

Screening out Workplace Violence

It happens all too often nowadays. An enraged employee seeks revenge for some real or imagined harm perpetrated by an employer, supervisor or coworker. Tempers flare and rage follows. Not long ago, a student who failed a pediatric nursing class at the University of Arizona's School of Nursing killed three people out of anger, then turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

Tragedies like this happen more often than you might think. According to a National Crime Victimization Survey issued by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2001, an average of 1.7 million incidents of workplace violence occur in the United States each year. Wary employers often ask what they can do to deter this type of violence.

For starters, we suggest that you change the way you view the job application process. Establish preventive strategies to protect you, your employees and your customers. Become proactive in your hiring and adopt stringent procedures to screen out potential troublemakers. Let applicants know where you stand. Advise them of your screening policies as soon as they walk in the door. You'll be surprised how many turn around and walk out.

Another way to uncover potential problems is to double-check the information applicants provide. According to The Wall Street Journal, one-third of all job seekers stretch the truth on resumes and job applications. Performing a background screen to verify an applicant's educational background, job history, job titles and employment dates is always a good idea. Also, authenticate credentials. When it was discovered that a Georgia Bureau of Investigations medical examiner was conducting autopsies without a valid license, the incident created a horde of legal problems for her employer.

Medical professionals, attorneys, teachers and, yes, even most screening professionals, require special licensing to do their jobs. A credentials check can validate professional licensure or certifications. This screen not only confirms that a license exists, it also discloses the date of issue, expiration date, any disciplinary actions imposed against the license and its present status.

Don't forget to check both personal and business references. The Equal Opportunity Employment Act, which protects the rights of job applicants, limits the amount of information a previous employer may disclose about an employee to the basics such as employment dates, job title and eligibility for rehire. Personal references, however, can reveal much more about an applicant.

If you really want to do the job right, run a credit report, a criminal background check, a driving record check and a Social Security number trace. These relatively inexpensive screening procedures can reveal a great deal about a

person's character, financial responsibility, trustworthiness and potential for aberrant behavior.

Says Mark Shook, President of AccuSearch, Inc., a background screening firm located in Phoenix, Arizona, "In our line of work, we come across people using aliases, false Social Security numbers, dates of birth, addresses and more in attempts to cover up past criminal behavior. Some rearrange or consolidate employment dates to hide jobs they would rather forget, or refer to false educational and professional credentials.

"Knowing the truth about a potential employee is an important method for predicting how well he or she will fit into your corporate culture, embrace company values, interact with coworkers, handle stress and react to difficult situations. Adopting workplace policies that establish clear guidelines for the confidential reporting of violent behavior, the assessment of danger, conflict resolution and the implementation of preventive measures can extend the value of initial screening procedures to your everyday corporate environment," says Shook.

The struggle to keep violence out of the workplace is an ongoing battle, and one that requires diligence on the part of employers and employees, but it is one that is well worth fighting.

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