

Fighting back...

...British Crime Survey statistics suggest that violence and abuse in the workplace is on the increase, resulting in dramatic effects on businesses and their operations. [Alex Chambers](#) reviews the various ways in which the in-house security professional might increase safety levels for the security team, and indeed, all members of staff.

Violence and abuse in the workplace is on the increase with dramatic effects on businesses and their operations. In March 2001 the Home Office and Health and Safety Executive published the Findings from the British Crime Survey (BCS) 2000, which showed that in 1999, there were around 1.3 million incidents of violence at work in England and Wales. Unsurprisingly the figures also showed that 70% of those surveyed had received no formal training or advice from their employers on how to deal with such physical and verbal abuse. Current Legislation and Health and Safety regulations make it the employer's responsibility to ensure the safety of their staff whilst at work, but there are many things that both employers and employees can do to reduce the risks.

One of the hardest things for any working individual to accept is that a constant possibility of threat exists for virtually all of us in whatever role we perform. This is not least because we come into contact with many different people in many different situations each day. Having accepted the possibility of risk, you can set about to take steps to either limit the chances of such threats occurring, or get yourself trained on the best techniques to handle them.

The extent of the problem is widely documented in reports, surveys and the press:

Facts and Figures

Up to 40,000 staff at Jobcentres and benefit offices went on a two-day strike in January over plans to scrap safety screens. The action by members of the Public and Commercial Services Union was taken after statistics showed last year over 5,000 of their workers had reported being attacked whilst at work.

Health Minister Malcolm Chisholm came under pressure to introduce a 'zero tolerance' policy earlier this year, after figures announced show that violence on the wards is escalating. Hospitals in the north called for greater security after bosses reported an average of 30 violent attacks on staff each month. In total, almost half of all casualty nurses had been assaulted by patients or visitors in the past year.

In October 2000, The Sunday Express reported on the extent of violence in Britain's schools. It referred to a survey compiled by the Professional Association of Teachers (PAT), in which it was reported that almost 50% of teachers have been physically or verbally attacked whilst at work, in the previous 12 months.

The Independent Retailers Network Survey 2000 showed that a quarter of shopkeepers in the UK have been victims of crime with more than half of these cases involving the use of a weapon.

The TUC recently commented in the press that the real figures may be much higher than previous surveys have shown and that it may be as many as one in five workers each year who will suffer from a physical or verbal attack whilst at work.

Who is at Risk?

Despite the relatively high number of incidences of violence each year, many institutions still believe that the risks of incidences are relatively low and are often related to the type of work.

This may be one of the factors contributing to the lack of company initiatives (in terms of policies or training) that appear to be in place for all staff when it comes to handling these situations. It should not, however, be a reason for any company to dismiss the risk altogether.

Jobs most likely to fall into the higher risk groups are generally those where the role requires them to deal with the public, and in particular those handling money, complaints, or working in positions of care. For example, roles with the highest related risks of verbal or physical threats are those in security, nursing, social care or public transport sectors.

That said there are some other factors, related to the type of worker rather than the role performed which may increase the chances of an attack on an employee. Higher risk groups listed by the British Crime Survey include those employees with managerial responsibilities, those in smaller organisations, those working after 6pm, young female workers and people who had been victims before.

Stemming the rising tide

It is a fact that very few violent incidents occur that could not have been avoided or at least detected in advance. Even if the possibility of certain types of threat had not been considered in an initial assessment of a position, staff could probably have spotted the signs and taken the appropriate actions to deal with them.

If you are not alert and aware, you will not be able to see the danger signs. Many situations result from a history of problems or an escalation of issues that finally lead to a breakdown in communications and end in an assault. It is up to the individual involved to make the right assessment of the situation and to take early action that will hopefully lead to a more positive outcome. It is however, up to the employer to make sure that their staff are protected, as far as is possible from harm, to a reasonable degree and that they have equipped their staff with the necessary skills or tools to protect themselves from the risks associated with the role.

Practical Management

Many employers do not seem to realise that they have a legal obligation to ensure their employees' personal as well as physical safety. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 states that employers are obliged to take such steps as are 'reasonably practicable' to ensure that the employee remains safe from 'reasonably foreseeable dangers', and any breach of this duty can provoke a claim by an injured employee for damages. Other comparable rules are set out in the law of negligence.

With each position recruited for, the employer lists the expressed terms on which the candidate is being employed. These are set out in the contract of employment, however, under our current legislation there are a number of terms, which are not necessarily set out by the employer in the contract but are deemed 'implied' terms of the agreement. One of the implied terms in the contract of employment is the employer's duty of care towards their employees.

Both employer and employees have an interest in reducing violence at work. For employers, violence can lead to poor morale and a poor image for the organisation, making it difficult to recruit and keep staff. It can also mean an extra cost with absenteeism, higher insurance premiums and compensation payments.

Violence in the workplace is a problem employers can ill afford to ignore. Each year more than 3 million working days are lost due to violent incidents at work. In 1997 workplace violence cost British businesses around £62 million, but that figure could rocket to as much as £230 million once all court cases and compensation claims for that year have been settled. Not only can violence at work be both frightening and dangerous for the individual involved, but the organisation as a whole will also be significantly affected. In a workplace where staff have been attacked or abused in the past, staff morale is likely to be low, and absence rates high, as over-stressed employees take time out to recover.

For staff, assaults have a huge emotional and often physical impact on their way of life. In the worst scenarios they suffer physical injury, disability or even death. Even in a milder attack they may suffer from depression, stress, fits and anxiety attacks. Their whole personality might be affected and they many become unable to work again.

First Step: A Risk Assessment

So what steps can the management take to ensure that their workers are not subjected to such attacks? The first step is to conduct a proper risk assessment of the risks to which employees are subjected to whilst at work. When looking into the risks, it is a general rule that all staff who have face-to-face contact with the public are normally at higher risk, assess all positions within the company.

Carry out workplace inspections to get a realistic view of working conditions and practices. You need to find out if you have a problem – encourage staff to raise any safety or security issues with their boss, so that systems and safeguards might be put into place to avoid incidents occurring.

The Review

Having conducted your risk assessment you should be able to see if a problem exists or where you might find yourselves exposed to ones in the future. Checking these against your existing arrangements allows you to find out the areas of weakness. What precautions are already in place? Are they adequate or should more be done?

Employers should regularly check that their assessment is a true reflection of their employees current work situation. An employer must be prepared to add further measures where these are not working. This is particularly important where the job changes.

It is a good idea to check what incidents have been reported previously and to ask staff when and how they have felt threatened in the past and make adjustments where necessary.

When reviewing current arrangements look at:

- The level of training and information provided to staff.
- The level of information and service given to customers or members of the public.
- The environment of the workers.
- The working practices and patterns of each role.

Looking at preventative strategies:

Training, is one of the most important preventative measures that an employer can invest in. Employees can be trained to spot the early signs of aggression and either avoid it or cope with it. It is also important that staff fully understand any systems or policies established for their own protection to ensure greater adherence and therefore an improved outcome.

Information - Staff should be kept fully informed of all incidences or potential risks. If employees are briefed on situations which could be problematical, or group/individuals with a history of conflict, they will be better prepared and more able to handle them.

Many violent episodes result from a lack of information or a misunderstanding, which could have been avoided if better, more timely advice had been available at an earlier stage.

The Environment - You can find designers who will create a more passive environment for you with calming music, décor and lighting, however, the most effective and important measures will be the physical security systems and policies used.

Just some of the measures taken include; video cameras, alarms, security locks, access control, wider counters, raised floors, transparent protective screens and security guards.

Working practices - Those who handle cash, are usually in the highest risk category. To make an attack less attractive, cheques, credit cards or tokens could be encouraged as a preferred choice of finance. Cash should be banked more frequently, and those going to the bank should vary their route and timings.

Employees should be fully vetted before employment for the safety of the other staff as well as the business. It is also worth using some form of client or supplier/contractor screening, and where a potential for trouble or a lack of information is available, meetings should be arranged away from the workplace in a public location.

Where employees have to make visits to difficult clients or to hazardous areas, arrangements should be made so that they are accompanied by a colleague or have the means to summon help. Employers are required by law to ensure that staff numbers are kept up so as to avoid the lone worker situation, where feasible. It is also advisable to look into the security measures and travel arrangements of those working late or during unsociable hours.

Time to take action

Most businesses have a safety policy or statement that may refer on how best to deal with violence or aggression at work, but all employees need to be aware of where to find that information should they need to refer to it. It may also help in encouraging the staff to follow procedures and to report any incidents properly.

Any statement should set out the objectives of the policy, definitions of categories, the management's philosophy, the what areas / staff the policy covers, where it applies, what the employer is committed to, the employees responsibility and the monitoring and reporting measures.

Evaluation/Monitoring Reporting

Consultations with staff, appraisals and reports should help to give you the necessary details for you to be able to evaluate how effective the systems, policies or training put into place have been. This should show what progress is being made, if any to tackle the problem or if the problems are changing. If the present policies are effective, this should be reflected in the evidence gathered.

Support

If there are still incidents reported, then how an employer is seen to handle this will often have effects on staff morale, adherence to policies and future handling of situations. The quicker an employer responds to an incident and the effects the easier it is to avoid long-term distress and for staff performance to 'return to normal' (within reason). It is extremely important that employee support plans have been drawn up before any incidents arise.

Staff will often need a 'debriefing' session that goes over what happened, what steps were taken, and what should have been done or needs to be done to avoid / handle this type of occasion in the future. Some victims may feel the need to talk about what has happened, and for police records might need to record the details. In serious cases, you may need to be able to provide specialist counselling. Staff who were not directly involved in the incident but were witnesses may also need debriefing or counselling.

People react differently when faced with difficult situations and will need differing amounts of time to recover. Each case needs to be treated individually but the company needs to be able to adapt to cope with extended periods of sick leave or time off.

In serious cases, legal advice or support may be needed. The business needs to be aware of what its responsibilities are, should an employee be taking or involved in legal action.

Violence in the workplace is a problem that employers can ill-afford to ignore. Each year, more than three million working days are lost due to violent incidents. In 1997, workplace violence cost British businesses £62 million.

There are plenty of charities and organisations offering literature on how to cope in these situations or support for victims of violence and abuse. The Home Office has produced a leaflet called 'Victims of Crime' which gives plenty of useful advice on a whole host of matters arising from workplace incidents. You can also get a booklet published by the Health and Safety Executive entitled 'Preventing violence to staff', which explains how to put these theories into practice with case studies to show how it is done.

Guidance for members of Staff

There are several practical steps that an employee can take to prevent themselves from becoming a victim, as well as ways in which they can handle these situations.

Prevention is better than cure

Try not to take risks with your own safety whilst travelling to and from work and whilst at work itself. Avoid travelling alone or late at night. Whether at work, or going to and from work stick to well lit, preferably populated or secure areas. Be alert and aware of your surroundings and any people within them. If something does not seem right than more often than not it isn't. Don't try to tackle verbal or physically abusive people on your own. Be aware that any situation can turn awkward but make sure you are able to get support if needed. Above all, don't take risks with your own safety.

Try to recognise the signs and learn the best methods do deal with situations of conflict. The warning signs are often there to show you that something potentially threatening is about to take place – verbal or otherwise. A person's stance, gestures, facial expressions, complexion and speech can all be signals to you that bad things may happen.

What then are the tell-tale danger signs? A pale or white face and tense facial muscles, exaggerated pronunciation with tight or thinning lips, a bowing of the head, a shifting of weight to draw closer, a dropping of shoulders when ready to lash out, dialogue ceasing, clenched fists and aversion of gaze are the classic indicators.

Company policy

So what can you do? Your company may have a policy on how to behave on these occasions and you should be aware prior to an attack of what actions your employer believes you should take, and what is expected of both you and your employer.

If your company does not have a policy in place, you should ask your employer to draw up plans and procedures to cover staff in such situations. If the policies are complicated ask for them to be explained.

If you require extra training to be able to follow them, ask for it. There are many private and corporate training groups offering personal safety, self-defence and conflict management classes. These teach you everything from talk-down methods for calming potentially explosive moments down to blocking actions to avoid getting hurt in an attack.

Both employers and employees have their own responsibilities to tackle the issues of staff safety. Although it is the employer who may be liable if adequate steps have not been taken to ensure staff safety it may be difficult to determine how far an employer has to go before this is achieved. A certain amount of responsibility will lie with the individual to make sure that they are aware of all the risks they take when applying for a position and what the company will do to safeguard them from those risks. Both sides need to spend time working together to try and make their working environment as safe as possible.

If you would like further advice on this subject or would like to speak to an advisor, call our consultants on 01252 782664 or alternatively email: info@ija.co.uk

An abridged version of this article appeared in Security Management Today Magazine.