Violence in the Work

place

By Helen Frank Bensimon

VIOLENCE AGAINST EMPLOYERS IS INCREASING. AND SOMETIMES, THE TARGET IS THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGER. HERE'S HOW TO GUARD AGAINST WORKPLACE VIOLENCE FROM TROUBLED EMPLOYEES.

"You ain't seen the last of me," Paul Calden told the human resource manager at the Fireman's Insurance Company in Tampa when he was fired in May 1992.

He meant it.

Eight months later, Calden was back—with two semi-automatics.

He walked into the company cafeteria at lunchtime and opened fire, killing three men and critically wounding two women, one of them the human resource manager.

"This is what you get for firing me," he told his victims. Then he drove off to a Clearwater park and shot himself to death.

The deaths and injuries at Fireman's are part of a growing phenomenon of workplace violence, especially violence directed at employers. Homicide is now the third highest work-related cause of death in the United States, with some 750 workplace killings a year, according to a study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

The study found that only one in five victims of workplace homicide is a woman, but that homicide is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace, accounting for 42 percent of on-the-job fatalities for females.

For all workers, beatings, serious injury, rape, harassment, and other violent episodes are also widespread.

Joseph Kinney, executive director of the National Safe Workplace Institute in Chicago, and Dennis L. Johnson, president of Behavior Analysis & Consultants in Stuart, Florida, estimate that there were 111,000 incidents of workplace violence in 1992 and that these incidents cost employers and others $4.2 billion. Kinney and Johnson are co-authors of the latest NSWI report.

They found that violence specifically directed against employers or former employers is the fastest-growing category of workplace violence, and that homicides in that category have doubled or possibly tripled since 1989.

The report, *Breaking Point: The Workplace Violence Epidemic and What To Do About It,* identifies the following categories of violence:

▶ Violence against bystanders at a robbery or commercial crime. Women, elderly workers, and teenagers are especially vulnerable to this type of workplace violence.

▶ Violence against law-enforcement and security officers. More than 100 law-enforcement officers and a comparable number of security guards are murdered each year in the line of duty.

▶ Violence against spouses and partners. The report defines this category as homicide directed at a spouse or at someone who is a target of misplaced affection and the resulting anger. "Perpetrators go to the victim's workplace because they are often barred by injunctions or restraining orders from going near the victim's home," says the study. Most of these incidents involve men attacking women.

▶ Violence against employers. This is homicide or other violence directed at current or former co-workers, supervisors, or managers.

▶ Terrorism and hate crimes. The recent bombing of the World Trade Center indicates that this type of violence, common in Asia and the Middle East, has made its way to the American workplace. Experts fear that its prevalence may increase in the future.

Violence directed at employers has a greater effect on HR professionals than does any other type of workplace violence. Because HR managers usually are the ones who have to tell employees that they are being fired, laid off, demoted, or disciplined, they often are the targets of rage.

HR people are in a position to take a leadership role in helping their organizations develop some preventive and protective measures. They are usually in the forefront of efforts to help organizations recover after an act of violence occurs.

The causes

Violence toward employers is the result of many factors. Each is serious in itself, but they are explosive when combined.

They include the pressures of widespread job losses, layoffs, mergers, downsizings, and working in "lean and mean" companies. Workers
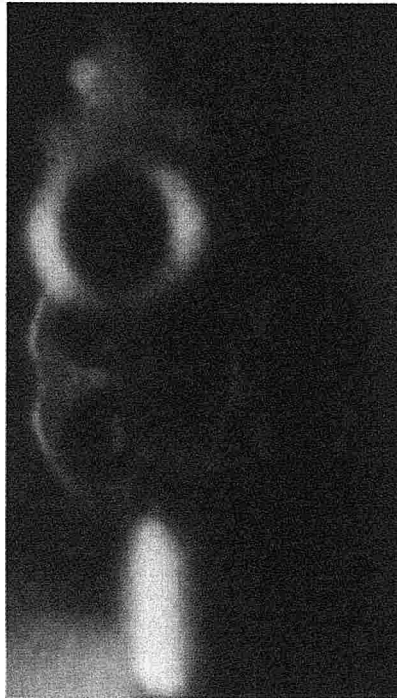
THE HUMAN
RESOURCE MANAGER
ESCAPED BY HIDING
UNDER A DESK

in the 1990s face a much smaller job market than workers did a decade ago. After a layoff, a new job is harder to find. A lost job raises the specter of losing one's home, car, and savings, or of jeopardizing a child's education. Loss of a job also means a loss of identity and self-esteem.

Combined with these pressures are the availability of guns (NIOSH says 75 percent of workplace homicides are committed with firearms), a population adept at using weapons, and a mass media that glamorizes weapons. The results are frequently explosive and always tragic.

Kinney and Johnson point out that unlike robbery or commercial crime, violence directed at employers almost always follows a set sequence. It begins, they say, with a traumatic experience that creates the perception of an unsolvable psychic state, which produces extreme and chronic emotional tension or anxiety.

"The traumatic experience may be

caused by a single major event, such as job termination, or it may be preceded by a series of minor events such as reprimands, one or two negative performance reviews," and so forth, the authors say.

The traumatized employee or former employee then projects responsibility for the state of mind onto the situation, in effect "externalizing blame for the unsolvable psychic state."

At this point, the person's thinking turns inward and becomes increasingly egocentric. Self-protection and self-preservation become the only concerns. From this perspective, say the authors, violence seems to be the only way out. Following a period of internal conflict, which may be prolonged, the person commits or attempts a violent act.

Intervention is possible at any point, they say, "but only if adequate levels of awareness and insight preexist so the warning signs flashed by individuals at risk are recognized and responded to appropriately."

The pattern

Cases of workplace violence are remarkably similar, particularly when homicide is involved.

At the Elgar Corporation, a small San Diego manufacturer of power electronics equipment, technician Larry Hansel went on a rampage several weeks after being laid off. He set off a series of radio-controlled bombs that killed two supervisors. The HR manager, who had been one of his targets, escaped by hiding under a desk.

David Burke, a California father of seven, had been fired as a U.S. Air agent. He smuggled a .44 magnum aboard a U.S. Air flight carrying the supervisor who had fired him. After the plane took off, Burke shot the supervisor, the pilot, and the co-pilot. The plane crashed, killing 43 passengers—including Burke and the supervisor. Investigators found a note that read, "I asked for some leniency for my family.... Well, I got none. And you'll get none."

Arthur Hill, a civilian employee at Fort Knox, Kentucky, had been passed over for a promotion. He shot and killed three civilian co-workers, including his boss, and critically

Murder at the Post Office: Until Culture Change Is a Reality, It's a "Ticking Bomb"

No examination of workplace violence is complete without a discussion of the U.S. Postal Service.

Over the past decade, 36 people have been killed and 20 wounded at postal facilities around the country. The latest incidents occurred last May, when four people were killed on the same day in two separate shootings in Michigan and California.

The Postal Service also is the site of one of the worst cases of violence ever directed against an employer. In 1986, Patrick Henry Sherrill, a part-time letter carrier who had been reprimanded and warned that he would receive a poor performance report, went on a rampage and killed 14 people at the Edmond, Oklahoma, post office. It was the third worst case of mass murder by a single person in U.S. history.

With more than 700,000 employees, the U.S. Postal Service has the nation's largest civilian labor force. Postal Service officials contend that, given the size of their employee population, the amount of violence is not statistically large.

A troubled environment. While that is undoubtedly true, experts who have studied the post office killings have come away with a nearly unanimous conclusion that a contributing factor is the rigid, almost paramilitary work culture of the Postal Service. The current postmaster general, Marvin Runyon, has pledged to change that system.

According to researchers Joseph Kinney and Dennis Johnson, the characteristics of a troubled work environment are as follows:

▶ chronic labor/management disputes
▶ frequent grievances filed by employees
▶ extraordinary numbers of injury claims, especially psychological injuries
▶ understaffing, or excessive demands for overtime
▶ many stressed workers
▶ authoritarian management.

It is significant that many of those characteristics exist in the Postal Service. In Florida, for example, one-fourth of the complaints filed in 1992 with the National Labor Relations Board against all employers and unions in the state were filed against U.S. Postal Service managers. The accusations—nearly 200 in all—ran the gamut from suspending workers for union activities, to installing a window in a post office to spy on workers visiting their union steward, to ordering a window clerk to remove photos of her grandchildren.

A Virginia woman, Callie Norton, worked for the Postal Service in the 1970s, sorting mail at a large regional center. She says the stresses she complained of then are still identified as problems today.

Norton said in an interview that because mishandling the mail is a

"THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF PRESSURE"

federal offense, there was extraordinarily close supervision where she worked.

"There was a tremendous amount of pressure due to the close supervision," she recalled.

One-way glass around the work area made it possible for supervisors to watch employees at all times without being seen. Workers had to punch in and out whenever they left their stations for even a few minutes. They were rated on how much time they spent in the bathroom. If they spent too many minutes in the bathroom, someone was sent to find them. A computer tracked their movements; as Norton said, "they knew where you were at any given moment." Supervisors were generally hated, she said.

Norton also noted that the many different work shifts at the all-night facility wrecked workers' personal lives.

The same complaints are true of the Postal Service of the 1990s.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. In the wake of so many killings, Postmaster General Runyon was concerned enough about morale to send a questionnaire in 1992 to all employees. According to a report in the *St. Petersburg* (Florida) *Times*, only a quarter of the 500,000 workers who responded said they were being "treated with respect and dignity."

While most said they were satisfied with pay, benefits, and job security, only one in nine agreed that the Postal Service promotes the most qualified people into management jobs. Only one-seventh believed they were recognized for doing a job well, and three-fifths said that "the amount of stress in my job is a problem."

In the article, several postal employees were interviewed about the stresses and frustrations of their jobs. One was Larry Harrell, a letter-sorting-machine operator with 16 years in the Postal Service. Harrell told reporter David Ollinger that one night, soon after he was hired, his wife called to say their house was on fire. He immediately told his supervisor, who refused to allow him to go home. Although the fire turned out to be minor, Harrell said that he "never recovered" from the incident.

These days, much of the talk at the Postal Service is about employee empowerment, a 360-degree turn from the present. In focus groups around the country, workers and managers discuss workplace problems, sometimes with the assistance of a psychologist. There also is an 800 number that employees can call 24 hours a day to report concerns and complaints.

Changing the culture of such a vast enterprise is a tremendous undertaking, and even with the best intentions it will take many years. Until then, the U.S. Postal Service remains a kind of laboratory case of the relationship between workplace culture and workplace violence— and a ticking bomb that could go off again at any moment.

wounded two others, before he shot himself.

Robert Earl Mack, a 25-year veteran of the General Dynamics Convair plant in San Diego, had told friends that he lived for his job. He was fired for repeated tardiness and other issues during a retrenchment at Convair. After a reinstatement hearing, he suddenly pulled out a .38-caliber handgun and shot his former supervisor and the union negotiator who was representing him. The negotiator died. Mack said he had actually been planning to shoot himself at the hearing. "It's the only job I ever had," he said. "How can they take everything away from me?"

Elizabeth Teague, who was unhappy with the way she was being treated at work, opened fire with a 9mm pistol at the Eveready Battery Company in Bennington, Vermont. She killed her target, the plant manager, and critically wounded two others after attempting to set the plant on fire.

Paul Hannah, a Chicago phone-company lineman, was suspended for refusing to take a drug test. He aimed a gun at a company manager, but it misfired six times. A union steward was killed when he tried to intervene.

Experts on workplace violence agree on several key points:
▶ There is a typical profile of the workplace killer (see the sidebar).
▶ The violent employee usually gives some hints that he or she is planning something.
▶ Better hiring and firing policies can help prevent violence.
▶ Companies need formal plans for preventing and dealing with violence.

A rigid, authoritarian workplace frequently contributes to violence. Time and time again, disgruntled workers who have become violent have said that what impelled them was not the fact that they were demoted or fired or laid off, but the dehumanizing way the action was carried out.

Thomas Harpley is a psychologist with the National Trauma Services in San Diego, a company that intervenes after violent incidents. He says that for many people who are fired and who turn violent, "their life is

The Workplace Killer: A Profile

The growing number of workplace homicides has made it possible to construct a profile of the typical perpetrator of workplace violence. While each person may not have all the characteristics in the profile, most have a majority of them. The typical perpetrator of workplace violence:
▶ is a white male in his 30s or 40s
▶ has lost his job or perceives that he will soon lose his job
▶ has been "let go" in an insensitive manner
▶ finds his identity in his job
▶ has a history of people problems—conflicts with co-workers, supervisors, or both
▶ is a loner
▶ may be undergoing a private stress such as a divorce or death in the family that compounds the pain of job loss
▶ has difficulty accepting authority
▶ repeatedly violates company policies and rules
▶ has a tendency to blame others for his problems
▶ threatens fellow employees or supervisors
▶ may have a history of substance abuse
▶ has a fascination with weapons
▶ has a history of depression, paranoia, and violence or encounters with violence
▶ frequently talks about his or others' past incidents of violence
▶ works in a company with an authoritarian management style.

their job. When their job is in jeopardy, their life is in jeopardy."

What to do

Experts agree that potential workplace killers usually hint that they are planning something, but not everyone agrees on what to do about it. Some say that such people should be identified and offered counseling or other services that could defuse their anger.

James Alan Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, Boston, disagrees.

"I don't think it's possible to reliably identify who will go on a rampage and kill the boss," he said in an interview.

Even if it is possible to identify a potentially violent person, he thinks it can be dangerous, because singling people out for attention can trigger unwanted behavior.

"It's not a matter of identifying problem cases and dealing with them," he says. "It's a matter of changing the way things are done in the company. You can't just grease the squeaky wheel. You've got to grease the whole machine."

Fox urges companies to "invest as much time in firing as in hiring."

If an employee has been with a company for 10 years or more, he says there's a "moral obligation" to

offer retraining or to help the person find a new job. This shows that the company values the person's contribution, and it can make departing employees feel less angry and more hopeful. Such gestures can also reassure other employees that the company is compassionate.

Fox also suggests that employers not fire workers on Fridays. Rather than giving them an opportunity to cool off, this strategy just makes them more angry and frustrated, he says. Over the weekend, they can't talk with managers or co-workers, get more information, or start a job search.

Fox, author of *Overkill*, published late in 1993 by Planum, often advises companies on strategies to prevent violence. He cites a recent case involving a belligerent employee at a medical facility who was being fired because of his volatile behavior and who had a history of violence involving guns.

Fox suggested to management that the employee, who was in a health-related profession, be offered some courses to upgrade his skills. Fox further suggested that a co-worker who had a close relationship with the volatile employee invite him to lunch and tell him about the offer. He reasoned that this might soften the blow of being fired and prevent a violent reaction. It worked.

Jeffrey Tanenbaum, who heads the occupational safety and health group at the San Francisco law firm of Littler, Mendelson, Fastiff, Tichy, and Mathiason, recommends more careful hiring practices to screen out some potentially violent workers.

"A good interview is very important," says Tanenbaum. "An interviewer needs to be able to really draw out the applicant."

He also calls for extensive background checks including criminal records for everyone being considered for a job, without exception.

Tanenbaum, who writes and consults on workplace violence in addition to running his law practice, also calls for simple physical security measures that can prevent or contain violence. These include security doors, shatterproof or bulletproof glass, and a panic button for the receptionist. He recommends placing the reception desk in view of others, having guests sign in, and providing guest badges for all nonemployees.

More and more organizations are taking these kinds of measures. After a mental-health worker was stabbed to death by a client in a California welfare office, many of those offices adopted new security measures, including metal detectors, alarms, convex mirrors similar to those in convenience stores, and closed-circuit television. Some also bolted chairs to the floor or replaced them with very light furniture to prevent injuries caused by clients hurling chairs at employees.

Also important is an ability to intervene quickly. When Gian Luigi Ferri, a disgruntled client, began shooting randomly in the San Francisco law offices of Pettit & Martin, building managers quickly contained the violence. They used a building-wide public-address system to urge all the occupants of the high-rise building to stay in their offices and lock all doors.

This confined Ferri to the stairwells, where it was easier to trap him. Ferri, armed with a .45-caliber pistol and a black valise filled with several hundred rounds of ammunition, killed himself when he saw police coming up the stairwell.

Some large corporations have chaplains on site to help them deal with explosive situations. More than 50 companies, including General Motors, Allied Systems, and Carolina Telephone and Telegraph, employ full-time chaplains.

According to the American Association of Ministry in the Workplace, at least 2,000 chaplains are working full-time at work sites. In one case reported by the association, a chaplain was able to dissuade and disarm an employee who had brought a gun to work, determined to kill his manager.

Avoiding workplace violence is essential from a human point of view, but it is also good business. Violence costs money—for the work of cleaning up the office, for lost

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A CHAPLAIN DISARMED AN EMPLOYEE WHO HAD BROUGHT A GUN TO WORK, DETERMINED TO KILL HIS MANAGER

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business when normal work stops, for lost productivity while injured workers recuperate, and especially for lawsuits and insurance.

Lawsuits resulting from workplace violence frequently concern claims of negligent security. Many result in high legal fees and large payments for damages. These suits hit the companies in which the attacks happened, and also the landlords and property managers for the buildings where they occurred.

Courts in Florida and Texas have already ruled that employers found negligent have to pay awards to families of murder victims.

At the Elgar Corporation, after the company's insurers paid the families of the men who were killed, the company had to pay them an additional $400,000. And since the incident, Elgar's worker-compensation

expenses have gone up by $100,000 annually. Such increases in insurance expenses are standard at companies where there has been violence.

Have a plan

Most experts agree that companies need some kind of formal threat-management plan aimed at preventing violent incidents, and a trauma plan for following up when they occur. Such plans include establishing a threat-management team, typically staffed with an HR person and representatives from the legal and security departments. The team should establish a relationship with local law-enforcement officials.

The team should also develop a procedure for reporting threats and communicate that procedure to all employees. Ideally, a threat-management plan should offer a confidential hot line or designate someone in human resources or security to take threat reports. Workers may feel uncomfortable reporting threats to managers or supervisors.

Along with this must come a procedure for investigating threats. Some companies bring in an expert to evaluate the threat objectively and to guide action after the investigation.

Training is a key component of any firm's threat-management plan. According to S. Anthony Baron, author of *Violence in the Workplace: A Prevention and Management Guide for Business,* training should cover the following subjects:
▶ identification of potential sources of violence, to familiarize employees with a profile of a potentially violent person
▶ warning signs and the need to report any threatening remarks or situations
▶ levels of human needs and how to recognize stress
▶ management training in hiring, downsizing, and termination.

Baron also recommends that the following training programs be part of TQM efforts: stress management, effective communications, conflict resolution, team building, dealing with difficult people, management of change, and termination training.

Companies also need trauma plans that cover what to do when violence occurs. Planning after the

fact is rarely effective. Train a rapid-response team to intervene in a crisis and to debrief people afterwards, experts advise. Have a method for monitoring people during the emotional turmoil after the event and during the recovery phase, so that the company can make mental-health referrals if necessary.

A trauma plan should include procedures for dealing with the police, notifying victims' families, calming hysterical witnesses, and arranging transportation if employees don't have access to their cars. After Hansel's rampage at the Elgar Corporation, employees had to be sent home by taxi while police checked their cars for booby traps.

Remember to make plans for cleaning up and repairing damage, notifying customers of any delays in service or changes in their orders, recapturing payroll and personnel information that may have been destroyed, and repairing phone lines.

A spokesperson should prepare to deal with the news media, because acts of violence almost always become news.

Also have plans for taking care of medical-insurance claims for treatment of physical or psychological trauma. And remember to tell employees when to return to work.

Dealing with feelings

The first 24 hours after an incident are the most critical for debriefing senior management and employees and allowing people to vent feelings and concerns.

Tanenbaum recommends that employees have access to a 24-hour hot line as soon as possible for as long as necessary.

"This is not a nine-to-five process," he says.

He also recommends that the company arrange for people to meet in small groups, "so they can talk about the loss they have suffered."

At Elgar, workers returned to two weeks of company-sponsored therapy. They could choose from a variety of therapists to find one they were comfortable with.

At the Convair plant where Mack killed his union negotiator and wounded his supervisor, General

Dynamics provided free counseling for many months after the incident. The firm also reevaluated its downsizing procedures. Now the company gives employees 60 days notice before they are furloughed.

"In the aftermath of a violent incident, the survivors—including those who were injured, those who were targeted but missed, witnesses, co-workers, family members, and other people in the organization—can be emotionally devastated and may suffer from posttraumatic stress," says Baron.

"The event so overloads and overwhelms an individual that the psyche's normal coping mechanisms can't handle it. For the survivors, the
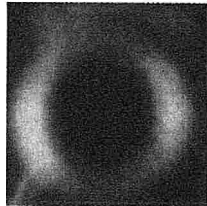
"FOR THE SURVIVORS, THE WORKPLACE IS NO LONGER SAFE, BUT HAS BECOME THREATENING"

workplace is no longer safe, but has become threatening. Information on the effects of posttraumatic stress in the workplace emphasizes the importance of immediate action and early treatment to avoid more severe, debilitating responses later."

In a 1991 study by the Barrington Psychiatric Institute in Los Angeles of 200 people suffering major psychic trauma, half began therapy immediately, and the other half began later. The study found that the first group averaged 12 weeks of recovery time before returning to work. Only 13 percent of this group chose to pursue litigation. The second group averaged 46 weeks of recovery time, and 94 percent chose litigation.

HR can help

Given the factors propelling violence against employers, the trend toward workplace violence will probably get much worse before it get better. Human resource professionals are in a unique position to be part of the solution. There is no magic way to prevent workplace violence, but the right human resource policies can save lives.

It is clear that companies need to address hiring and firing practices and that workplace cultures need to become more friendly to workers. These are areas in which HR professionals can take a leading role.

Tom Erickson, vice-president of human resources at Elgar, who escaped Hansel's rampage by hiding under a desk, wrote the introduction to Baron's book. He gives this advice:

"The lesson I gained from this tragedy was not a new one," he writes. "Companies are made up of people with all their human complexities and frailties. My job as a human resource professional and manager is to be sensitive to, to understand, to support, to share, to challenge, to relate to, the individuals and the group of employees collectively.

"Somehow over the 20 years, I lost sight of my job, and I became an efficient administrator—doing what it takes to comply with laws, regulations, and sound practices.

"I thought I knew Larry Hansel; I guess I just administered for him. The message in this book is to take the time—make the time—to know the people in your organization; look intently for how each individual is doing, help fellow managers and employees be sensitive to one another, take the risk, and offer yourself to the subtle cries for help." ∎