



BY RICHARD HART

Violence in the workplace: How can HR prevent it?

Spot warning signs, set clear conditions, and offer employee awareness and training.

Workplaces are hotbeds of complex relationship issues. Whenever groups of people have to interact, there lies a potential for distressing emotions, harmful behaviour, and a risk of violence. (Just look at our global socio-political and religious conflicts.)

People have a common misconception that workplace violence is rare. Violence is *not* uncommon, even in workplace settings. A recent health and safety survey by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) claims that nearly 70 per cent of respondents have experienced "verbal aggression" as a leading form of workplace violence. In addition, 40 per cent said they had been struck while in the workplace, with an additional 30 per cent claiming to have been either grabbed or scratched.

In a British Columbia workplace, a newly appointed informational-technology employee constantly talks of fighting and shooting competitions and has a preoccupation with mercenaries and weapons. Soon after being hired, he begins exchanging photos of graphic violence over company email and spends a lot of time on the Internet searching for photos. After failing to heed several warnings, his employer decides to terminate him. Considering his fascination with violence, management worries about how this employee might react to the news of his termination.

1) Could this employee's behaviour become violent?

There is no standard profile of those who will engage in violent behaviour. However, research has identified a number of telltale personality traits for those who might be at risk:

- poor impulse control;
- tendency towards new and/or intense situations;
- constant need for change and action;
- suspiciousness;
- reduced socialization;
- and difficulty differentiating between the external and internal world.

Despite this list, it is important to note that many people display one or more of these personality traits without ever displaying violent behaviour.

2) Could HR have predicted that this employee would be a problem?

Trying to predict whether or not a potential employee will engage in violent behaviour is difficult. However, you can consider certain factors. Has the applicant

- behaved in a way that would cause others to fear for their safety?
- experienced significant life stressors like divorce or financial hardship?
- been diagnosed with a mental illness that would bear on the risk of violence?
- been socially isolated or without social support for a significant period?

Evaluating people's personality style poses a challenge for employers. Most applicants are on their best behaviour during job interviews and it is difficult to gauge how they will function over time. The best approach is to speak with previous employers about the applicant's interpersonal style, communication skills, and emotional adjustment.

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3) What measures can HR professionals take if the problem escalates?

In the case of the new IT person, FIR worked with a conflict management firm to create a plan for safely terminating the employee and ensuring the safety of other employees. Together, they identified the risk factors and developed a solution that minimized the chance of unnecessary escalation.

The human resources staff emphasized that the employee was terminated based on his own failure to heed warnings. They avoided personalization of fault or the suggestion that his actions made him a bad person. They held the meeting away from his work group, had security personnel present nearby, and changed all passwords and access codes immediately after the meeting. They also informed all office members of the termination and created an action plan in case the employee attempted to return to the office.

The HR department also laid out clear conditions for the employee:

- Do not return to the workplace;
- Do not contact anyone at the workplace except a designated point person; and
- Do not access the organization's IT system.

The company successfully implemented its plan and did not experience any problems following the termination.

4) What other measures can HR professionals take to prevent violence in the workplace?

Be aware of warning signs and common scenarios of violence. Work with employees to develop an effective program for management of conflict and violence. Such a program should include the following:

- effective policies and procedures to prevent and respond to incidents of conflict and violence. Be sure to monitor their effectiveness and make regular updates;
- creation of a critical incident response team, including occupational health and safety personnel, lawyers, HR experts, and threat assessment/management consultants;
- a network to share information concerning incidents of workplace violence at different worksites; and
- support mechanisms for employees.

HR professionals can take other simple measures:

- Create a psychologically healthy workplace where employees have no fear of repercussion for speaking out. Insecurity and low staff morale often cause workplace violence.
- Ensure that all employees receive workplace violence training from a conflict management firm. With more awareness, violent situations are less likely to occur.

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Finally, it is important to listen to employee complaints seriously. While not all complaints will have merit, you can prevent workplace violence by recognizing a problem early on. Although

workplace violence makes for a scary prospect, you can prevent it. Choose a preventative and proactive HR response - not denial or minimization.

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