

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: MYTHS AND MITIGATIONS

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

As the global financial crisis grinds on, it is doing more than generating foreclosures, bankruptcies and losses in the financial markets: It also means people are losing their jobs as many companies cut back on staff in an attempt to stay solvent. Last week, banking giant Citibank announced plans to lay off some 53,000 employees, and Citibank is not alone, as many other companies are being forced to adopt similar measures. These layoffs are not confined to the banking sector; the automotive, computer and transportation sectors have also been hit hard.

We are hearing a lot of concern over the fact that the layoffs could spawn incidents of workplace violence. Of course, there is always a risk of such incidents. Indeed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, out of the 5,488 workplace fatalities in the United States in 2007, there were 610 homicides, of which 491 were shootings. But such concerns are frequently amplified and brought to the forefront during times when there are mass layoffs. (When discussing workplace violence, it is also important to understand that it is not just a U.S. phenomenon. Cases have also occurred in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, Japan, China, India and elsewhere.)

Additionally, workplace violence concerns have been elevated in recent days by the Nov. 14 triple homicide at SiPort, a Silicon Valley semiconductor company. In the SiPort incident, Jing Wu, an engineer who had been fired for performance issues, returned to the company later that day and killed the company's CEO, vice president of operations and human resources manager. There are reports that Wu had asked for a meeting with the victims to discuss his termination, and had killed them in the meeting.

Workplace Violence Myths

In this environment, we believe it is prudent to explore some of the widespread myths surrounding workplace violence and to discuss some measures that can be taken to help mitigate potential workplace violence incidents.

'He Just Snapped'

Perhaps the first workplace violence myth that needs to be addressed is the idea that a man "just snaps" and goes on a shooting rampage in his workplace. We intentionally say man rather than person here, because while incidents do occur in which a female shooter is involved, they are rare. Statistically, it is far more common for workplace homicides to be committed by men.

It is also important to note that workplace homicides seldom occur randomly. They are usually planned in advance, and in most cases the perpetrator intentionally targets a specific individual, usually a supervisor, human resources manager or co-worker, whom he believes is responsible for his plight. In the SiPort case, Wu intentionally targeted his supervisors and the human resources manager. The fact that he returned to the company's office with a gun after being fired shows that the attack was premeditated.

In most cases of workplace violence, the violent outburst is driven by factors that build up over a long period of time, rather than by sudden, traumatic events. Failed romantic relationships or marriages, stress from financial problems, lack of job advancement and perceived (or actual) injustice at the hands of a co-worker or superior are all factors that have led to violent incidents in the workplace.

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Current vs. Former Employees

Another significant myth that needs to be addressed is the idea that workplace violence is primarily a concern during times when employees are being laid off. This is simply not the case. In fact, studies by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and others show that only about 22 percent of workplace homicides involve former employees, compared to approximately 43 percent involving current employees. (The remaining incidents were committed by non-employees, with 21 percent involving domestic disputes and 14 percent involving customers or clients.) This means that while there are many examples of workplace violence involving fired employees, like the Wu case, companies are almost twice as likely to be targeted by a current employee as by an employee who was terminated. In other words, it is not only a concern for companies that are in the midst of layoffs. Workplace violence needs to be a constant concern for all companies.

A Proactive Stance:**Protective Intelligence and Counter Surveillance**

One very effective way to achieve a proactive stance is to use a combination of counter surveillance and protective intelligence as a critical element of a facility's (or executive protection) security plan.

Protective intelligence teams can coordinate with managers, human resources professionals, mental health professionals and law enforcement to identify, investigate and flag potential perpetrators of workplace violence before they get to the point of launching an attack. Additionally, counter surveillance teams, which are proactive by their very nature, can help by noticing out-of-place behavior occurring in parking lots and outside of entrances — places a uniformed guard sitting inside the facility has very limited ability to monitor. By focusing on behavior and demeanor, counter surveillance teams can frequently pick out angry or mentally disturbed individuals before they can get to the building. When combined with an educated and alert workforce, these proactive measures can help provide protection that no technological system can match.

Warning Signs

The key element of a proactive security regime is the ability and willingness to identify the warning signs and take them seriously. As with school shootings, one of the biggest contributing factors to workplace violence is the failure to pick up on and thoroughly investigate such warnings. In many past workplace violence cases, the perpetrators clearly presented warning signs, and in several cases, investigations of the incidents later found that those warning signs were downplayed or ignored.

Although we have not yet seen all the details of the SiPort shooting, it would not be surprising if it is determined that Wu gave indications of his intent to friends, family members and co-workers that went unheeded.

Warning signs that an employee is at risk for committing acts of workplace violence include sudden changes in behavior, decreased productivity, uncharacteristic problems with tardiness and attendance, withdrawal from one's circle of friends, or the sudden display of negative traits such as irritation, snapping at or abusing co-workers or even a sudden disregard for personal hygiene. The theft or sabotage of employer or co-worker property is another sign.

Perhaps the most indicative signs that serious trouble is looming are talk about suicide and/or the expression of actual or veiled threats. If co-workers or supervisors feel afraid of a person, even when the reason for that fear cannot be clearly articulated, that is also a significant warning sign (and has been noted in several past incidents). Another indication is when an employee suddenly begins carrying a gun to work or flashing it to co-workers.

Because, as noted above, corporate security departments are not omnipresent, they require other people within the company to be their eyes and ears and alert them to individuals who have the potential to commit acts of workplace violence. Co-workers and first-line managers know when John in the cubicle next to them has suddenly become really creepy and talks about killing the boss, or when Jane down the hall is being stalked by her psychotic ex-boyfriend.

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Companies that are serious about preventing workplace violence should establish clear workplace violence policies — and ensure they are widely communicated and strictly followed. Any and all threats of violence expressed by employees must be taken seriously, even those that appear innocuous at first. Employees, managers and human resources personnel must be educated about workplace violence and encouraged to report all threats or other overt signs immediately. Most important, supervisors and human resources managers must be cognizant of the other, more subtle warning signs — and be encouraged to take them seriously. Clearly, in this situation, a false alarm is better than no alarm at all.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT ORCA...

Thank You for Giving Your Time

Dear Rebekah,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your participation in the City of Des Moines 2008 Crime Free Rental Housing Landlord Training Program. This year we hosted 3 classes and educated 50 property owners and managers.

I appreciate your time and efforts in assisting me in putting on a very informative and entertaining training program. I look forward to working with you again in 2009!

Thank You!

CSO Officer, Tonya Seaberry

