

Rob Perez
Owner
DV8 Kitchen

I'm Rob Perez, and along with my wife Diane, own DV8 Kitchen. DV8 is a restaurant and a bakery company in Lexington, Kentucky that employs people recovering from substance use disorder and the formally incarcerated.

Before I tell you all the reasons why DV8 is awesome, I'd like to tell you how I originally thought it was a *terrible* idea.

Let me be clear: I am a businessman with a long career in the restaurant industry. As in any small business, my daily focus is turning a profit!

When my wife approached me with the idea of using a restaurant to help people with a past, I was NOT interested.

Previously, over the course of 8 years, we had employed 60 people at our for-profit restaurants with a past. Each candidate would admit to their mistakes, claim to be clean and rehabilitated. We would hire them and most would disappear within two weeks. I'd done the math: nearly \$800 of training expense per person x 60 people is nearly \$50,000. I told my wife no.

Diane didn't give up. She had done her own math. We had lost 10 of our employees to fatal overdoses in the same 8 years. Diane was heartbroken. She did not care about the cost.

However, I was not on board. So, she scheduled a police ride along for me. On a Friday afternoon I witnessed things that changed me forever. Why would a person sell themselves for \$5 dollars?

Ultimately, this was the question Diane had been desperate to answer. Now it was keeping me up at night too.

Diane suggested that on the path of poor choices there are sober moments and motivation to become employed. We came to believe people need the support of a recovery community AND the purpose of a job.

We didn't have any of the answers. *So, we did what any sane person would do:* We started a restaurant and we would figure it out along the way.

In August 2017, DV8 Kitchen was born. I had one condition: It had to be profitable.

We developed a menu, hired employees, prepared for opening day, excitedly flung open the doors and...IT WAS AN EPIC FAIL!

We had no idea how to validate that our employees were in recovery, how to motivate them and our customers were basically afraid of us.

So, over the next couple of months, we took a hard look at what we were doing and tried to learn from our mistakes.

We learned two big things:

One, you do not need to be a social worker to employ people with a past. However, you can have recovery experts on your team. People with a past *do* need more than a job to be successful. They need housing, therapy and case workers. So, we forged relationships with residential living facilities. These centers validate our employees are staying in their program and provide the support they need to arrive at DV8 ready to work.

Secondly, you don't need to lower your standards to employ people with a past. In fact, you should *raise* your standards. So many of our people shared 1 thing: SHAME. It was both a cause of their substance abuse, and a result of it. We realized *work was PERFECT place to build them up*. We decided to set a higher standard because, not only are our people capable of meeting it, *but they also needed to see that they could*.

Today we work with a group of people most people deem "unemployable" and together have created two successful restaurants and a wholesale bakery.

Turnover is low, profits are good and YELP named DV8 Kitchen one of the top 40 restaurants in America twice in the past 3 years.

But now I want more. Not for me, but for our people. We have a nurse, an engineer and a college professor at DV8. I'm thrilled to have them, but they have skills which could be put to better use in other businesses.

Sadly, just like me... too many businesspeople think someone with a past will be legally risky, expensive and a waste of time. Our results suggest otherwise.... so, do I. You see, I'm not just a small business owner, I'm a recovering addict, with 31 years sober.

Here's what I want you to know: *I am not the exception, and neither is DV8. People in recovery can be EXCELLENT in the workplace*. What if EVERY American Small Business rethought HR and employed one person with a past? Based on my experience, small businesses can make a huge impact on recidivism.

Contrary to what some people think, Free Enterprise can save the world.