

Slowing the Tide of Employee Crime

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RECENT NEWS HEADLINES

"Glass in burgers injures two policemen,"
– MSNBC News

"Two jailed in slayings at eatery."
– Dallas Morning News

The first headline refers to an incident in Florida where two sheriff's deputies were hospitalized after eating broken glass intentionally placed in their food at a quick-serve restaurant. The second describes a heinous crime committed by two ex-employees of a national steakhouse restaurant. These ex-employees killed three restaurant employees in what appears to be an act of retribution and theft. One of the slain employees was six months pregnant. Shocking and reprehensible.

DISTURBING TRENDS

These are but two examples of many acts of violence that have happened in restaurants and other businesses across the nation. All of us have significant concerns about the safety of our employees and customers in what seems to be a growing trend of destructive behavior. When we hear about vicious or hostile acts against another person or property most of us want to know why. Acts so repugnant to us are difficult if not impossible for us to understand. Some of us seek explanations through psychiatry, social injustice, poverty, poor parenting, media violence, etc. We seek answers to the problem while our prisons are rapidly filling up with the perpetrators of these crimes. Many of us feel a certain helplessness in dealing with the reality and potential implications of these hostile and criminal acts. On a very practical and personal level we must deal with the possibility of violent crimes committed by our employees in our businesses.

EMPLOYER DILEMMA

Of course our first strategy is to hire capable, conscientious and cooperative individuals who have shown no tendency toward violence or criminality. Conversely, we want to eliminate from hiring consideration any person who has a history or propensity toward angry, destructive behaviors. But

how do we do this? For those of us that hire entry-level, lower-wage service employees, the task is very difficult. High turnover in this category of employee complicates the process even further. Do we complete background checks on every candidate? And can we afford it? Even if we did would these background checks offer significant protection?

Most employers are not sure how to address the possibility of hiring an employee who may commit violent, destructive acts in the business place. We hope that our interview process and broad assessment tools will be the first line of defense and knock out angry misfits. Because of the uncertainty surrounding the identification of potentially destructive employees, many employers have focused more on being prepared if this kind of emergency happens. Is there a better alternative?

IMPORTANT RESEARCH RESULTS

BHI recently completed a groundbreaking research study on productivity crimes by employees in the restaurant industry. This study took 1½ years to complete and focused on eight categories of employee behaviors that are destructive to restaurant businesses: *cash theft, product theft, sexual harassment, substance abuse, anti-diversity, disrespect for others, unreliability, and food contamination*. We found significant confessed counter-productive behaviors across all eight categories. In addition to quantifying the number of destructive acts committed, we were able to identify three major groups of employees:

- Green Zone Employees. This group is the most productive 25% of our sample of 600 employees. In almost all instances they were reliable, honest, positive, and respectful.
- Yellow Zone Employees. Individuals in this middle 50% were sometimes productive and sometimes counter-productive. On average, they committed twice as many acts of counter-productive behaviors as green zone employees.
- Red Zone Employees. People in the least productive 25% of our sample research group committed 400%

more productivity crimes than green zone employees and 200% more than the yellow zone group.

As we analyzed the data from the restaurant employees in our study, other patterns of behavior began to emerge. One very important finding was that employees that committed one type of crime also tended to commit other types of crimes. For example, those employees who abused drugs or alcohol regularly before coming to work were much more likely to steal cash and sexually harass others on the job. No real surprise but the relationship was significantly stronger than we anticipated. The combination of research results that shows red zone employees commit 400% more productivity crimes and the linkage of these crimes is very important. Red Zone job candidates are like ticking time bombs waiting to go off. Every employer must avoid this group of hostile or disturbed employees.

PREDICTING PRODUCTIVITY CRIMES

One of the purposes of our research was to develop the capacity to identify Red Zone employees before they are hired. Consequently, we collected a large amount of other data on the study participants (background information, personality and attitudinal data). Fortunately, we found that we could, with a high degree of accuracy, identify those individuals who confessed to red zone level productivity crimes by using these background and personality factors. Further analyses showed that the employees in the Red Zone committed 82% of all the acts of intentional food contamination in our sample of 600 employees. This means that if employers hire only Green and Yellow Zone employees they will have eliminated a majority of the intentional food safety problems in their restaurants.

REDUCING THE RISK

Psychological research on violent or highly destructive criminals shows upon investigation, that there were warning signs in the pasts of these individuals. So rare is the case of a person with a completely unblemished past committing one of the brutal crimes that it is sensationalized in the media. More commonly, the persons who perpetrate the extreme atrocities have a history of smaller crimes. In thinking about our productivity crimes research and these extremely

destructive crimes like our beginning headlines describe, I conclude the following:

- Extreme acts of violence appear to happen randomly but, in fact, are part of a pattern. People who commit these extreme acts are likely to have been committing many types of smaller crimes prior to this incident.
- We can identify those job candidates (Red Zone) who are likely to commit the eight productivity crimes in our research on restaurant employees: *food contamination, cash theft, product theft, sexual harassment, substance abuse, anti-diversity, disrespect for others and unreliability.*
- We predict that the Red Zone group is likely to contain the majority of the individuals who commit highly destructive crimes. Therefore, if we stop hiring Red Zone employees we can reduce the risk of having a heinous crime occur in one of our restaurants.

DON'T BE THE NEXT HEADLINE

It is extremely painful for all of us to think about one of these tragic crimes happening in our place of business. When it does happen, a collective sadness and shock reverberates throughout the organization. Sometimes, a sense of guilt and anxiety arise from our inability to prevent these types of incidents from occurring. While it is not effective to dwell on the possibility, it is important that we design our hiring and management systems to minimize the probability of the occurrence of one of these crimes.

Fortunately, it appears that effective selection systems and management practices that minimize smaller productivity crimes can also minimize the extreme crimes. It is important to make sure that we have solid systems in place so that we don't, someday appear in one of these headlines.

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