsey, 2023). Similar trends have been observed in Europe, with countries such as Spain and Greece relying heavily on tourism facing workforce shortages (euronews.travel, 2022). The World Travel & Tourism Council has addressed this issue, stating that despite the 6.6 million job openings in the tourism sector, labor shortages will likely persist for nearly 11% of the sector, equating to roughly one in every nine jobs remaining unfilled (WTTC, 2021). The ongoing labor shortage could be linked to attributes inherent to the industry's work environment, including chronic working, low pay, seasonal contracts, and the challenge of dealing with disgruntled customers (Kwok, 2022). However, this challenge also has potential. This study paves the way for the exploration of untapped labor resources, specifically for rehabilitated offenders.

A rehabilitated offender refers to a person who has been convicted of a crime and has undergone a process of rehabilitation (McNeill, 2012). This term signifies more than simply depicting an ex-offender released from prison. In the context of criminal justice, rehabilitation encompasses various methods aimed at reintegrating offenders into society by fostering personal growth and transformation (Burke et al., 2018). Hence, rehabilitated offenders seek to address the root causes of criminal behavior, offering those who have made mistakes a second chance to lead productive and law-abiding lives (Burke et al., 2018). The literature mentions numerous potential benefits of hiring rehabilitated offenders. From a societal perspective, rehabilitation programs focusing on education, therapy, and skill development have been proven effective in reducing reincarceration rates (McNeill, 2012). Such programs not only benefit individuals but also contribute to a decrease in crime rates, benefiting society as a whole. From a business standpoint, hiring rehabilitated offenders can have a positive impact on the economy. Their hiring can boost productivity and employment rates and foster inclusive environments that mirror the societies in which businesses operate (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). Additionally, employing rehabilitated offenders can be viewed as an act of social responsibility, demonstrating a commitment to providing individuals with an opportunity for redemption and contributing to societal betterment (Burke et al., 2018; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; McNeill, 2012).

Despite the various potential benefits of employing rehabilitated offenders, this aspect remains underexplored in the literature, especially within the realm of hospitality. Existing research predominantly explores the general barriers to employment faced by rehabilitated offenders, such as trust, security, and societal stigma (Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019; Young & Powell, 2015). Typically, employers express skepticism regarding the reliability of rehabilitated offenders when their duties involve handling money or the property of guests. These concerns are heightened by the possible risk of reoffending (Visher et al., 2005). Businesses also concern themselves with the possible repercussions for their public image once their practice of employing rehabilitated offenders becomes widely known (Khasni et al., 2023). Despite this possibility, the employment

of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality sector remains an intricate issue that warrants further investigation.

Despite the challenges of overcoming common stereotypes, the hospitality industry's unique job characteristics offer opportunities for the inclusion of rehabilitated offenders in the workforce. This industry stands out from many others due to its much lower entry barriers concerning professional knowledge or specialized educational backgrounds (Kwok, 2022). This approach is particularly applicable for entry-level positions such as housekeeping attendants, bell services, restaurant waitstaff, or kitchen cooks. A notable example of this practice is the Clink Restaurant, a special dining venue that functions as a social enterprise within prisons (Gebbels et al., 2021). Prior research has demonstrated how this restaurant has successfully integrated offenders into its staff, assisting them in acquiring operational skills and experience in hospitality operations (Harkison, 2023). The success of this model is also reflected in positive customer reviews posted online (Gebbels et al., 2021). While these studies shed light on this alternative employment model, only a few scholars have explored the functioning of similar or other operations within the hospitality industry that might employ rehabilitated offenders. This research gap leads researchers to a critical question: How would employers across different positions within the hospitality industry approach this possibility?

In this context, this study delves into the viewpoints of diverse hotel managers regarding the employment of rehabilitated offenders. The research aim is to decipher the intricate factors that either hinder or facilitate the employment of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry. With government approval for the Correctional Services Department (CSD) participation, the research used a three-stage data collection method involving the following: (1) CSD specialists; (2) senior hotel department managers; and (3) academics in criminology, sociology, and hospitality management. The process began broadly with the first panel and narrowed study based on feedback from subsequent panels, ensuring a thorough examination from general practices to specific concerns. Given the labor shortages and limited research, the study contributed to scholarly debates and offered insights for policymakers, industry leaders, and social service organizations on reintegrating rehabilitated offenders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Recruitment of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry

The literature on the employment of rehabilitated offenders within the hospitality sector is notably limited. The majority of existing studies primarily address the general employment obstacles that imprisoned offenders face rather than focusing on industry-specific hurdles and opportunities. In general, research has discussed the stigma associated with criminal records, biases from employers, and the absence of supportive structures as major barriers to employing incarcerated individuals (Fahey et al., 2006; Khasni et al., 2023; Stacer & Roberts, 2018). However, in the hospitality industry, the personal interaction inherent in service roles can intensify these challenges, underscoring the necessity for research tailored to this industry (Fahey et al., 2006; Khasni et al., 2023). For instance, Flake (2015) investigated employer attitudes within the hospitality sector

toward hiring rehabilitated offenders, citing employment discrimination. The study stated that a hotel might be justified in refusing to hire a room attendant with a theft-related conviction, given their access to guest rooms and frequent unsupervised work. Commonly, early research highlighted the hesitation among employers in hiring individuals who were previously incarcerated.

Contrary to previous research, recent studies have presented supportive views of such employment in the hospitality industry, specifically in catering operations (Gebbels et al., 2021; Harkison, 2023). These studies underscore the operational success and favorable customer feedback for restaurants and cafés that have adopted this approach. In such cases, Gebbels et al. (2021) conducted an analysis of online customer reviews for The Clink restaurants, a series of training restaurants located within four U.K. prisons and managed by the Clink Charity. Their findings showcased the transformative impact of the rehabilitation process on the attitudes and lives of prisoners. Although The Clink restaurant is not a hotel component, its success within the hospitality sector demonstrates the viability of employing rehabilitated offenders. This study thereby explores whether such potential for employment could be expanded to other departments within hotels. However, a gap exists in the literature regarding how hotel employers in various positions perceive and approach this potential opportunity.

2.2 Considerations of employing rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality workforce

The integration of rehabilitated offenders into the hospitality industry is multifaceted and involves traversing past experiences, present circumstances, and future prospects. Regarding the history of rehabilitated offenders, stigma theory examines the negative labels and stereotypes that can be attached to individuals based on certain attributes or past behaviors, such as criminal records (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). The literature indicates that the crime category (e.g., illegal substances vs. violent offenses) and criminal versatility (i.e., the number of different types of crimes committed) significantly influence the degree of stigma they encounter (Moore et al., 2016). This stigma, stemming from the past, can profoundly impact an individual's employment prospects; this case is particularly true in the hospitality industry, which places a high value on trustworthiness and customer relations (Gebbels et al., 2021). However, the literature has not yet addressed how the diverse functions of the hospitality industry and how employers might vary in their concerns regarding stigma.

Apart from past records, employers consider present circumstances and future prospects, as illuminated by desistance theory. This theory focuses on the cessation of criminal behavior and the personal and social factors that contribute to an individual's decision to cease offending (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Desistance theory elucidates how employers expect rehabilitated offenders to transition from a criminal mindset to a postrecruitment desistance mindset. In the desistance process, employment has been identified as a pivotal element, offering not only a lawful, stable income but also a sense of structure, purpose, and social integration (Matthews et al., 2020). For instance, DC Central Kitchen, a community organization that runs a culinary job training program to assist individuals facing employment barriers, has demonstrated how this training facilitates cognitive transformation from criminal behavior to operational productivity (Matthews et al., 2020). As suggested by desistance theory, the hospitality industry, with its array of entry-level

positions and diverse on-the-job training, can be particularly conducive to desistance (Kwok, 2022; Lyons, 2006). From the present-time perspective, rehabilitated offenders may discover avenues for personal growth and positive social engagement in roles such as housekeeping attendants or bellhop. These positions enable them to acquire new skills, especially in customer service roles, where they have the opportunity to reshape their self-image via positive public interaction (Kwok, 2022; Matthews et al., 2020). Over time, the extended working hours of the hospitality industry can increase the likelihood of rehabilitated offenders distancing themselves from previous networks associated with criminal behavior. Incrementally, these individuals are more likely to sustain their productivity in the long-term future (Matthews et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of desistance theory, as viewed from the perspective of various hotel employers, is an area that warrants further exploration.

2.3 Rehabilitated offenders as human capital

Employers consider recruitment an investment in trust, with the belief that rehabilitated offenders can serve as a form of human capital that boosts productivity. The notion of human capital emphasizes the value of an individual's accumulated skills, knowledge, and experiences as assets that contribute to their own economic prosperity and those of their employers (Lochner, 2004). In criminology, according to a model of crime developed by Lochner (2004), empirical findings have shown that job training has a strong negative impact on recidivism. When applied to rehabilitated offenders, this theory suggests that their experiences, coupled with specific skills and vocational training obtained early in their employment, can make them valuable contributors to the hospitality industry (Gebbels et al., 2021).

Apart from the current ability of rehabilitated offenders to perform tasks, employers also consider their long-term performance. The concept of restorative justice provides insight into this perspective. The focus is on repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior through cooperative processes involving all stakeholders (Claes & Shapland, 2016). Although not entirely subject to employers, this concept offers a broader and longer-term perspective on the reintegration of offenders into society, including the role that employment can play in the restorative process (Claes & Shapland, 2016). In the context of the hospitality industry, employing rehabilitated offenders can be viewed as part of a broader restorative practice. Employee tenure fosters self-confidence in rehabilitated offenders, cultivates trust, and encourages the formation of friendships with colleagues (Claes & Shapland, 2016; Gebbels et al., 2021). This supportive environment remarkably aids in the personal restoration of individuals who have fulfilled their sentences and thus enhances the likelihood that rehabilitated offenders will remain productive (Gebbels et al., 2021; Lochner, 2004). Extensive research in criminology and sociology has demonstrated that the concepts of human capital and restorative justice have substantial implications for the employment of rehabilitated offenders. However, their combined application in the hospitality sector remains underexplored, indicating the necessity for further research to uncover this potential synergy.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology to deeply explore hiring rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry, acknowledging that departmental roles may influence managerial decisions. The qualitative method is essential for understanding individual perceptions, decision-making processes, and attitudes in their natural environments (Cresswell, 2013). This approach provides comprehensive contextual insights into how operational considerations, societal attitudes, and industry demands affect managerial decisions.

Grounded theory was chosen as the methodological framework to interpret perspectives on hiring and collaborating with rehabilitated offenders within the organization. Developed to formulate mid-level theories and elucidate social actions and processes (Charmaz, 2006), grounded theory helps understand perceptions, processes, and expectations related to hiring and working with rehabilitated offenders in different hotel positions.

3.1 Data collection

Prior to data collection, the researcher, who is also the author of this study, secured ethical approval from the university. Informed consent protocols were meticulously implemented to ensure the participants understood the study's purpose, the measures taken to protect their anonymity and confidentiality, the storage and use of their data, and the absence of associated risks. Participants were explicitly informed that their data would be securely stored and utilized exclusively for academic research purposes.

This study conducted in-depth interviews from April to July 2024, utilizing the progressive intention of three-stage data collection. Figure 1 provides a summary of the data collection framework used in this study. The specifics of each stage are detailed below.

Stage One commenced with the acquisition of approval from the Hong Kong government for the participation of the CSD. This department was instrumental in devising strategies for the long-term development of rehabilitative services for offenders. With the assistance of six officers from correctional institutions, the researcher undertook site visits to correctional institutions (i.e., prisons) for both genders. These visits served a dual purpose: they allowed for personal observation, aided in data triangulation, and prepared the researcher for a subsequent in-depth interview with the government representative, titled Superintendent. The Superintendent, who oversees all rehabilitation programs managed by the CSD, provided fundamental information concerning the general opportunities and challenges faced by rehabilitated offenders when seeking employment. This approach had set the groundwork for the next phase of data collection with hotel employers.

Stage Two involved collecting data from senior hotel employers with hiring authority across various positions and departments. To address interviewer biases and participant awareness, the author reviewed supportive and opposing studies to maintain neutrality and explained the research aims to mitigate social desirability bias. Key points were summarized before interviews to ensure no bias. Stage two participants were selected for their extensive experience (averaging two decades) and decision-making authority, ensuring relevant and authoritative insights. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used for the 25 participants. Table 1 details their profiles.

Stage Three focused on insights from academics, involving interviews with experienced criminology and sociology professors and scholars published in top-tier journals on human resource management and hiring offenders in the hospitality industry. Participants were presented with a summary of findings from the first two stages, providing a detailed understanding of the research journey. This process enriched the narrative, enhancing the understanding of complexities in employing rehabilitated offenders and providing a comprehensive basis for further analysis.

All interviews were conducted face to face in respondents' native languages. Each prison site visit and interview with the Superintendent lasted for roughly two hours, while interviews in Stages 2 and 3 were approximately one hour each. The data were gathered via carefully designed semi-structured interviews composed of open-ended questions. This format enabled the interviewer to delve deeper into the responses, granting interviewees the opportunity to share their experiences, a crucial aspect of applying a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). With the consent of the participants, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

3.2 Data analysis

This study applied the systematic analytic procedures of grounded theory, focusing on the perspectives of the three stages of expert panels. Figure 2 summarizes the data analytics process. Following the coding guidelines set forth by Holton (2007), the analysis commenced with detailed, line-by-line open coding of the interview transcripts. This initial phase of coding involved the following four critical steps: 1) identifying key elements within the data derived from the first round of expert panels, specifically those from the CSD; 2) interpreting the significance of these elements based on the specific terminology used; 3) developing categories to organize the data effectively; and 4) detecting any data voids that might indicate the need for further theoretical sampling in subsequent research phases.

After the open coding, the study progressed to focused coding to scrutinize and refine the initial codes (Charmaz, 2006). Leveraging the theoretical frameworks established in the literature on inclusive recruitment practices for rehabilitated offenders, the study employed the "axial coding" technique. This approach facilitated the identification of key themes, which in turn led to the delineation of the core categories that form the basis of the theory emerging from the data as outlined by Kendall (1999). These categories were constructed around various elements, including causal conditions (e.g., considerations in recruiting rehabilitated offenders), strategies (e.g., rehabilitation programs and on-the-job training), intervening conditions (e.g., stereotypes and stigmas), and outcomes (e.g., hesitancy and employment opportunities); accordingly, the conceptual model of the study is shaped. The axial coding phase utilized data from the first and second expert panels to elucidate the "why" and "how" and under what conditions and consequences the recruitment of rehabilitated offenders occurs.

Subsequently, selective coding was undertaken to refine and synthesize the categories identified in the earlier phases. This final phase of coding involved rigorous professional analysis by scholars in relevant fields, aiming not only to interlink the categories but also to delve into their attributes and dimensions, thereby crafting a comprehensive theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). This

scholarly validation ensured that the insights generated aligned with established theories. Following these meticulous steps, the subcategories were organized into broader themes as documented by Holton (2007). Table 2 presents the frequencies of these themes. Additionally, Table 3 illustrates the progression from open codes to axial categories, and ultimately, to core themes.

4. Findings

4.1. Stage 1 Findings of the CSD

The findings in Stage 1 included site visits to correctional institutions for both genders and in-depth interviews with government representatives. The Hong Kong government endorsed the CSD, which offers tailored rehabilitation programs to incarcerated individuals (CSD, 2022). These programs aim to aid in their rehabilitation and smooth reintegration into society as law-abiding citizens postrelease. One such initiative is the execution of the “Risks and Needs Assessment and Management Protocol for Offenders” (CSD, 2022). This protocol utilizes an evidence-based approach to bolster the rehabilitation of offenders. The protocol involves a thorough assessment of each offender, which then informs the deployment of targeted interventions (CSD, 2022). These interventions are intended to improve prison management and ensure that inmates are matched with rehabilitation programs that best suit their individual needs and circumstances. The CSD has rolled out a variety of vocational training courses to meet the career development needs of persons in custody. During the site visits, the researcher witnessed various vocational training facilities and courses available at correctional institutions that are in line with the CSD’s official information, covering the construction; business; and service industries, such as building services, offices, and commercial practice; and food and beverage services (CSD, 2024).

Despite the concerted efforts by the CSD to enhance the vocational skills of rehabilitated offenders, these individuals continue to face a myriad of challenges in their employment journeys. This issue was underscored by a male government representative who held the position of Superintendent during a comprehensive interview:

It’s really tough for rehabilitated offenders to find a job. A lot of employers are hesitant to hire them because they’re not sure if they can trust them. Employers often worry about the nature of the crime they committed in the past and whether they might reoffend. Moreover, job applications typically ask candidates to disclose any criminal history. Unfortunately, it seems [that] many employers tend to overlook applications with such disclosures.

While employers’ reservations are comprehensible, curiosity exists on any success examples the Superintendent might have experienced in such employment scenarios. The Superintendent then described the following:

Indeed, there’s been a longstanding reluctance among employers to hire rehabilitated offenders. But the tide is turning. The CSD has rolled out “Project JET,” a holistic program offering training and career growth for those in custody. It aims to inspire early future planning, unlocking their potential and fostering positive societal contributions. The project has been a success. A growing number of employers from diverse sectors are not just open to hiring rehabilitated offenders but are

also visiting prisons to lead training workshops. Additionally, the CSD has also set up the “Halfway House,” a residence for released offenders, enabling them to work or study during the day. In my opinion, the CSD has excelled in offering a well-rounded approach for rehabilitated offenders.

Apart from the general employment aspect, the Superintendent provided additional information on the current status of the rehabilitation program, specifically addressing the lack of employers within the hospitality and tourism sectors. He supplemented with the following details:

Despite the progress in the rehabilitation program, we’re facing a major obstacle, the insufficient backing from diverse employers. It’s rare to see employers from sectors like hospitality and tourism reaching out to participate in Project JET despite the immense potential for mutual benefits. A large portion of our rehabilitated offenders are young with a certain educational foundation. For instance, the social unrest in 2019 led to a substantial influx of radical individuals involved in crimes. These individuals, mostly first-time offenders, along with others who have committed more common crimes like theft or drug-related offenses, are typically minors and due for release soon. These individuals are keen to find stable jobs after their release, and roles in the hospitality and tourism industries would be a good fit for them.

When determining why the Superintendent sees potential in the hospitality sector for employing rehabilitated offenders, he reinforced his viewpoint with a concrete example:

When it comes to young offenders, the main factor they consider isn’t the pay scale, but the social standing and work conditions associated with the job. For example, we’ve encountered situations where employers from the construction sector, even with attractive salary packages, were turned down. This rejection stems from the offenders’ perception that a construction site job is tough and lacks respectability. Hence, I believe that jobs in the hospitality industry could potentially appeal to them given the industry’s perceived social status and work environment.

Overall, the initial findings from the CSD suggest that rehabilitated offenders are generally younger and less inclined to reoffend compared with repeat offenders. The hospitality industry, with its diverse roles and decent social status, seems to be a promising job market for them. However, employers in this industry have shown minimal active support for hiring rehabilitated offenders thus far.

4.2. Stage 2 Findings of hotel employers

4.2.1. *General findings*

The findings in Stage 2 reveal how hotel senior managers consider hiring rehabilitated offenders from their own positions. In the face of labor shortages, all respondents agreed that employing rehabilitated offenders could be a viable solution, provided that the applicants meet the basic job requirements. A general manager stated as follows:

Frankly speaking, the existence of a criminal record in an applicant’s history isn’t a hindrance in our hiring process. I, and all department heads, primarily focus on the abilities and potential of the applicants. We firmly believe that everyone can make mistakes, and it’s crucial for our society to provide second chances. (P1)

All interviewees expressed support for the employment of rehabilitated offenders. However, when asked regarding practical experience, all interviewees indicated a lack of examples. In addition, during the individual interviews, all interviewees lacked a clear distinction between “ex-offenders” and “rehabilitated offenders.” The initial research findings from Stage 1 with CSD were introduced at the beginning, and all interviewees acknowledged that this information was their first clear understanding of the matter. On this basis, all interviewees expressed a stronger belief in the potential of rehabilitated offenders. The hotel manager answered,

Initially, I wasn’t fully aware of the rehabilitation program offered by the CSD and had the impression that rehabilitated offenders were simply individuals released from prison. However, now I understand the distinction. Considering the nature of our work in the hotel industry, I see potential in hiring these individuals. They are young, possess language skills due to their educational background, and most importantly, even though I’m not fully aware of the specifics of their past offenses, I presume they aren’t of a severe or harmful nature. Therefore, I’m inclined to offer them a second chance. (P2)

Overall, senior managers support hiring rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry but lack specific near-term plans. They recognize the manpower shortage and the need for alternative labor sources, although attitudes vary across departments.

4.2.2. Attitudinal variations among job nature and offense type

Despite the overall supportive stance, respondents from various hotel departments have exhibited differing views on hiring rehabilitated offenders. These differences can be attributed to the following two factors: the type of past offense and the functions of the department. Concerning the type of offense, most interviewees (P4–6, P9–P11, P13, P15, P17, P20, P22, and P23) regard this aspect as a crucial consideration. For instance, an executive housekeeper described the following:

In our housekeeping department, the entry requirements are generally not stringent. We primarily look for individuals who are physically fit for the role, and prior experience isn’t a necessity. However, when it comes to hiring rehabilitated offenders, I am more concerned about their criminal records, specifically the nature of their offenses. For instance, if an individual has a history of theft, it would raise concerns for guests and our hotel reputation, given that housekeeping staff have access to guest rooms. Therefore, among various types of offenses, I’d be more inclined to hire someone whose offense was related to political protests or rioting, as these crimes don’t pose a direct risk to the nature of housekeeping work. (P10)

Similar concerns arise not only from jobs requiring direct customer contact and the potential impact on the hotel’s reputation but also from internal aspects. A reservation manager responded:

In the reservations department, our work doesn’t require handling guests’ belongings. As such, rehabilitated offenders who can effectively manage communication tasks, like responding to emails and fielding phone calls, would be considered for employment. However, I do have some concerns about employing male offenders with a past of sexual offenses, given that most of my team is female. It’s not an outright disqualification, but it’s something I would think over carefully.

If there's an urgent need for staff to hire such an individual, I would make sure to arrange the work schedule in a way that prevents a situation where he and a single female colleague are working alone. (P13)

Beyond the risk of reoffending and ensuring the safety of internal colleagues, employers consider the physical condition of rehabilitated offenders, which can be influenced by the nature of the crime they had committed. An engineering manager said:

In the engineering department, a certain degree of physical fitness is a requirement among colleagues. When I'm hiring rehabilitated offenders, I assess their physical capabilities and their ability to handle various physical tasks, as our work mainly involves facility repairs. Hence, I might not take into consideration applicants who have a past involving drug-related offenses, as they may lack the necessary physical fitness. (P15)

While most departmental managers consider the type of offense to be relevant to their job role and risk management, some departments, including the Food and Beverage Administration, do not share this level of concern (P8, P12, P18, P19, P21, P24, and P25). A restaurant manager stated the following:

As the person in charge of all front-line operations in our restaurants, I won't inquire about the nature of crimes committed by potential waitstaff during the interviews. This is because most tasks in the restaurant, such as welcoming and seating guests, serving food and beverages, and ensuring cleanliness, carry relatively low risk. Even though some roles involve handling cash, these positions are generally filled by more experienced colleagues who have proven their reliability over time. (P12)

In short, hotel employers carefully assess the job nature and the offender's past crime when considering employment. They are cautious if the past crime is related to the job role to ensure safety. However, they are more open to candidates whose offenses are unrelated to the job duties, recognizing the potential for rehabilitation and the value of second chances.

4.2.3. Broader considerations apart from the nature of job and crime committed

Senior managers in human resources departments and those in general management positions take a more holistic approach when considering the hiring of rehabilitated offenders. Their concerns extend beyond the specific relevance of the job and the type of crime the applicant is associated with to a broader perspective that includes cost and reputation (P1–3 and P5–7). Regarding cost, managers from both human resources and general management positions have expressed that the additional training required would be a factor to consider. A general manager expressed:

While I don't have prior experience in hiring rehabilitated or former offenders, I'm not opposed to the idea and believe it's a viable option. However, I anticipate that if we were to proceed, the hotel would need to invest more in training. This would include preparing managers and supervisors on how to effectively work with such colleagues. For instance, addressing potential stigmas, biases, or concerns would be crucial. We would need to strategize on how to eliminate these barriers. (P3)

Apart from financial considerations, the reputation of the hotel is a significant factor. Interestingly, opinions are divided into the following two groups: those in favor of and those against this approach. On the supportive side, numerous employers agree that hiring rehabilitated offenders positively impacts a hotel's image (P6, P10, P14, P19, and P23). A human capital manager mentioned that

While it may not be a common practice in the hotel industry, I view the hiring of rehabilitated offenders as a positive reflection on our hotel's image, and I believe it's something that should be publicized. I think that in today's world, most customers are knowledgeable and wouldn't instantly assume that individuals with a criminal past are bound to reoffend. This is similar to hiring employees with disabilities, a move that would boost our hotel's reputation and societal image. (P6)

Conversely, several strategic-level managers hold a less supportive view regarding hiring rehabilitated offenders, particularly in terms of public reputation or image. Employing these individuals was believed to lead customers to doubt their safety or speculate that the hotel had hired such individuals as a cost-saving measure (P1, P2, and P3). A general manager expressed that

I concur that not all rehabilitated offenders are likely to reoffend. However, I'm uncertain if our customers would share this understanding or if they might harbor negative perceptions. In my opinion, our society hasn't fully embraced the idea of employing such individuals, which is why their representation in hotel staff is relatively low. Compared to hiring staff with disabilities, who don't pose ethical or reoffending risks, I believe that promoting or publicizing the employment of rehabilitated offenders might not be the best course of action at this time. (P1)

In summary, senior management takes a comprehensive approach when considering hiring rehabilitated offenders, weighing job-related factors, financial implications, and potential impacts on the hotel's reputation. Opinions are nearly evenly split among managers, reflecting diverse perspectives and belief systems.

4.2.4. Rehabilitated offender potential

Beyond past criminal records, which are a major concern for most departmental managers, employers also evaluate the capabilities and potential future prospects of rehabilitated offenders. Several interviewees indicated that they do not expect applicants to master job tasks immediately, but they require at least a demonstration of a positive attitude (P1–7, P10, P11, P13, P14, and P17). A chief concierge indicated the following:

In the concierge department, the duties associated with bellhop and valet services are relatively straightforward. All that's required is the ability to handle basic English conversations, such as numerical communication for bellboys and a valid driving license for valet staff. Hence, my primary concern is their long-term commitment and any ongoing links to criminal networks. (P14)

With regard to the duration of employment, some employers place greater emphasis on the potential of rehabilitated offenders to perform various functions (P5 and P16–25). A director of human resources stated the following:

My focus would be more on the future prospects of the applicants. I realize that rehabilitated offenders differ from disabled staff who have physical or cognitive limitations. They've simply made past mistakes and it's a matter of whether we trust them enough to offer a second chance. I'm confident that they possess unique talents and, given employment opportunities and training, they can further develop these skills. Just like any other employee, they too can advance if they demonstrate good performance. (P5)

Most employers consider both the current capabilities and potential long-term contributions of rehabilitated offenders. They agree that by employing them, they have already extended their trust, and therefore, no specific monitoring practices exist for these employees. However, they concur that these individuals possess unique competitiveness, which further underscores the value of employment opportunities (P1–3, P7, and P11–18). A director of human resources echoed these views by detailing the following:

Currently, it's challenging to recruit staff, even with a competitive compensation package. The trend among young workers is to opt for "Gig" or "Freelance" roles over full-time employment, as they value flexibility, independence, and a balanced lifestyle. However, I believe rehabilitated offenders present a different scenario. Given their potential difficulties in securing employment, they are likely to be more committed to their jobs and thus have a lower turnover rate. (P7)

Briefly, the employment of rehabilitated offenders has its own potential, including their current capability and future potential as viewed from the hotel senior managers' perspective.

4.3. Stage 3 Findings of Academics

The findings from Stage 3 involved criminology, sociology, and hospitality management academics analyzing the employment of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality sector. Criminology and sociology experts investigated employment failures, while hospitality and tourism researchers studied success factors.

4.3.1. *Failed employment*

Professors specializing in criminology and sociology share similar opinions on the unsuccessful employment of rehabilitated offenders. These unsuccessful instances can be categorized into the following two aspects: initial hesitation by the employer and sustained employment over the long term. Concerning initial hesitation from employers, stigma, discrimination, and the risk of recidivism are the primary concerns. A professor in criminology and sociology elaborated the following:

Rehabilitated offenders frequently face stigma and discrimination in the workplace, particularly in the hospitality industry where such employment is uncommon. This reinforces negative perceptions. The main worry for employers is "recidivism," the likelihood of an individual reverting to criminal behavior. Given their limited exposure and references in this context, employers might exhibit reluctance in hiring rehabilitated offenders. Based on the data you've gathered through interviews, I'd plausible that some employers might initially display a supportive stance to avoid appearing prejudiced or stereotypical. However, upon further reflection,

they might reveal more reservations. Thus, rehabilitated offenders would receive prompt rejection when seeking jobs.

Another professor specializing in criminology identified an additional factor contributing to the failure to hire rehabilitated offenders, which emerges at a later stage after employment. This approach involves situations where ex-offenders initially perform without any issues but later succumb to the temptation or influence of their previous criminal networks, leading to reoffending and subsequent termination. The professor elucidated as follows:

Risk factors play a crucial role in sustained employment. They refer to specific traits or conditions that, when present in an individual, increase the likelihood of that person developing a disorder or engaging in criminal behavior compared to someone from the general population. For rehabilitated offenders, these risk factors may include relapse into criminal behavior, insufficient ongoing support, societal pressure, stigma, inadequate coping mechanisms, and unfavorable employment conditions. Understanding these risk factors thoroughly is essential for devising effective strategies that support rehabilitated offenders in successfully reintegrating into society and the workforce. Therefore, I would also recommend these considerations to hotel employers.

In essence, professors pinpoint two main obstacles in employing rehabilitated offenders: employer reluctance and job retention. Employer concerns include stigma, discrimination, and recidivism risk. Additionally, rehabilitated offenders may revert to criminal behavior due to various risk factors after securing employment.

4.3.2. Successful employment

Scholars specializing in human resource management and the employment of offenders within the hospitality industry have conducted an analysis to summarize the success of hiring rehabilitated offenders in this context. These findings have been analyzed from the perspective of hotel employers. An associate professor in the field of hospitality human resource management stated the following:

The hotel industry provides diverse positions suitable for rehabilitated offenders. Your findings show varying concerns across departments, suggesting multiple viable employment options for these individuals. Successful employment in this context requires collaborative effort from both sides. Hotel employers must identify roles that align with an individual's capabilities and preferences. Simultaneously, employers play a pivotal role in creating a supportive and unbiased work environment. This involves conducting sensitivity training for staff, enforcing robust anti-discrimination policies, and fostering a culture that appreciates diversity and embraces second chances.

Successful employment relies not only on employers but also on other factors. Another associate professor, who has also studied the topic of hiring offenders in the hospitality sector, agreed and offered additional insights based on the industry's characteristics:

In the hospitality sector, a robust team spirit and an all-encompassing strategy for integrating employees are essential. The process of transitioning into a new work setting can be especially daunting for rehabilitated offenders, which is where the concept of restorative justice becomes relevant. Restorative justice highlights the necessity of providing support and opportunities for

individuals to reintegrate into society in the long run. To aid this integration, it's vital to establish a well-organized support system involving various stakeholders, such as supervisors or team colleagues for rehabilitated offenders. This system could encompass regular check-ins to track their progress, the provision of training programs to bolster their skills, and the establishment of clear career advancement routes within the organization. These initiatives not only foster their personal growth but also enhance the overall efficiency and harmony of the team. Meanwhile, employers should be aware of the unique challenges rehabilitated offenders may face, such as societal biases and personal hurdles. To address these, flexible scheduling, mentorship, and open communication policies can be implemented. In the long run, a supportive environment benefits both employers and rehabilitated offenders.

Briefly, scholars have thoroughly analyzed employing rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry, from initial collaboration to long-term development. Sustained efforts to help offenders break free from criminal behavior are crucial for success.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Amid the hospitality industry's labor shortage, this study highlights the untapped potential of integrating rehabilitated offenders into hotel settings. It distinguishes rehabilitated individuals from those simply released from incarceration. The study begins by addressing general employment obstacles identified by CSD specialists, subsequently focusing on senior hotel managers' specific concerns. This study combines these insights with scholarly expertise by presenting a multifaceted view of the challenges and opportunities in assimilating rehabilitated offenders into the workforce. This comprehensive approach generates theoretical insights and practical strategies for the hotel industry during a critical labor deficit period.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Utilizing the grounded theory approach, this study offers various insights into the process of employing rehabilitated offenders within the hotel industry. The theoretical consequences of assimilating such individuals into the hospitality workforce fill a notable void in the current academic discourse. Research specifically targeting the employment of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality sector is limited, underscoring the unique value of this investigation (Gebbels et al., 2021; Harkison, 2023). By closely examining the industry's ability to incorporate rehabilitated individuals into its workforce, this study not only can enhance the limited existing knowledge on this subject but also pave the way for various extensions and advancements in related theories.

Consistent with stigma theory, this study reveals that a considerable proportion of hotel employers hold societal labels that negatively influence their decision to hire rehabilitated offenders. These adverse stereotypes, frequently linked with the apprehension of reoffending, imply that hotel employers anticipate these individuals to possess a greater propensity for recidivism (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). Rather than merely concluding stigma theory with its array of negative labels, this study's findings illustrate that such negative labeling manifests in varying degrees. For instance, the findings show that managers of housekeeping departments tend to be more concerned

of criminal records related to theft, considering the nature of their work. By contrast, some hotel employers from buffet restaurants or administrative offices express less concern regarding the type of crime committed, owing to the lower job relevance and associated risks. This nuanced understanding of stigma theory highlights the varying levels of concern among different departments, providing a more detailed picture of how stigma affects hiring decisions in the hospitality industry.

Going beyond the initial considerations of employers, this study delves deeper into the subject over time, focusing on both existing skills and future potential. This study contributes to desistance theory by underscoring the role of stable employment in promoting desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001). The findings suggest that employers are generally open to hiring rehabilitated offenders, as long as they are qualified for their positions. This study thus broadens the empirical evidence by showing that a variety of senior hotel managers would consider hiring these individuals, regardless of their previous job experience. As proposed by desistance theory, employment can provide rehabilitated offenders with a sense of purpose, identity, and community, which are vital components in the process of desistance (Matthews et al., 2020). By offering employment opportunities, the hospitality industry can play a crucial role in helping individuals transition away from criminal behavior, demonstrating the practical application of desistance theory. Secured employment further reinforces human capital theory (Lochner, 2004). This concept emphasizes the potential economic gains of investing in rehabilitated offenders, benefiting not only the individuals themselves but also the businesses that employ them and the broader economy. Consistent with this idea, the findings of this study also highlight the ability of employers to perceive rehabilitated offenders as more stable employees with a lower turnover rate, thereby reinforcing the concept of human capital.

Regarding future prospects, this study contributes to the theoretical expansion of restorative justice, which advocates for repairing the damage caused by criminal acts through inclusive processes engaging all relevant stakeholders (Claes & Shapland, 2016). By examining perspectives from CSD specialists, hotel managers, and academics, the research identifies common employment barriers for rehabilitated offenders and offers targeted insights. It highlights employment as a means for social reintegration, demonstrating that job opportunities in the hospitality sector can mend relationships, restore trust, and enhance community solidarity. This finding aligns with restorative justice principles that encourage ongoing cooperation among diverse parties (Claes & Shapland, 2016).

Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of hotel employers' perceptions on hiring rehabilitated offenders, from initial considerations to future prospects. The width of each arrow represents shifting employer concerns, starting with stigma and expanding to include desistance theories, human capital, and restorative justice, all within a relevant theoretical framework.

5.2. Practical implications

This study, exploring senior managers' views on employing rehabilitated offenders, has practical implications beyond the hospitality industry. It informs human resources management and societal

efforts for offender rehabilitation and reintegration. The insights can guide policy development, operational practices, and strategic planning in the hospitality sector and other relevant industries.

First, the insights from this study can guide the creation of inclusive human resource strategies that actively promote the hiring of rehabilitated offenders. Hotels can establish organized programs that incorporate background checks conducted with fairness, managerial training on the advantages and handling of rehabilitated employees, and support mechanisms to ease these individuals' integration into the workforce. This method can contribute to the development of a more diverse and inclusive work environment. This research underscores the necessity for specific training and development initiatives not only for rehabilitated offenders but also for the existing workforce and management. Sensitivity training, awareness initiatives regarding the obstacles encountered by rehabilitated individuals, and education on the merits of a diverse workforce can cultivate a workplace that is more understanding and supportive. The knowledge gained from the study can inspire the creation of inventive recruitment tactics that reach out to the population of rehabilitated offenders. Collaborations with rehabilitation programs, vocational training institutions, and criminal justice entities can supply a consistent stream of potential employees who are keen to reintegrate into society and the workforce (Gebbers et al., 2021).

Second, the employment of rehabilitated offenders aligns with broader corporate social responsibility goals, demonstrating a commitment to social justice, community support, and diversity (Chan & McGinley, 2024; Fahey et al., 2006). This approach can enhance a hotel's brand image and reputation among customers who value socially responsible practices. While customers may have safety concerns, sharing success stories and positive outcomes from employing rehabilitated offenders might further solidify a hotel's standing in the community and industry. Consequently, this study can guide hotels in fostering a peaceful and unbiased environment linked to the employment of rehabilitated offenders. Understanding the actual experiences of rehabilitated offenders, as opposed to merely ex-offenders, can help hotels develop supportive employment practices. A supportive work environment that addresses the unique needs of rehabilitated offenders could include mentorship programs, flexible scheduling to accommodate rehabilitation or parole requirements, and access to counseling or support groups.

Third, to address hotel employers' concerns regarding recidivism, hospitality firms should implement a mix of disciplinary and monitoring mechanisms; establish clear policies and progressive discipline systems to define acceptable behavior and consequences for violations (More frequent performance reviews [e.g., monthly] and mentorship programs can provide ongoing support and oversight, helping rehabilitated offenders integrate into the workplace culture); sensitively handle these practices to maintain a positive and inclusive environment; discreetly implement them, ensuring they are applied privately and personally without other colleagues being aware. For example, use surveillance systems for less obtrusive monitoring and improve the accessibility of counseling and support services (e.g., virtual or in-person calls) to maintain employee privacy and promote a safe, trustworthy environment.

Finally, policymakers and social service organizations should consider several strategies to facilitate the employment of rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry. Policymakers can incentivize hotel employers by implementing tax credits or subsidies, such as expanding the "Work

Opportunity Tax Credit.” Adopting “Ban-the-Box” policies, which remove questions regarding criminal history from initial job applications, ensures candidates are assessed on the bases of their skills and qualifications, promoting a fairer hiring process (Craigie, 2020). Social service organizations can develop and fund vocational training programs within correctional facilities that align with hospitality industry needs. Certifications in culinary arts, housekeeping, and customer service can enhance employability. Establishing employment advisory boards with business leaders can provide valuable insights and support for training programs tailored to the hospitality sector, bridging the gap between prison and employment.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations persist despite the achievement of this study to enhance research on employing rehabilitated offenders in the hospitality industry. It primarily reflects hotel managers’ views, potentially overlooking insights from other staff members. Despite addressing interviewer biases and participant awareness, social desirability bias may still have influenced responses. Future research should use methods such as anonymous surveys or mixed-method approaches to minimize this bias and obtain genuine responses. Long-term studies should include non-managerial employees’ experiences for a comprehensive understanding. The research is geographically limited to Hong Kong’s CSD and senior hotel managers, suggesting that a broader, cross-cultural approach could reveal further on long-term integration and best practices internationally. Owing to word limitations, this study excluded perspectives from rehabilitated offenders and customers, but these aspects are part of upcoming projects. Other researchers are encouraged to explore these areas to deepen the understanding of employment dynamics. Additionally, examining different sectors within the hospitality industry beyond hotels could uncover insights that enhance employment strategies across the industry, fostering inclusive practices.

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