

THE WETC PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

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Violence in the Workplace

Violence in the workplace has many faces and is the cause of a very large number of psychiatric claims in the workers' compensation arena. At one extreme, we've all read accounts of the spurned employee who walks into his former place of employment and guns down his ex-supervisor and three former co-workers. We've also heard stories of the gang member who walks into a convenience store to commit a robbery and gets carried away and shoots the clerk. A more subtle occurrence is the technician who doesn't get an expected promotion and "forgets" to re-set a safety valve, resulting in a co-worker losing a portion of his hand. Finally, at the lower end of the continuum is the lead who takes a disliking to a supervisee and not only gives them a hard time, but manages to manipulate co-workers to do the same. This edition of the WETC Newsletter takes a look at the various forms of violence in the workplace and suggests what can be done to sense, assess and diffuse anger, which can ultimately help to prevent the violence.

From a workers' compensation or personal injury litigation perspective, once violence has occurred, the cat is out of the bag and there is not much anyone can do about it except to find out what occurred, assess and repair the damage and compensate the victims, as well as to perhaps punish the perpetrators and try to prevent recurrences. However, on closer examination, something positive can come out of virtually all instances of violence. In this regard, it is generally accepted that the first step in preventing violence is understanding what produces it and then setting in place a program to predict and prevent these situations from occurring. In traveling down this road, one finds that from a psychological perspective what all of the above-mentioned examples of violence have in common is anger that has gotten out of

"In developing a strategy to reduce workplace violence, it is often cost effective to hire specialists in industrial-organizational psychology."

There is little doubt that, aside from physical injuries, it is workplace violence, aggression or some other form of anger that produces the largest percentage of psychiatric injury claims. In this regard, workplace violence is defined as "physical assaults or threats of assault directed towards employees" whereas aggression is a more general term that is defined as "behavior that is intended to physically or psychologically harm an individual." Research has shown that in any given year, anywhere from 1% to 5% of employees are victims of a physical assault at work, while anywhere from 9% to 70% of employees are the victim of nonphysical aggression in the workplace, such as verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and/or sexual harassment (Barling, J., Dupre, K. E., & Kelloway, E. K. (2009). Predicting workplace aggression and violence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 671-692). Worse yet, according to a 2011 report by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), workplace homicide accounts for 11% of all fatal workplace injuries in the United States. In fact, the leading cause of workplace death for women in the United States is homicide.

Sticking to the research and statistics for a moment, the data show that despite highly publicized instances of employees in specific industries acting out violently, or "going postal," the rates of violence across numerous occupations are highly similar (e.g., LeBlanc, M. M., &

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Kelloway, E. K. Predictors and outcomes of workplace violence and aggression. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2002, *87*, 444-453). Believe it or not, a coal miner, a police officer and a university professor have approximately the same chance of being physically or non-physically assaulted by a coworker. Nevertheless, certain jobs are associated with an increased risk of violence perpetrated by customers or clients. For example, it should come as no surprise that employees who come in contact with people who are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, such as nurses, doctors, psychologists, police officers, corrections officers and security guards, face an increased risk for experiencing violence. Other characteristics, such as handling or guarding valuables and working alone, puts an employee at a greater risk for experiencing violence. As interesting as these facts are, they are of little value in predicting and preventing negative outcomes.

One approach to the prediction and prevention of violence is to determine what individual characteristics or personality variables are associated with violent occurrences. In this regard, one of the most important factors is the proclivity for an individual to become angry and respond aggressively and/or violently to particular situations. Another important factor is alcohol and illicit substance consumption. When one looks back at individuals who have been violent one finds a relatively large percentage have been under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Another relevant factor is an individual's personality structure in general. One such personality trait is a person's belief about locus of control. Specifically, individuals who have an external locus of control, or believe that when bad things happen to them someone else is always to blame, are more prone to act out aggressively or violently. Another predictive variable concerning who is likely to "act out" is an individual's past behavior, as individuals who have a history of acting violently in the past are more likely to behave violently in the future (Douglas, S. C., & Martinko, M. J. Exploring the role of

individual differences in prediction of workplace aggression. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2001, *86*, 547-559).

From a risk management point of view, how can individuals be identified who are likely to act out violently? One obvious recommendation is to avoid hiring individuals who either have a history of acting out or possess characteristics that are associated with behaving violently. Depending on the employer's Human Resources budget, it may be reasonable to do background checks on prospective employees or even pay for a pre-employment psychological evaluation. Another loss-preventative measure is to continually assess employees for their potential to act out and to provide counseling programs for individuals who show characteristics likely to lead to workplace violence, helping them deal with their personal problems without compromising the organization. Of course, whether or not this is cost effective in any given setting is a completely different question.

When it comes to keeping an eye out for prospective problems, one important organizational factor is abusive supervision. Studies have shown that workers who report being abused, or subject to sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, are more likely to retaliate aggressively and violently towards their reported abusers. Similarly, organizational injustice is a strong predictor of workplace violence. When an individual feels that they have been treated with a lack of respect and dignity, retaliation becomes a frequent and expected response. Finally, another relevant variable in the current economic climate, are feelings of job insecurity and inadequate compensation. Research has shown that when an individual is insecure about their job security and/or feels under-compensated in relation to their output, they are more likely to act out violently.

In developing a strategy to reduce workplace violence, it is often cost effective to hire specialists in industrial-organizational psychology. These individuals can assist any employer in selecting workers who are less likely to perpetrate or to be the "victims" of violence, can set up programs to monitor for the warning signs of aversive events, and are able to provide plans for taking counter measures to defuse situations. Essentially, these psychologists work with their Human Resources counterparts to design recruitment programs and personnel selection systems that identify qualified

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candidates and promote personnel who will facilitate rather than harm or destroy the organization. Common psychological tools include personality tests, and systematically collecting biographical data that can identify individuals who might be involved in stealing, damaging interpersonal conflicts, substance use, sexual harassment as well as more direct aggression and violence. They also can help train managers to treat their subordinates with respect, while enforcing company policies and deadlines and can introduce a variety of workshops, seminars, consulting services, and ombudspople into an environment that will make employees feel valued and appreciated and less likely to become angry and to behave destructively.

The bottom line here is that violence and aggression in the workplace is a result of individual proclivities and behaviors as well as variables within an employer's organization. Unfortunately, once violence has occurred, it is a done deal that requires compensation in one form or another, as well as other remedial actions. However, there are industrial-organizational psychologists who can collaborate with the employer's Human Resources Department to help avoid occurrences of violence. These are psychologists whose specialty includes a variety of skills that can reduce the likelihood of violence in a cost effective manner. Putting such a program in place would almost guarantee a reduction in an employer's workers' compensation and litigation costs.

This is the thirty-sixth of a series of monthly newsletters aimed at providing information about psychological evaluations and treatment that may be of interest to attorneys and insurance adjusters working in the areas of workers' compensation and personal injury. If you have not received some or all of our past newsletters listed on the next page, and would like copies, send us an email requesting the newsletter(s) that you would like forwarded to you.

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September, 2009 - Compulsive Computer Use Disorder

October, 2009 - Major Depressive Disorder

November, 2009 - The Millon Tests

December, 2009 - Psychological Factors Affecting Medical Condition

January, 2010 - Pain Disorders

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March, 2010 - Drugs: Use, Abuse and Dependence

April, 2010 - Common Flaws In Psych Reports #3

May, 2010 - "Impossible" MMPI-2 scores and their consequences for litigation

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