

SAFETY AT WORK

THIS TIME IT'S PERSONAL

Did you know there are approximately 655,000 incidents of workplace violence in England and Wales per year? ¹ People who deal directly with the public may face aggressive or violent behaviour. They may be sworn at, threatened or even attacked.



Even though the 2007/08 British Crime Survey shows a decrease in violent crime there are still some business sectors where violence against the person poses a substantial risk. These include the retail and service sectors, and the NHS. Some 75,000 NHS employees were attacked in 2006, at a cost to the health service of more than £100 million. ²

Whilst it is easy to assume that the NHS is an exceptional case everyone should be aware of their vulnerabilities in the workplace.

The Health & Safety Executive define violence at work as:

“Any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work”

Of the areas that this definition highlights, verbal abuse is overwhelmingly the most common occurrence - physical attacks whilst increasing, are still relatively rare.

Obviously we are looking at personal safety from a work perspective, however many of the points covered in this article are also relevant for day to day living.

WHERE ARE YOUR EMPLOYEES AT MOST RISK?

The answer to this question is unfortunately everywhere. However, there are areas that carry greater risk. By being aware of these areas and looking at how we can reduce exposure, we can mitigate the likelihood of being a victim. Three of the main areas where personal security risk is heightened are:

- Travelling
- Intruder to premises
- By a work colleague

ACTION THAT CAN BE TAKEN TO REDUCE RISK.

The following are some of the preventative measures that can be taken to increase safety in the areas highlighted:

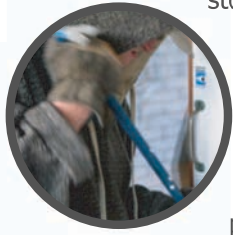
WHEN TRAVELLING IN A PRIVATE OR COMPANY VEHICLE:

i) Ensure that all valuables are not on obvious display. This is particularly relevant with mobile phones and handbags on the passenger seat, as the crime of snatching items from vehicles at traffic lights or when otherwise stationary is on the increase. Lock the doors when travelling alone.

ii) Reduce the amount of personal information that employees bring to work on a daily basis. Items such as passports, expensive jewellery, credit cards, bank details or large amounts of cash are not a daily necessity. These things can make an individual a viable target for attack as much as someone as carrying a laptop or mobile phone.



iii) A mobile phone can carry a lot of useful information but advise employees not to store information such as passwords or PIN numbers, as if the phone is lost or stolen it may allow an individual to access personal or financial details easily. Also reduce the amount of time using the phone, either for voice communication or texting, as this in itself makes the user more vulnerable to attack. A phone held in one hand can be easily snatched, particularly if the user's attention is elsewhere. Advise employees to put in ICE (In Case of Emergency) numbers into their mobiles.



iv) Advise employees when visiting an unknown area to familiarise themselves with their surroundings before leaving the vehicle. Supply them with a detailed map from a source such as **www.multimap.com** and a contact name and number at their destination in case they get lost or are delayed. Ask them to inform you of their arrival and departure to ensure their whereabouts is known. If a problem then arises it will be noticed more quickly.

v) An individual should not follow the vehicle in front too closely (As a guide, ensure that you can see the road in front of your vehicle at all times). This is not only safe driving, it also allows room to manoeuvre if they feel that they may be getting boxed in. If there is a collision or accident and your employee feels unsafe, advise them to contact the Police to attend the scene.



vi) Ask them to keep the vehicle locked even if they are only leaving it for a very short time. It will reduce the risk of a snatch or an intruder entering the vehicle.

vii) Ensure the vehicle is well maintained at all times and keep the fuel level above 1/4 tank. Owners of company vehicles should purchase a torch, safety triangle and personal alarm that can be used by the driver.

viii) Do not give lifts to strangers – no matter how plausible a story they may give.

ix) If it is dark ensure that the vehicle is left in a well-lit area within easy reach of the exits. If they are parking in the daylight and will return in the dark, they should ensure that both the vehicle and their route to the vehicle is safe and visible.



WHEN TRAVELLING BY TAXI OR PUBLIC TRANSPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES SHOULD:

- i) Wherever possible, ensure that there are other people around them and stay in well-lit areas.
- ii) Plan their route and possibly an alternative should there be a delay or incident.

iii) On buses try to sit near to the driver and if someone makes them feel uncomfortable – get up and move away.

iv) Wear appropriate clothing. Female members of staff who travel alone long distances may consider wearing flat shoes or trainers for the journey and changing into work shoes when they arrive.

v) Avoid using a taxi that randomly stops in the street, unless it has been hailed.

vi) When booking the taxi always ask what make of car it will be and the driver's name.

vii) The safest place in a taxi is in the rear behind the driver.

viii) When travelling at night book a taxi to pick them up from the railway station and ask the driver to wait outside until they are in the house.

GENERAL TRAVEL ADVICE

Remind your employees that when travelling always use common sense to ensure their safety. Don't make a display of valuable items, don't be vulnerable to strangers and always ensure that someone knows their plans and whereabouts. Some good pointers can be found at:



www.crimestoppers-uk.org

Suggest that their mobile phone is always charged before a trip and programme the 999 emergency number into your speed dial.

A personal attack alarm can be purchased from most DIY stores. It is worth having this in a pocket or carried in their hand whilst out and about so it can be used easily and not left lying in the bottom of a bag. For advice on personal alarms you can either contact us, your incumbent security provider or your local Crime Prevention Officer.



www.personalarms.com
www.gbsg.co.uk
www.top4security.co.uk
www.nntc.org.uk
www.multimap.com
www.fco.gov.uk

If their job involves foreign travel always check the destination status before travel with the Foreign Office (**www.fco.gov.uk/travel**). For some destinations the Embassy publishes its own guidance, e.g. the British Embassy in Riyadh produces a comprehensive country specific guide. Employees should be encouraged to read and remember this guidance.



INTRUDER TO THE PREMISES.

Thankfully, aside from high risk industries (e.g. banking where there are large amounts of cash), violence by intruders to the work premises is relatively rare. That being said it is the duty of all employers to provide safe and secure working conditions, so this issue has to be addressed. When Norwich Union assessed the risk from intruders they compiled the following guidance for companies:

- The environment that you create will have a bearing on how clients behave.
- Clients should be made to feel comfortable by their surroundings.
- Waiting areas should be well lit and seating should be provided.
- Reading materials should be available if clients have to wait for a long time.
- If you do not recognise someone on your premises, challenge them in a polite and courteous manner. For example ask, 'do you need any help?'
- Have a plan in your mind about how you would handle a situation that could turn violent.
- Think about what you would do to try and calm a threatening or agitated person down.
- Have a contingency plan in case your actions are unsuccessful. For example, in a dangerous situation how would you escape from the building and where would you be safe outside? Who would you need to notify?
- To minimise the attractiveness of your premises to robbers, avoid keeping large quantities of cash on site.

THIS CAN BE ACHIEVED BY:

- Encouraging the use of cheques and credit cards rather than cash wherever possible.
- Banking money more frequently but ensuring that the time and route taken is varied.

For the same reason, you should avoid keeping large quantities of stock and equipment at your premises where possible. If this cannot be avoided ensure that the security that you have in place is adequate.

Source: Norwich Union Risk Services / June 2006.

In addition to this every firm should have a Visitor's book prominently displayed at reception. You should ensure that all visitors to your premises sign in with their details. There are a number of reasons why this is important, in particular for safety reasons, this procedure will enable you to keep track of who is in the building, and where they are.

This will be important in times of emergency evacuation of the premises or a fire safety incident. It might also help if there was an incident affecting personal security. Many companies issue visitors with badges, it is important that these are numbered and also that the badge is retrieved from the visitor on leaving the premises. This ensures that, not only can the badge not be reused unofficially, but also that copies cannot be made.

If your staff are at high risk of dealing with intruders or potentially threatening clients you should consider whether you need alarms, coded locks or video surveillance. Access control systems are now being used to provide high level security across the UK (and beyond), drawn from the dozens of different contracts for a wide variety of applications created each week by installers using our equipment, including:

- Hospitals, Health Care and Nursing accommodation
- Finance & Banking
- Multi Tenanted residential apartments
- Food processing
- Software & IT companies
- Research laboratories
- Universities & Halls of residence
- Sports facilities
- Tourist attractions
- Airports and Port Authorities

For advice on installing integrated access and surveillance systems contact a 'one stop shop' security provider such as www.gbsg.co.uk.

If you feel that your company falls into a high-risk area it may be worth having a locking door between the work area and reception and protecting the receptionist behind a hatch. If your reception is manned by an individual who may be on their own for long periods of time, consider an alarm system that can be activated easily in case of a problem. This could also be useful if individuals worked remotely and therefore made more vulnerable.

Try to reduce the risk factor by ensuring PCs are logged out before leaving the desk and that laptops and PDAs are not left lying in vulnerable areas. This can also be said for handbags, wallets and other personal items. Keep them safely locked away or out of sight.

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Also be aware that violence also covers physical abuse, and that your receptionist may be first in line for abuse. Formulate a reporting procedure that will enable your receptionist to log all verbal abuse. It is often a repeat offence and a time and date log will enable you to produce evidence if you decide to take court action against offenders.

Another area that is a consideration when evaluating the safety of your employees is the workplace itself. If you have the luxury of designing a new building consider putting in safe areas where employees can take refuge. This is your 'protected space' and is not only useful for intruder protection but also in times of bomb alerts or terrorist attacks. If you are converting to open-plan accommodation remember that it is often more difficult to contain an incident in this environment. It may also reduce your options for exit routes. It is recommended that you consult not only with your security provider, but also a structural engineer with a specialism in secure buildings.

Personal security should be an integral part of your induction programme and should highlight:

- What to do in an emergency?
- Who to contact?
- Where to go during evacuation?
- How to recognise the signs of aggression?

VIOLENCE BY A WORK COLLEAGUE

Violence most commonly takes the form of abuse between colleagues, however this should not trivialise the impact that this can have on the working environment.

There have been many high profile cases of sexual harassment at work and it is now thankfully considered highly unacceptable to instigate any form of harassment in the workplace.

An increasing problem in companies is the use of email, internal and external, to pass on jokes, video clips etc. Whilst it can be seen as friendly banter in most cases, is open to abuse and can cause offence if the content is of a personal nature. Good practice would suggest that this is frowned upon and therefore reducing the risk of an unpleasant situation within the workplace.

Any employer who allows this to take place is liable to very high financial penalties, so it is therefore something that should be very high on the personnel agenda. The most effective way to eliminate abuse is to take a very firm disciplinary stance as soon as it manifests itself.

Actual physical violence is far more rare and should be an immediate dismissal offence. The likelihood of violence can be minimised by a good screening and vetting procedure at recruitment. All employers should be aware that different mindsets are required for different roles within the company, for example a target driven sales manager may require a more aggressive personality than a janitor. Consideration should be given to how employees can 'let off steam' safely for example, consider a games area for relaxation.



REFERENCES

- 1 www.crimestoppers-uk.org.
- 2 Politics.co.uk 26 February 2007.

SUMMARY

- Expect the unexpected - do not allow the familiarity of the work routine to give a false sense of security.
- If confronted by someone aggressive, adopt a non-threatening approach, try to defuse the situation not escalate it.
- Have a mobile phone at all times and pre programme emergency numbers.
- Make sure that someone is aware of your whereabouts at all times.
- Undertake a premises risk assessment to highlight vulnerability.
- Work with your security provider to prepare a security plan for your staff.
- Be aware of visitors at all times
- Random test the security system periodically.

USEFUL CONTACTS

HSE Information leaflet – Violence at work:

A guide for employers Ref: INDG69 (rev) Reprinted 04/06 HSE Books

Work-related Violence:

Managing the risk in smaller businesses – HSG229 – HSE books 2002

Managing and preventing violence to lone workers:

Case studies Health and Safety Laboratory/ Report WIS/03/05. A shorter version of the case studies is also available on the HSE website at:

www.peoplesafe.co.uk/

www.personalalarms.com

www.top4security.co.uk

www.nntc.org.uk

www.multimap.com

www.fco.gov.uk

www.gbsg.co.uk

www.hse.gov.uk HSE (The Health & Safety Executive),
Information line: 01787 8811 65

Crime Prevention Office
The Home Office
Room 155
50 Queen Anne's Gate
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