

Violence in the Workplace: How Safe are your Employees?

By James Harwood – CEO, Total HR

In July of 2003 at a Lockheed-Martin manufacturing plant near Meridian, Mississippi, worker Doug Williams went on a shooting spree killing five people and wounding several others before he committed suicide. Stories like this are a grim reminder of the reality of workplace violence, and the important responsibility we have as employers to ensure a safe work environment for our employees. According to OSHA (Occupations Safety and Health Administration), some 2 million American workers are victims of workplace violence each year, and workplace homicides were the second leading cause of death in the workplace from 1996 to 2001. Unfortunately, our struggling economy is being blamed for stirring up more violent impulses on the job as companies lay off employees and don't fill vacant positions, leaving remaining workers stressed out and taking on more work. Of course, external conditions like a bad economy or heavy workloads don't cause most workers to commit an act of violence, but they can be triggers to set off an employee who was emotionally unstable to begin with.

So what can employers do to help protect their employees? The best protection employers can offer is to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence against or by their employees. The employer should establish a workplace violence prevention program or incorporate the information into an existing accident prevention program, employee handbook, or manual of standard operating procedures. It is critical to ensure that all employees know the policy and understand that all claims of workplace violence will be investigated and remedied promptly.

Employers should also keep a look out for early indications of employees with violent tendencies and try to deal with them before a homicide or an assault takes place. Looking at a worker's past history with violence can provide valuable clues as to their future behavior. Workers who tend to be loners with emotional problems, career frustrations, antagonistic relationships with others and some type of obsession – such as political or radical zealotry or sexual flirtations – are also more likely to have an outbreak of violence at work. According to Workplace Violence Headquarters in Coral Springs, Florida, in 85% of workplace violence cases there were clear warning signs that the perpetrator was about to commit a reckless act. Look out for warning signs that a violent outbreak could occur including threatening or hostile behavior, performance problems, interpersonal or emotional problems or indicators that the person is suicidal or about to “solve” all of his or her problems in some way.

What employers can do to help ensure a safer workplace:

- Establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence and make sure employees know it
- Provide safety education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable, what to do if they witness or are subjected to workplace violence, and how to protect themselves
- Secure the workplace. Where appropriate install video surveillance, extra lighting, and alarm systems and minimize access by outsiders
- Contact Total HR at (818) 248-0049 if you have questions or concern about the safety of your work environment