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Four inmates in regulation uniform gather at a metal container. There’s a whispered intensity about them as a tattooed arm points to the mouth of the container. What conspiracy is taking place here? What plans are being made? Draw closer and eavesdrop but shed your expectations of high drama.

The tattooed man is pointing out a welding problem. He’s putting his suggestions to the group. The intensity of the moment is dedication to the job... nothing else seems to matter. Only standard issue dress distinguishes them from a group of workers giving their best on any efficient factory floor.

Drenched in a media focus on threats and dangers, a story like this can easily sound like hype and wishful thinking. On the surface, what we have here is the happy ending to a prison drama. It’s the sort where a tough but fair Governor runs a gauntlet of opposition to tame the hardest hearts.

But Hollywood didn’t concoct this story. A constant flow of newspaper, radio and television reports continues to emphasise the more negative and dramatic prison issues. That’s the nature of the media and it is a process essential to any free society. But it often tends to exclude positive changes to the same system. It has mostly ignored a quiet revolution in New South Wales Correctional Centres over the last seven years... a revolution based on a firm belief in work as a cornerstone of society.

Lauded in one testimonial after another, it’s likely to serve as a model to many other Correctional Centres across the globe. An unfolding outcome, it has all but changed the culture within the system. After two centuries of prison history, life inside the walls and fences of our prison system was anything but inspirational or hopeful. It was based on conflict, crisis and hopelessness. The emphasis was on a human dumping ground where society’s values were abandoned along with the hope of all who entered.

In the mid eighties, any work ethic was an elusive ideal. Correctional industry was in a sorry condition, a chronic loss maker draining one point five million dollars from the state purse while giving inmate workers little or no purpose or hope.

In 1987, the department investigated its industrial function and found lost hope and little sense of direction in staff and inmates, a set of industries stumbling along without any coherent policy direction or apparent understanding of why they existed, CSI Director, Wayne Ruckley was a senior administration manager at the time: “There was no way inmates could leave the system any better than when they joined... but a lot worse because of the destructive influences of boredom and a lack of hope.” he says.

Correctional Industries were sitting in the managerial too-hard basket. They were rudderless and becalmed by lack of vision.

Over seven years, Director Ruckley has worked with a management and operations team drawn from the toughest arenas of public and private enterprise. They’ve chased and tendered for projects that give employment to inmates in need of purpose. The work has come from clients who get clear evidence and understanding of what’s being done in the New South Wales Correctional system. Everyone has reaped benefits. Together, they’ve brought about a transformation that is little short of phenomenal. CSI has become a professional and respected organisation achieving realistic social and commercial objectives. Inmate work programs have vastly expanded. New facilities have been opened, existing facilities have been given a boost and facilities that were closed have been re-opened.

The extensive commercial and social change is a working balance of often disparate forces: the public and private sectors; managerial and technical staff; youth and experience, overseers and inmates.

Making it work has meant a blending of modern
management philosophies with the school of hard knocks in what was long regarded as an unlikely cauldron. Success has come by placing the commercial focus beyond a closed system.

The customer always comes first with a total service program that guarantees quality.

There's obvious constraints in tendering for contracts and working within a Corrections system. So, CSI has fashioned a market strategy that fits within the limitations of the system and its workforce.

Crucial to its success is an even greater human story. An extensive commercialisation plan puts the focus on giving the maximum number of inmates an opportunity to experience work and everything that flows from it. At any time, between seventy and eighty percent of the state's inmate population is employed.

CSI's results would gladden the heart of any manager dedicated solely to commerce: Eighty four commercially-based units throughout New South Wales achieved sales in the last financial year of $17.8 million.

The story of CSI in the nineties is about putting a pragmatic philosophy into action; it is a testament to the importance of work... and it runs roughshod over myths and negative ideas that have long stood in the way of social and commercial progress.

Those myths; the transformation of CSI; its philosophy of work; its social and commercial achievements and a sprinkling of history are the stories we explore in the following pages.
"It is in changing that things find purpose."

Heraclitus
Greek philosopher - circa 500 B.C.
From the day England dumped several boatloads of convicts on these shores to labour under harsh discipline and conditions, our rules of survival became popular myths. We’re not keen on tall poppies; we’re all for the little Aussie battler; we love putting officialdom in its place and a ‘fair go’ is sacred. We often greet change like a plague of flies at a bush picnic. We can brush them off but they keep coming back, hanging in the air around any whiff of change, getting in the way of opportunity, promoting unease and limiting progress.

Myths were in abundance in the eighties when CSI was a chronic loss maker in an atmosphere of boredom. There were big problems motivating overseers and inmates. Phones weren’t answered, processes were a world apart, there were no cohesive policies in place for Corrective industry. Urgent change was essential.

A new management had to steer a course around negative ideas and myths to put a three-prong policy in place. It declared each inmate has the obligation and opportunity to work; that an idle correctional population is destructive; and that inmates work to reduce the high cost of the Correctional System.

CSI set out to build a dynamic professional entity with the disciplines and environment of any workplace in society. That meant setting hours of work and production schedules and it required a commitment to quality with a clear customer focus. CSI had to be capable of performing competitively on an open market. Its transformation to benchmark performer has done much more than catch up with the competition, it’s passing them.
But myths hang in there, such as:

"Inmate labour breaks rocks, builds roads, makes numberplates, stitches mailbags and puts together brooms and brushes... but that's where it stops."

Until the CSI revolution, some truth lingered in this myth. But it was well and truly swatted by CSI's success story as it expanded into eighty four business units in New South Wales. Corrections industry was moving into high gear, leaving its familiar place in the red and charging well into the black, employing over seventy percent of all inmates and embracing a range of business. It now takes in quality assured textiles; ergonomic office chairs; a range of school and office furniture; the design and fabrication of metal products; offset printing and binding; a bakery; hi-tech agriculture including dairy and nursery products... and an expanding set of partnerships with private industry. And that's just the start of a long and versatile list.

If you're determined to cling to the myth, you'll be consoled to know CSI can still stitch mailbags. To break rocks you'll need to train inmates in 'Operating your rock-breaking machine.

"Inmates are lazy, unwilling and don't want to work."

Many inmates enter the system with very poor education, few social skills and little or no work ethic. The average age of inmates is between the late teens and early twenties.

They don't know how to present themselves for employment or how to fill out a job application.

Many have never worked.

Says Wayne Ruckley: "Many inmates are with us because they lack patience and perseverance... if they want money, they go out and rob. Its hard to imagine one would get an enduring buzz out of those exploits. What we’re trying to convey to inmates is that there’s a better way, a more enduring way to live and work in a community."

The CSI director counters destructive myths with a philosophy full of positivism and motivation. He declares CSI brings inmates hope that they'll leave with habits and skills to get work and keep working.

The social commitment is to reduce their chance of returning, to expose them to real work with its responsibility, satisfaction and rewards.

"It helps them understand and value the work ethic. CSI has significantly expanded and commercialised their work opportunities in a way never seen before. It's very noticeable the response you get from inmates in providing an objective and giving feedback on performance... as well as building maturity within staff and inmates to cope with success and failure. It's critical to the broader picture.”

The current buzz-word is dynamic security.

An American concept, it acknowledges but moves beyond the physical fabric of offence, alarm systems, towers and all its protocols... it encourages inmates into activity where they're able to find themselves.

"To the greatest cynic, there must be acceptance that while they’re thinking about doing something, they’re hopefully not thinking about destructive things..." says Wayne Ruckley. Give inmates a daily program of structured activity and you give them the basic idea about the importance of work.

Director Ruckley easily shed any labels of being 'soft' or a 'do-gooder'. His energy is the core in the CSI reactor and he's a pragmatist.

"For people to experience the satisfaction of reaching their potential, they need to be driven. As I push my managers, overseers have to do the same with inmates. What's important is the accountability of the individual... we can talk about team and corporate spirit but you can only talk to an individual."

Between seventy and eighty percent of inmates now work with CSI. They sustain the self sufficiency of the correctional system with catering, laundry, cleaning and building maintenance and construction. They are active and successful in CSI's commercially based business units. One reliable witness is a former member of the Corrective Services Commission who recently visited several northern institutions and talks of 'total activity by staff and inmates.' Commenting on the interaction between staff and inmates he says CSI workers were positive in their commitment and endeavours.

The report concludes "I would not have believed such a
Myth & Reality

change could’ve occurred."
"Corrections is a hotbed of strife, violence and corruption."

It’s a hoary old myth promoted by the media and a tough one to shake under an avalanche of stories. The reality is, of six and a half thousand inmates, a very small percentage are in for life. The rest will be back in the community within a short period of time. The average sentence is seven to nine months. A Correctional facility is no longer called a prison, but it always has to be a place of security and public safety. But that doesn’t rule out hope for the inmates. "Corrections is much more than locking inmates up. We need to provide a better future for those about to be released. And that’s done with a balance of work, education and recreation. If we just locked them up and did nothing, many would be released with a great deal of vengeance and hatred with all its implications." says Director Ruckley. Its often easy for the media to emphasise the volatile nature of Corrections and the people contained by it. But stories other than strife and crisis deserve to be told. A management policy based on a strong philosophy of work can inspire and effect remarkable change, but it’s mostly ignored by the media.

"CSI provides cheap labour and is unfair competition."

For CSI Business manager Michael York that’s an easy one to answer. There’s no truth in it. He explains: "Industry puts material costs, labour costs and overheads together and the difference between their selling price and their costs is their margin. It’s the same for us but the make-up is totally different. There are constraints in the limited skills and education levels of inmates. Labour is frequently shifted by the department as inmates track through their security classifications. There are interruptions for visits, legal and other inmate matters." And it’s rarely efficient or cost effective to bypass technology for maximum use of labour.

"Private enterprise spends a lot of money on sophisticated machinery which will completely eliminate labour. We go the other way. We have less sophisticated machinery and lots of hands... so any comparison is meaningless. Our number one role is to employ inmates." says Michael York.

The myth of unfair competition is readily used as business propaganda by the competition. Cortex Marketing And Sales Manager, Graham Jowsey has taken up the gauntlet. "There’s this political and industrial perception we’re taking work away from ‘good, honest mouths’. We get interstate rivalry because we’re in New South Wales and we’re a prison industry. It’s always been on the cards but it becomes more so as the market expands." he says.

When CSI introduced commercialisation, it was regarded with deep suspicion by a sector of the business community. It was seen as a hell-bent drive to achieve profit at any cost. Its a myth that ignores the constraints of the system. One of CSI’s private enterprise partners, Panama Developments experiences a few and is finding ways of either working around them or despite them. Barbara Lea, Panama’s Long Bay nursery manager estimates she needs thirty inmates to get a production result equivalent to a ten man working week in the world outside. The thirty inmates she manages each work six and a half hours a day, five days a week. The shorter hours are interrupted as inmates go to other sections for counselling or visits. There’s also a high turnover in staff as men are moved to other institutions. Interruptions to the working day bring frustrations. "We’re working on it," says Barbara. Tony Jones manages women inmates in the nursery at Mulawa. He regards the job as a challenge with plenty of interruptions. Constraints are the same at Mulawa and they’re a clear annoyance in the working day of the nursery. "I can have a great crew for a month and then it’ll fall apart as inmates are moved. It can certainly be a challenge" says Tony Jones.

Managers have their frustrations when a good team changes almost overnight to inmates who need to begin with the basics. But both nurseries, utilising this flowing labour force, report strong progress despite the constraints.

By its enormously increased presence inside the system and its presence in the marketplace, CSI is wearing down long entrenched myths.

CSI Operations Development Manager, Steve Thorpe emphasises: "At the end of the day, when I speak to people from the private sector and show what we’re about, they leave going "Wow! What we’re doing from a philosophic point of view is unbelievable."
If any symbol shouts out the difference between life in and out of Corrections, it's the fence that divides the two worlds. It has to be tall, strong and secure.

A decade ago, no official or contractor would have dared suggest such a barrier be built by those whose lives are contained by it. Recently, CSI contested, won and fulfilled a $1.3 million contract to build the fence for the new Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre. It was the ideal task for the Cormet business unit at the Silverwater Correctional Centre. The project has become a clear indicator of how much change has taken place within Corrections. The contractor building the centre has nothing but praise for the work done. "The quality is higher than a fence I built two years earlier with a private sector metalworker" declared project manager Greg Ward.

It's an important accolade for the management team, overseers and inmates and it comes from a straight talker who doesn't easily toss around compliments. The nine hundred bed remand facility will be the biggest of its kind in the southern hemisphere and is the fourth major Corrections project for Greg Ward. He's supervised Correction Department projects from development application to a very literal lock-up stage.

He supervised construction of the Witness Protection Unit at Long Bay, a three hundred bed centre at Lithgow and a four hundred bed minimum security centre at Silverwater. He's now on his most challenging project with the Remand Centre.

He says CSI went up against six other tenderers that included some major players for the fencing and erection job. "They had their commercials right, they knew their market and they went all out to win it... which they did by a whisker, but that's the name of the game and they knew how to play it".

Operations Development Manager, Steve Thorpe and his management team led the marketing assault. They knew that behind the negotiations and paperwork was a promise of long term continuity of work and consistent skills training for inmates.

In its pursuit of the fence contract, Cormet grasped the winning edge with a quality program CSI put in place throughout its business units. It was regarded as a rare initiative amongst companies tendering for the job. But winning the contract was only the first step. Cormet Silverwater had to start from scratch, turning an empty shell into a highly efficient manufacturing unit.

Welders at the site needed high voltage power. Saws, punches, jigs, drills and sanding equipment were purchased. After inspecting the factory floor, Greg Ward was satisfied the fences were being built with the best equipment for the job. "CSI maintained its vision and put the best operators on the job... everyone knew they had to perform and that's exactly what they did" he says.

With emphasis always on quality and a wary eye on price, competitive quotes were needed to supply steel and mesh. The quality guarantee required the contractor galvanising the panels to put his own quality statement in place.

"They had their commercials right, they knew their market and they went all out to win it... which they did by a whisker, but that's the name of the game and they knew how to play it."

Says CSI's Supply Officer Neville Edwards: "If anything goes wrong with a panel in ten years time, it will reflect on us and we'll have to go back through the system and find the problem. 'Each panel is numbered so we can trace everything all the way through... we have to fix it at any time."

The men building the panels gave consistent enthusiasm and innovation to the task. They cast a critical eye
over plans and, in consultation with staff and the business unit, initiated changes that delivered greater efficiency and saved on cost. The unit dramatically increased the expected rate of production on the sixteen hundred panels and gates that made up the wall. Neville Edwards was amazed by the pace of the work: "We budgeted for 15 panels a day and were getting up to 25 a day. The guys worked like they were in private enterprise and that's how we treat them... like normal guys in private enterprise."

Greg Ward adds to that: "This is all about grassroots quality... eighty percent of the quality in a job like this comes from the shop floor".

The fence was a vital achievement and a test for the philosophy driving the corporate body. CSI had stepped into a highly competitive and intense business area and was there to stay. When the project's gates were under construction, inmates came up with a better way to produce the locking mechanism. Their designs were superior to those on paper, they saved on material, were easier to manufacture and they solved problems in galvanising. Some of the jigs made by inmates produced the goods faster than expected. The job also identified equipment needed to win the big jobs. For example, a subcontractor was brought in to erect the fence. A decision that had nothing to do with security, it was about the shortage of a crane and someone qualified to drive it. CSI is now buying its own crane for a very big project, this time at Cessnock. The crane will be used to shift and store a thousand Education Department demountables ready for repair.

Staff and inmates are in training to use it. Everything positive about the fence project was reflected in the attitude of inmates. Neville Edwards regards the workforce as no different to any other: "We're all the same, we're here to work. The guys are very keen...they come up to you and tell you this drawing isn't right... we need to modify this. We took their suggestions on board and modified drawings and techniques to suit the fence... some of them were very good ideas and increased production. There was a lot of initiative"

The highly successful project began with inmates who arrived on the job keen to pick up skills. Overseers trained them to perform essential boilermaking tasks such as cutting and welding. When the fence was built, CSI had achieved its productivity and quality assurance targets. It could boast a project that kept a clear focus on the customer in a highly expectant marketplace. Just as importantly, it gave solid benefits to the men on the shopfloor. They got know-how in the workplace, regular working hours, a strong mix of education, vocational development and work program activity as well as a wage. Working for CSI earned them pocketmoney and gave them enforced savings.

Director Wayne Ruckley takes pride in a rapport between staff and inmates. He says it has brought a positive influence to stability in the system. "The emphasis has been to create a work environment with conditions similar to the one an inmate will find on release in the community... an environment with the rigours, disciplines and satisfaction of a workplace in the community."

CSI takes inmates and trains them for all its projects. It prepares them for a world beyond the fence, their new skills have taught them how to build.
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He's a tough sort of bloke - the kind who'll make strife if things don't go to his plans. This is a private moment, he doesn't want anyone watching as he picks weeds out of the smallest potplant in the joint, and sits contemplating it. But tough doesn't mean he can't be gentle or care about a delicate fragment of nature.

Barbara Lea manages the Panama Developments nursery at Long Bay and she's seen this happen many times. But she's not about to name names. "They get quite proud of their achievement with the plants. You see the toughies with the tiniest pot, nurturing it, sitting there... it never ceases to amaze me the way they'll carefully look after this little plant. I've never pointed it out. They'd worry about being called a 'wuz'... they'd be drummed out of the toughies club," she says. And her boss is well aware some inmates have two or three plants hidden behind a bush... plants that get a little extra care and attention.

At Mulawa, it's a very different story.

The women working in the nursery all want flowers by their bedside... but they stand little chance of getting past their fellow inmate whose job it is to make sure the complete plant is ready for the market.

"It's a case of 'you touch my plants I'll bloody do you.' They're her plants and she wants to make sure they're sold that way" says Tony Jones. He took over management of another Panama nursery a year ago and has heard customer phone calls change from "bitching to compliments".

He says there's been a lot of hurdles to overcome in growing potted colour but the women are very happy with the way the nursery has turned around.

Corrections have run nurseries in New South Wales institutions for many decades. "There was the idea that to be a successful nursery person all you had to do was buy a few hundred pots, a few..."
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bags of potting mix and a pair of scissors." says CSI Director Wayne Ruckley.

When the general manager of Panama Developments, Stan Piggins visited a public sale at Long Bay two years ago, he saw an opportunity for private enterprise to make big improvements. Panama went into partnership with CSI. The private company now runs nurseries at Long Bay, Mulawa and Grafton Correctional Centres, with the focus on quality plants for its six retail nurseries.

Barbara Lea has respect from most of the inmates. With twenty years in the nursery industry and an edge of gravel in her voice she says "I can make myself heard when I need to". Barbara was a little worried when the job was first suggested to her eighteen months ago. Her management proposed sending her to gaol for ten hours a day as the only female private sector manager. She now believes a woman is better suited to cope with the job. "I'm a bit of a mother figure. Swearing gets toned down when I'm near" she says and shrugs off the occasional problem. "You get some fellows you'll never be able to do anything with... but I've got too much else to do to worry about them". A healthy understanding of human nature is an obvious advantage:

"When the men first come into the nursery to work they can be unsettled and sometimes a bit surly. They're not sure what's expected of them."

Springing to their defence, she adds, "It's the same with any job wherever you are... it usually takes anyone a couple of weeks to settle in".

Two Overseers work with her in the Long Bay nursery. Their job is to look after security and function as industry supervisors.

Tony Jones has the opportunity to select the women who'll work in the Mulawa nursery. "I interview them, find out what their interests are and whether they can cope with the physical labour of the nursery" he says. Limitations in the system slow things down. But far from halting progress they present challenges to be overcome and a great deal of satisfaction when that happens. Both nurseries report vast improvement in the quality of the product they're putting out. Tony says the structure of the nursery has changed entirely in the past twelve months at Mulawa. Its now producing what he regards as a good, if not better potted colour than anything available on the open market.

Inmates are given training through TAFE courses. Once a week, they're instructed in the basics of nursery work such as propagation, stock selection and maintenance and are taught about the right soil mixes.

"They come in with little or no work ethic and once they settle in and start working you see it begin to turn them around." says Barbara.

At Mulawa, the women doing a sentence longer than twelve months get key positions in the nursery. Six are doing the TAFE trade course in horticulture which gives them a certificate in three years.

Tony Jones hopes that, when these women are released, they'll continue their course.

A recent public sale at the Long Bay nursery surprised some of the harder heads in Corrections. They had reservations about inmates dealing with the public on a one to one basis. On the day of the sale, a special area landscaped to look like a retail nursery carried a mix of exotics and natives.

Indoor plants came from Grafton, potted colour and annuals in full flower from Mulawa. It was an event to affirm the veracity of CSI's approach.

Everyone was run off their feet.

"It was very gratifying. The fellas worked very hard." says Stan Piggins.

Inmates advised on selection and planting; they talked with knowledge about the vagaries of plants and even carried the potted bargains to car boots. The event will now happen five times a year.

The sale is popular with inmates... they get to show their skills and look forward to the energy and contact of the event. After the experience, Stan Piggins says he'd always use inmates as salesmen on the day:

"It's motivational for them, like an open day with parents and friends... 'Look at what I did mum!!'"
Many inmates have skills that CSI can utilise in their eight business divisions. All inmates are given the opportunity to tap into a range of work skill programs in primary, secondary and high technology industries.

The original icebreaker at any social gathering is “What do you do?”

Our work is our identity... it gives us income but far more, it is how we see ourselves, it is our status, our security and our purpose. Without work, we are disempowered and often invisible.

With the issue of unemployment a constant crisis of the nineties, finding work for ex-inmates is the hard edge of that crisis. Get a criminal record and you face a big disadvantage in the labour market. When one door closes others should open. The experience for many former inmates is that doors can keep closing. There remains a chasm between the culture inside and the society on the other side of the wall. A kind of community twilight zone, it frightens people who are coming up for release.

Unfortunately many have very good reason to be frightened. They may not be as desperate as the often told tale of a sixty year old inmate who’d spent thirty years in and out of the system and refused to leave when his time came. The police were called to escort him to the nearest town where he found a plateglass window to smash as his ticket back inside.

Funnily but sad and very telling, it highlights the many inmates who have great difficulty bridging the gap between the culture inside the walls and the society into which they’re returning.

Overseas studies on employment and training for ex-inmates shows those who find a job or follow-up training on release have the lowest recidivism rate of thirty two percent. The grim fact is that those who trained but didn’t get a qualification during their term inside, and those who got the wrong job or didn’t find a job accounted for a rate of ninety percent. Disillusion and hopelessness send many back to the life that plunged them into the system in the first place. They’re condemned to an endless cycle.

“Unless they have some support, maybe the only option they see is to go back to what they were doing before... that’s their survival mechanism if things aren’t working the way they should, and society makes sure it doesn’t.” The comment comes from Jan Hall, co-ordinator for the department’s Employment Development program. She’s setting out to encourage government departments, agencies, employers and industry groups to support the notion of extending employment opportunities to ex-offenders.

Jan takes the lift most days to level eighteen. It puts her with the hierarchy of Corrections. She knows its a job on the tenuous fringe of a system with a clear charter to secure inmates and protect public safety.

As others in Corrections acknowledge, its a system that can provide training, encouragement and work skills, but once a sentence is finished, the inmate is the full stop at the end.

Employment Development is a variation of the Second Chance Business Register, started in Victoria a decade ago by a business person who’d been robbed several times. It was an attempt to do something about employment for ex-inmates.

“Employers who wouldn’t be prejudiced against former inmates and who provided an equal opportunity of employment, were encouraged to register.”

The newly established program works with CSI to chip at a weighty problem. “CSI provides inmates with work skills, it keeps them occupied, builds self esteem and keeps them quiet.” says Jan.

She has a few understandable reservations about a task that needs to persuade business and reach much further into the general community: Perhaps the biggest challenge is to encourage private employers to think about continuity of work when inmates move beyond the gate.

“CSI establishes a communication with employers who meet inmates and see they are not strange after all. Most employers see gaol as ‘a big pit,’ where inmates ‘break rocks’ and have nothing to offer in terms of skills or a healthy work ethic. Others see gaol as a holiday farm.” explains Jan. She says business relates every inmate seeking work to its own negative experiences with offenders.
For example, the retail trade will think you're talking about a shoplifter and it's really hard to break that down. They also find it difficult to understand they might have two or three ex-offenders working for them and not even know it. If an ex-offender comes in and applies for a job, no-one knows what they've done. Most try to hide it because it makes a difference.

Progress may not be quick in these matters.

One employer with commercial links to CSI explains the prejudices:

"I've tried getting work for inmates who've worked for me... but the minute I tell my contact they've been inside, it kills their chance."

Jan has been approaching employers and giving presentations.

"I'll say that this presentation was printed at the Correct Print Business Unit in the Parklea Correctional Centre and they're quite impressed that something positive is happening," she says.

But knocking on doors has its limitations. Jan realises she's one of many with that approach. Employers are weary of an army of agencies with the same message.

A different tack was needed.

She's developing a suggestion from an inmate who saw an important resource that was badly needed. He suggested computer networking in which inmates looking for employment get centralised work information and are co-ordinated with any opportunities available to them. It would mean employers who don't have the usual prejudices against inmates can ring in and find the people they need. The initiative established communications with agencies that offer employment and the services that go with it... pointing ex-inmates to counselling, skills training, personal development, case management, and other referrals while keeping tabs on jobs available.

Says Jan, "It's a fairly high expectation that they can move straight into work and society and cope with it. Anyone out of mainstream society needs a reintroduction and that's where an agency comes in... it's not sending an inmate cold to an employer and saying 'there you go, do your best'." It's one obvious solution to a critical problem... but it needed Jan's office, a little know-how in computer networking and the energy to make it happen. She believes the best course of re-entry into full-time employment for an ex-inmate is a gradual one. She sees it beginning in work experience with CSI, moving on to work release and then getting a job. She wants to break down barriers within the system between inmates and the essential information they need about work and how to get it. The unit is trying to make sure inmates know about the many programs of help available.

Reaching into the marketplace, CSI helps employers become familiar with inmates and the workplace. Its commercialisation policies and the Employment Development initiative understand an important principle of work:

"Unite boss and worker in the same cause and they both become determined to make a go of it."
Cortex is CSI's largest and most successful business division. The Cortex Long Bay business unit operates a successful partnership with a private sector company manufacturing T-shirts. The Interrogation was intense... it demanded clear, precise answers. Then came waiting and tension. When the announcement was made... silence sat like a gasp, then erupted into a raucous cheer that filled the workshop floor. Inmates were quickly on their feet shaking hands, celebrating their breakthrough with each other and the officers overseeing them. The work standard at Cortex Cooma had been given the nod of excellence from the highest level. On their final inspection, auditors from Standards Australia had put many of the men and their work under the microscope. Cortex was quietly confident it had established the kind of standard that could pass an exacting test. But second guessing can easily come unstuck... or unstitched. As investigators explored every stage of the production line, they found the textile products division knew its stitches and standards. Standards Australia questioned machinists at length, details were taken from the service team and only then came the verdict: "The Cortex business unit at Cooma and the Cortex corporate office at Silverwater have received certification in accordance with Australian Standard AS3902." Cortex business manager Mick Pendry has long experience with Corrections. He was a Prison Officer before taking up his current post and knows the system and the way it works. He was at Cooma when that announcement was made and the fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as the cheering and handshaking swept the workroom. "It was unbelievable... you could see the pride those men took in their work and their achievement." With twelve units throughout the New South Wales Corrections system, Cortex is CSI's largest and most successful business division. It employs more inmates than any other industry in the system. It manufactures products mainly for the healthcare industry. Items include general patient and staff apparel, theatre linen, drapes, wrappers, sheets, blankets and bags. Marketing and sales partner Graham Jowsey stresses: "It's been a big push over the last two and a half years to really focus on quality, reliability and the products we make. We know we can stand by them." Graham is a private contractor working with CSI on commission. He looks after product development, face to face selling, the spread of information and an advertising policy for Cortex. He generates orders with the commitment and enthusiasm that can only come from knowing he's selling top quality product. But there's a touch of whimsy in the knowledge that today's quality has happened despite a grim tradition: "When we first took over, my partner, in selling Cortex to the industry told a Victorian seminar we were the only linen product supplier who had been in business for two hundred years... and still going strong." Textile manufacture is ideal to a Corrections system. Cooma puts sixty inmates or so to work in a highly successful operation. Says CSI Director Wayne Ruckley: "Cortex is there because most correctional systems get involved in sewing... it has high labour intensity with people keen to be trained in new skills, you can keep a fairly close control over what the inputs and outputs are and you
can get a lot of sewing machines into an area... Dismiss any notion of a sweatshop behind walls. There's an expectation of performance but working conditions are an essential aspect of the Cortex story and its success in the system. There's plenty of space between the machines, a good level of communication between inmates... and no sweatshop, even for quality certification, let alone the rousing cheer that followed.

A problem long faced by all textile producers in Australia is that much of the retail market busily imports low cost textiles from the sweatshops of South East Asia. By the end of the century, the industry here will be stripped of tariffs, quotas and protection by all Australian governments. That's likely to open the floodgates even wider.

Australian manufacturers, competing with their own inferior labour are under increasing government pressure to stay away from sweatshops. To continue their labels, many are searching for other ways of efficiently making quality products without a blowout on labour costs.

A sensitive industry gives reluctant acceptance to CSI as a legitimate competitor in the marketplace... but CSI's work is panning a solution for some. Inquiries have certainly increased since the political atmosphere lifted up.

Cortex plans to protect a growing reputation for quality. It sees its future in firming its position as a quality manufacturer, it will never be able to compete solely on price.

"To maintain our standards, we'll be paying more for our labour component. Over the past two years, we've looked at producing cotton blankets, T-shirts, face washers... the sort of product that can compete head to head with those coming in from overseas," says Graham Jowsey. He's been involved in the industry since 1977 when the label put on prison industries was 'cheap products and woeful quality'.

"While we're changing, that perception out there. We tender for every contract available. We put a lot more emphasis on quality and reliability... on our customer service guarantees," he says.

Cortex doesn't rest its laurels on certification. To give itself ongoing quality assurance it has imposed a thorough set of checks and balances. In mid-1994, customer focus groups proved worthwhile. The overall result was complimentary but there were areas in need of improvement.

"We're working through the results but we've learned the need to address and control a few small things in packaging and transport," says Graham Jowsey.

Wayne Ruckley sees Cortex as a stalwart for Australian made products. "If we didn't exist in the healthcare industry, the product would be imported but the raw materials we source from Australian manufacturers would also be brought in," he says.

The evidence of an effective idea often surfaces in speeches and announcements in cheering and handshakes. But it also comes in barely noticed individual stories about changed lives.

Mick Pendry recalls one inmate who worked in the system. When he was released, he was deported back to England as part of his sentence. That year, Mick got a Christmas card in the mail from the inmate.

"It was a simple thank you for everything. Mick and Cortex had done... and an assurance he'd never be in gaol again."
If any other successful organisation were to explore its history and find stories similar to those lurking in CSI's archives, it would shoot home the bolt, pretend it never went looking and put the heaviest piece of furniture against the cellar door. There's no photos of managing directors, thumbs in waistcoats, peering stern and judgmental from the boardroom wall... no proud traditions with banners flying at the masthead. Its ghosts have heavy chains to rattle and moans to be heard, a history steeped in mud and torture, in forced labour and cruelty.

Exploring CSI's past holds a grim mirror to attitudes that have surrounded work and the work ethic in Australia. The story began over two centuries ago. England’s prisons were bulging with a set of laws that swept up the poor, the hungry and the desperate like street debris. Condemned to life for every crime from the theft of a bread loaf to murder, they were tossed in unseaworthy hulks moored in the Thames estuary. Many drowned; confinement and disease claimed all but the hardest. Those had to be somewhere else for them to go, somewhere out of sight and mind.

New South Wales was the answer to that problem. In the half century following 1788 and the first fleet, Australia became the dumping ground for England’s unwanted, for those who had offended the moral and social codes of a class-bound society. Transported to the other side of a distant and unknown world, it was a horror sentence. Weakened by long confinement and abandoned by their homeland, those who survived the long voyage arrived to hard labour, brutally enforced.

Work was repetitive, relentless and humiliating, a punishment designed to wear down and break the spirit. Convicts had few rights and no rewards. The idea of work as punishment hangs in our language to this day with ‘noses to the grindstone’; ‘backbreaking work’ and ‘slaving to get it done’, and the overall idea that work and pleasure are opposites by definition.

Our foundation century is filled with guilt, shame and anger... but also with a residue of pride, especially in buildings of elegant stonemasonry and craft. The mid eighteen hundreds held firm to English protestant beliefs that were only a step beyond the idea of work as punishment. Emphasis was on discipline and hard work as the way to save the soul. Idle hands were the devil’s tools. It was solid fuel for an industrial revolution that needed a constant supply of reliable and obedient workers who feared God and the boss. Consolation came at home where a man was hailed as protector and provider. Society and his culture asserted him ‘head of the household’ and honoured him as the hard worker who gave his family that day their daily bread. The belief was reflected in prison life... every prisoner had to earn his daily bread to be considered worthy... and those without a skill were deemed unworthy.

To arrive in prison as a young man lacking training or a trade meant three months of bread and water, the basic diet of the unskilled. A really good worker could expect extra rations. To be released on licence required good conduct along with the promise of hard work and a useful life.

Toward the end of the century, rehabilitation found its way into the Correctional system and work was deemed essential. Bathurst and Goulburn gaols were equipped with industrial workshops. Their purpose was work and training. With the coming of the twentieth century, punishment continued as a view strongly held in some quarters. But there were genuine attempts to lead inmates to social salvation through work. Detailed accounts were kept recording the items made in each gaol and their value. Work assigned to prisoners included binding books, making items like boots, caps, mats, brushes, brooms and saddles. There was employment for those who qualified as a blacksmith, stonesmith, tinsmith, tailor, upholsterer, gardener or a carpenter. Inmates could do knitting and needlework, they could paint, print, do washing or chop wood and break stones.

When war came in 1914, the prison workshop was turned over to the national effort. Red Cross supervised the production of enamel and tinware items, coal sacks for the navy and matting for troop ships. A mix of fresh air, an adequate diet and hard work were the formula at newly opened camps for first offenders over twenty five. The idea was to separate them from hardened criminals while giving them hard work under an azure sky.

Red pine was grown at Tuncurry at the beginning of World War 1 and the camps lasted a quarter of a century. A different social notion began changing work and the way it was regarded when the twenties arrived. Still the cornerstone of society, everyone needed to be active and gainful employment... but it was now seen as a builder of strong character. The echo was felt inside prison. Earning your daily bread lost its emphasis.
Over the past five or more years, construction has been put to work as a means of preventing economic depression. The building of Sydney’s first airport, the construction of a new public hospital, the building of the Sydney Opera House, and the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge are just a few examples of the many projects that have been undertaken in this period.

In the construction industry today, we are seeing a significant increase in the use of modern techniques and materials. This has led to a more efficient and safer working environment for all involved.

The construction of monumental buildings, such as the Sydney Opera House, has been a major focus of the industry in recent years. These buildings are not only of aesthetic value but also serve as a symbol of the progress and development of our society.

The construction industry is a vital part of the economy, providing employment and contributing to the growth of the nation. As such, it is important that we continue to support and invest in this sector to ensure its continued success and growth.
wouldn't get a job. We should teach them to cope with unemployment... it was a dreadful approach." he says.

Cessnock Correctional Centre opened in 1974 with modern and spacious facilities. It had modern machines and processors and was able to supply high quality furniture for many state schools and government bodies. But for the best part of the seventies, it was the only major industrial Correctional institution that could be called modern.

In the late 70's, the Nagle report criticised the performance of some prison industries in New South Wales. It was accepted that institutional routine prevented Correctional industries generating any commercial profit. In 1982, CSI was given an independent board of review drawn from private enterprise and the public service.

Its charter was to scrutinise the operation of prison industry. Inmates got a limited system of payment and privileges for work well done. Parklea was then opened as a maximum security industrial correctional centre. It's industries were the metal and timber trades. Bathurst was rebuilt with facilities for training inmates with machine processes used in industry. Major rebuilding was still needed at Long Bay.

Formal trade training was introduced. By mid 1987, with an increase in discipline demanded from the community, around a third of all inmates were involved in some form of industrial work... mostly on a range of manufacturing that supported government departments and authorities.

But Correctional industry had become the bound, dazed and gagged victim of its own harsh terms. If it didn't undergo significant change, the only other likely result was a complete breakdown.

A 1988 article about changes in the system says the challenge facing administrators was to find ways to motivate prisoners to acquire skills and work habits.

With traditional and proven programmes tossed out, new concepts were needed for inmates and the community.

The modern story of CSI began.
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