



Inmates develop employment skills using business simulations

State Correctional Institute Camp Hill

An Interview with Ron Burchfield
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Ron Burchfield, Coordinator of Vocational Training at the State Correctional Institute (SCI) Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, had a problem. He had heard of prison programs that were attempting to focus on entrepreneurship training as an employment option for inmates, and he wanted to explore that idea at Camp Hill. Ron had a computer lab alright. But, he didn't have a business instructor to lead his inmate-students.

"Lots of inmates say they want to open a business," says Burchfield. "It's my job to place them in job-training programs, do assessments, and prepare them for re-entry (into society and industry). I think many of them start off believing self-employment will be easy."

Easy or not – establishing that link between inmates and entrepreneurship is a hot topic for people at all levels of the justice system these days – from inmates all the way up to national policy advisors. In their 2007 monograph: *Venturing beyond the Gates – Facilitating Successful Reentry with Entrepreneurship*, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (at CUNY) flagged entrepreneurship training as a key tool to prepare inmates for a productive life after prison:

"While self-employment may not be a viable option for many individuals leaving prison, exposure to entrepreneurship training can play an important role in fostering successful re-entry (into society and the work force) ... These individuals may never become entrepreneurs themselves, but will use their entrepreneurship training to improve their performance as employees and to proactively engage with their families and communities."

Venturing beyond the Gates

Burchfield has first-hand experience with the challenge of fostering entrepreneurship at a maximum security facility for men. There is no formal business program at SCI Camp Hill, but Burchfield does have a newly renovated 30-station computer lab – which includes a license for *GoVenture Small Business*.

● "Entrepreneurship is a hot topic for people at all levels of the justice system these days."

● "It's easy to use – even for people who struggle with literacy skills, or whose learning styles vary from the norm."

● "...a realistic computer simulation that recreates day-to-day experiences in running a small business..."

● "...they figure out that business management is a juggling process...and begin making better decisions..."

● "...the simulation...feels authentic...a real eye-opener for the inmates..."

GoVenture Small Business is a realistic computer simulation that recreates the day-to-day experiences involved in starting and running a small business. The intuitive, game-like interface makes learning engaging and fun, and is easy to use – even for people who struggle with literacy skills, or whose learning styles vary from the norm.

"I stumbled across *GoVenture* on the Internet and requested a demo," says Burchfield. "It was something new, but I was able to get it approved by our Bureau of Information Technology. We started with 2 seat licenses, but decided to add 15 more seats because our inmates were showing a lot of interest in it. I'm really glad we were able to add it to the lab. Eventually I would like to see *GoVenture Small Business* taught as part of our business education program."

Inmates at SCI Camp Hill often hear about the *GoVenture* simulation by word-of-mouth from other inmates – and then apply to Burchfield to try it out. Burchfield applies a bit of anti-sell reverse-psychology to prepare them for the challenge.

"I tell them it is like a flight simulator," says Burchfield. "It's not a simple video game. They're going to face the same challenges that a business manager does."

Those simulated challenges involve practicing and applying fundamental business-and-life skills, such as critical thinking, organization, stress and time management, planning, risk management, team building, decision making, and leadership.

In the absence of a business instructor, Burchfield's inmate-students are largely on their own with the simulation. "They experiment a lot," says Burchfield, "and let the feedback mechanisms guide them."

Fortunately for the inmates, the mistakes that might bankrupt a real business owner become excellent, cost-free, learning experiences in *GoVenture's* simulated business environment.

"Generally, their first attempts (at running a virtual business) end in disaster," says Burchfield. "They let their inventories run out. They don't do marketing. They set their prices wrong."

"But soon they figure out that business management is a juggling process. They start keeping a closer eye on customer satisfaction – and begin making better decisions about inventory levels, operating hours, and hiring reliable employees."

Burchfield says that inmates typically spend between 15 and 30 hours playing the simulation – though some inmates have continued playing for months, and have taken the simulation to high levels.

Even in the absence of a business instructor and a full-fledged curriculum, *GoVenture Small Business* is generating a steady stream of new students at Burchfield's computer lab.

And while *GoVenture Small Business* may not make an entrepreneur out of every inmate who tries it, Burchfield agrees with the observation made in the *Venturing beyond the Gates* report – that entrepreneurship training makes inmates more employable.

"The business experience they get from the simulation certainly feels authentic," says Burchfield. "Even if they decide that running a business is not for them, I think (*GoVenture Small Business*) has been a real eye-opener for the inmates who tried it."



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