



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence

Abstract

How is the workplace impacted by a type of violence so deeply associated with home life that it's even called domestic violence? This white paper outlines the effect that domestic violence has on organizations and how easily the lines blur between home and work, leading to workplace violence. Factors such as reputation damage also come into play, especially when warning signs of violent tendencies in an employee are ignored. Days of work are lost due to emotional and physical injuries, health insurance costs rise, and company equipment is misused. These risks of workplace violence, reputation damage, productivity loss and health insurance costs are discussed along with detailed options for mitigation of the risks.



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

Domestic Violence Defined:

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines it as "the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another."

Domestic violence is also known as intimate partner violence or simply as partner violence.

www.ncadv.org

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Security

Domestic violence impacts the workplace in a variety of ways and can increase the risk of workplace violence. The fact that many of the adverse effects on the workplace are not always readily apparent and the stigma associated with the topic make it a difficult issue for organizations to address. However, with workplace violence being a growing problem, none of its contributing factors should be ignored.



On a corporate retreat in 2011, Bensussen Deutsch & Associates, a provider of branded merchandise solutions to Fortune 1000 companies, experienced a tragedy stemming from domestic violence. As reported by various news agencies, Susan Brockert, the company's employee of over 15 years, was brutally beaten to death in her hotel room by her boyfriend. Coworkers heard screams coming from the room, but it was too late to save her. What should have been a pleasant trip to Hawaii for Susan and her coworkers was marred by an unthinkable tragedy.¹

While stories of tragic domestic violence incidents impacting the workplace do not often make news (it's not exactly the reputation most organizations want to showcase), this does not make them uncommon. In fact, a third of women killed in U.S. workplaces were killed by someone with whom they had a personal relationship and, most often, the person was an intimate partner.²

¹
<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/227753>

²
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4687019/>



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

Major Associated Risks and Losses

Workplace Violence

The fact that it's called *domestic violence* doesn't mean that it happens only at home - Brockert's murder is a stark reminder of this. Not only did Bensussen Deutsch & Associates lose a long-term employee, but her coworkers suffered the trauma of hearing the beating. A ripple effect also extends to the grief experienced by other coworkers who had formed relationships with her. This trauma and grief creates additional healthcare costs (such as grief counseling), reduces morale, limits productivity, and diminishes the overall sense of workplace safety.

Perpetrators of domestic violence often attempt to control every aspect of their victim's life, and the victim's work is no exception. Workplaces often allow for a level of independence that feels threatening to a perpetrator trying to control his/her partner's life.³ As a result, perpetrators may attempt to harm their victim's ability to work through tactics such as hiding car keys so the victim will be late to work. Perpetrators may also come to the workplace unannounced, which puts both the victim and other employees at the site at risk of harm. Someone who is violent with a domestic partner may not think twice about other acts of violence as well - this is supported by the fact that many mass shooters began with a history of violence toward a partner.⁴



Key Risks:

- Workplace violence
- Reputation damage
- Productivity loss
- Health insurance costs

Prevention:

- Comprehensive violence policies
- Training employees

Reputation Damage

The resort where Brockert's murder occurred was not spared from being mentioned in the news of her death. Although the resort does not seem to have been at fault, readers of these news stories may now associate the resort with a violent crime and death. However, did the resort handle the situation as well as it could have? By the time hotel staff was able to break open the hotel room door, it was too late to help Brockert. This raises the question - should a better emergency plan have been in place for intervening when cries for help are overheard?

³
<http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/2011/fs1176.pdf>

⁴
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/06/15/what-do-many-mass-shooters-have-in-common-a-history-of-domestic-violence/?utm_term=.695aa7d9065e



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:



Even worse for an organization's reputation is what happens when the perpetrator is an employee rather than a visitor at a resort. Perpetrators of violence at home will not always leave the violence behind when they come to work. During the hiring process, employers don't usually consider arrests unless they become convictions, but domestic violence crimes are historically difficult to convict since they frequently occur behind closed doors and do not always leave physical marks or evidence. Organizations without a policy for employees accused of violence leave themselves vulnerable and can even appear sympathetic to perpetrators when subsequent convictions do occur. Additionally, organizations who knowingly hire a perpetrator of violence can even be held liable for those employees' future violent acts, if it is a foreseeable risk based on past behavior.⁵

⁵

http://www.cambridgepublichealth.org/lifestyle/domestic-violence-prevention/DV_Guidebook_Web.pdf



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

One third of women killed in workplaces were killed by someone with whom they had a personal relationship.

Productivity Loss and Health Insurance Costs

Employees experiencing domestic violence can suffer from a variety of distractions that harm productivity. These distractions can range from receiving harassing phone calls from his/her partner while at work or having anxiety about the violence that occurs at home. In addition, physical abuse can lead to victims taking additional days off work while seeking medical attention or recovering from an injury. In the long term, victims of violence also suffer significantly higher instances of health concerns including stroke, heart disease and substance abuse.⁶



⁶

<http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/2011/fs1176.pdf>

⁷

<http://www.caepv.org/membercenter/files/eadv.pdf>

On the other hand, employees who are perpetrators of violence are both part of this productivity loss and likely to misuse company resources including phones, email or vehicles to perpetrate violence. When they attend related court matters, they also often use paid work time and sometimes receive support from their supervisors, even going as far as to bail the perpetrator out of jail.⁷



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

Managing These Risks

Comprehensive Violence Policies

Creating a Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention Program which is inclusive of all types of violence helps employees know where the company stands on the issue and the types of resources that may be made available to victims of violence. Some organizations include Zero Tolerance policies for violence of any kind that occurs in the workplace and, for violence that occurs outside the workplace, policies that dictate actions such as unpaid leave for an employee who has been arrested for a violent act (or has a restraining order against him/her) until the matter is resolved in a court of law. Based on the legal decision made, the policy can further dictate circumstances under which the employee should receive counseling (such as anger management) or other discipline including termination. Resources for victims can include benefits such as employee assistance programs or an offering as simple as a list of external resources.⁸

Victims may avoid disclosing an abusive situation due to the associated stigma or concerns that their employer will not be responsive.



Additional policies that protect and support victims are also important. A victim may need to take time off work to obtain a restraining order or other court-related matters, as dealing with these safety measures often overlaps with traditional work hours. Reassuring employees that their safety comes first and allowing them to take the time needed to protect themselves is essential.

⁸
http://www.cambridgepublichealth.org/lifestyle/domestic-violence-prevention/DV_Guidebook_Web.pdf



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

Training Employees

Training for employees on workplace violence can include domestic violence awareness and resources. This helps to reinforce that violent behavior is not acceptable and that there is support for those in need. Employees who are victims of domestic violence do not always think of themselves as victims and may not recognize that their partner's behavior deviates from the norm (many adult victims suffered similar violence as a child, making a violent home life seem normal). Coworkers can use this knowledge to help protect each other by recognizing the signs that a fellow employee may be a victim. Some of these signs may include changes in job performance, e.g., a previously good employee who suddenly displays a pattern of poor job performance such as arriving late, frequently missing work, or seeming distracted while at work. Other signs include emotional distress, unusual attire (such as wearing long sleeves despite warm weather in an attempt to cover up injuries), and/or disruptive visits to the workplace by his/her partner. Precursors to violent behavior may also be observed and treated with adequate levels of seriousness, such as overhearing a coworker make threatening statements over the phone.

Additional Reference: ASIS International's Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention:

A detailed guide on creating policies and training employees that outlines steps to be taken. It is approved by the American National Standard Institute (ANSI) and was developed in conjunction with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Visit <https://www.asisonline.org/standards>.

Security professionals may need to take additional precautions beyond the average employee and remain vigilant. Significant others of employees may routinely visit the workplace for innocuous reasons, but this is not the case in every situation. In the right situation and when consistent with post orders, actions such as simply taking the time to have a brief conversation about why the visitor is at the workplace and noting any suspicious behavior, such as the visitor appearing agitated or in a rush, can help identify the legitimacy of the visit.

Actions required by security professionals will vary based on their post, protocols, and the exact situation, but increasing awareness of this issue can help to resolve problems before they intensify.

Conclusion

Maintaining the physical health, emotional health, and safety of employees makes sense for organizations. By simply updating policies and training programs that likely already exist within the organization, another risk may be mitigated. A workforce educated in these matters can better spot the signs in a coworker and support each other so that today's domestic violence does not become tomorrow's workplace violence.



When Domestic Violence Becomes Workplace Violence:

Additional References: Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence:

A national nonprofit dedicated to reducing the costs and consequences of intimate partner violence at work:
<http://www.caepv.org/>.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline:

Provides anonymous, confidential help 24/7:
1-800-799-7233 (SAFE)
or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY).

Top Security Threats & Management Issues Facing Corporate America:

More information on workplace violence and other key security threats can be found in Securitas USA's bi-annual publication *Top Security Threats & Management Issues Facing Corporate America*, which provides insights from security managers and directors for Fortune 1000 organizations:
www.securitasinc.com/top-security-threats

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Michelle began working for Securitas USA after completing her Masters of Business Administration (MBA) with a concentration in Risk Management. She also holds a Bachelors of Science in Psychology and previously worked for a domestic violence program where she gained first-hand insight into the impact violence had on the careers of program clients.

About Securitas Security Services USA, Inc.

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