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## Alertness May Help Prevent Violence on the Job – Working to Stay Safe

By Terry Maxon

After an employee explodes and begins shooting co-workers, someone inevitably says it was a complete surprise.

Steve Millwee is here to tell you that it's never a surprise.

There's always someone who witnessed an instance of violence, heard a threat or saw peculiar behavior from the person who winds up shooting at people in the workplace, said Mr. Millwee, an expert in workplace violence and prevention.

"In fact, in every single workplace violence case where I've testified over the past 26 years as an expert, [each] person had an extensive history of violent behavior," Mr. Millwee told security professionals at the ASIS International convention this week in Dallas.

"He may not have been convicted of it. He may have never been charged with a crime for violent behavior. But he has been involved in a pattern of violent behavior all of his life."

The trick is to train security professionals, human resource people and others to watch for warning signs, take appropriate action and get the person out of the company, Mr. Millwee said.

It is no trivial matter. According to Mr. Millwee, who's president and chief executive of SecurTest Inc. in Tampa, Fla., one of every six violent crimes occurs on the job. Violence is the leading cause of on-the-job deaths for women, and it's the third-leading cause of workplace deaths.

The stories are vivid and horrifying. A worker passed over for a promotion guns down his supervisor. A domestic dispute turns into a shooting at work.

Among the instances:

- In July 2003, an employee shot 14 co-workers, including six who died, at a Lockheed Martin factory in Mississippi. He then killed himself.
- In early July 2004, a 21-year-old employee at a Kansas City, Kan., meatpacking plant shot seven co-workers and killed five of them. The shooter reportedly had had a “tiff” with another employee. After shooting his colleagues, he committed suicide.
- In March 2004, a man shot a co-worker, a 34-year-old woman, at a Grand Prairie plastics factory. She died soon afterward. The two reportedly had had an affair.

### Need for screening

The best way to avoid workplace violence is to make sure you don’t hire violent people, Mr. Millwee said. Employers can use extensive background checks and screening to help detect a violent past. And when violence is threatened, he said, an employer cannot downplay the threat.

Mr. Millwee recounted a Texas case in which a man was seen beating his second wife in the company parking lot. After he was released from jail on attempted murder charges and his wife came out of her coma and left the hospital, the company had to decide what to do.

Ideally, Mr. Millwee said, security people at the company should have stepped forward and insisted that the man leave the company. Instead, he was simply put on a different shift than his wife.

“He proceeds over the next 30 days to tell 12 of his co-workers and two supervisors, ‘I’m going to kill the [expletive] because I am not going to go back to prison for her,’” Mr. Millwee said.

At shift change one day, he stepped behind his wife and fired two bullets into her head and four more into her chest after she fell to the floor. He then shot at other employees before killing himself.

After the crime, investigators discovered that the man got the job – on his wife’s recommendation – after finishing 20 years in Texas state prisons for killing his first wife. Mr. Millwee said the tragedy could have been avoided if company officials had adequately reviewed his past or acted decisively when he battered his wife.

### Previous problems

In another notorious case, 33-year-old Paul Calden – fired from Fireman’s Fund Insurance Co. eight months earlier – entered a Tampa, Fla., restaurant in January 2003, walked up to a table of Fireman’s supervisors and began shooting.

Three died and two were injured. Soon afterward, he was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot in Clearwater, about 15 miles away.

But the violence didn't start at Fireman's. Mr. Calden had pulled a semiautomatic handgun on a supervisor at his previous job at Allstate Insurance Co. Other Allstate employees knew that Mr. Calden thought he was from Mars and left work at 3 p.m. each day to get Martian blood transfusions, Mr. Millwee said.

Instead of being fired, Mr. Calden was allowed to leave with a severance package and Allstate provided a letter of reference.

The letter wasn't particularly glowing, "but it didn't say he was a Martian with a gun," Mr. Millwee said.

The widows of the three dead men and one of the survivors sued Allstate, claiming that it should have alerted prospective employers that Mr. Calden had problems. Allstate later settled the case.

Firing employees who threaten violence can trigger violence, Mr. Millwee said, so employers should adopt a negotiating strategy that lets the employee quit his job and keep his dignity, and then get him help with his problem.

Security people must create a companywide mindset that threats are usually precursors to violence: actual threats ("I'm going to kill you") and conditional ones ("If you fire me, I'll do my own firing with a gun").

But threats are not just an internal issue.

"This is not a human resources problem. This is not even a security problem. This is a criminal problem," Mr. Millwee said.

"If you don't believe me, walk up to a police officer when you get back home, and say, 'Officer, I'm going to kick your butt.' I guarantee you, you'll get to take a ride with him or her because these are criminal problems," he said.

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