

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Saturday
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Never in a million years did I think, for a single moment, that I'd actually be happy about having a job that pays \$0.30 an hour, but strangely enough, I am.

For those who don't know, paying jobs in prison are notoriously difficult to come by, and when they do pay, it's something that's measured in pennies per hour, not dollars, and even then, it's rare that an inmate sees all the money he makes, as the prison usually manages to find one excuse or another to take it before the inmate even sees his pay stub.

In the State of California, there are 3 basic classifications of employment. In the first 2, the inmate works directly for the prison in which they're incarcerated in. The first group receives absolutely no pay at all, regardless of how many hours the inmate is forced to work, or how hard the inmate works. The second group of jobs includes those with a "pay number," those in which the inmate receives financial compensation for the work he performs, but his pay is capped out at a maximum of only a few dollars per month. Once again, the amount of hours he works, or the amount of work he completes results in no increase in pay.

The third category of employment opportunities falls into those positions in which the inmate works for the California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA), which is essentially a private company that hires inmates to manufacture items purchased by the state. In this final category, the inmate is actually rewarded for his performance, albeit nowhere near the amount that someone in the free world would be paid. He's paid by the hour, is offered raises that rival his skills and production output, but even then, he can only make a maximum of \$0.75 to \$0.95 per hour, depending upon the position he holds. Not only that, but he's limited to a mandatory period of 2-years in any one shop. While he can continue working for CALPIA after the completion of his 2 years, he must transfer to another shop, where he has to start all the way back at the beginning. (Can we say "scam"?)

Still, it's far more preferable to working for, and being paid by, the prison, a paycheck that is never enough to take care of even your most basic of needs, and for this, I'm extremely grateful.

I've waited a long time to get the approval to work in the CALPIA, but my patience has been aptly rewarded. When I finally did get a chance to interview, I was after a position that would allow me to work on the computer. With a background in website design, it was my hope to use my remaining time in prison to expand my computer skills in whatever way that I could, which would hopefully make me marketable upon my release. When I interviewed for the position, I was literally hired the moment I said my name. Turns out that there's been a good deal of talk, and praise, thrown about from my previous employers (the librarian), and a number of inmates who've come to me for help with their computer problems.

I am, however, fortunate enough to have a computer to make my task easier, but the guy who had this position before me didn't exactly leave things the way they're supposed to be. As a result, I've had to completely redesign the database from the ground up, perform a complete inventory of more than 2,500 different parts, etc., but it's a challenge that I've thoroughly enjoyed. Not having ever used Microsoft Access before, or any database for that matter, I didn't exactly have the luxury of experience, but I'm a very quick study, and after less than 45 days, I've not only managed to receive a \$0.15 raise, I've also managed to learn enough about Access and database design to create my new database from the ground up. More importantly, I've realized that this is what I love to do, and what I want to do when I get out.

Yes, if you would have told me 10 years ago that one day I would have been happy to have a job paying only \$0.30 an hour, I would have called you crazy, but here I am, happy to have been hired at \$0.30 an hour.

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