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Employers Miss Warning Signs of Violence

By Stephanie Armour, USA Today

In an average week in U.S. workplaces, one employee is killed and at least 25 are seriously injured in violent assaults by current or former co-workers.

Many of those attacks might have been prevented.

In nearly eight of 10 cases, killers left behind clear warning signs – sometimes showing guns to co-workers, threatening their bosses or talking about attacking. But in the majority of cases, employers ignored, downplayed or misjudged the threat, according to a USA Today analysis of 224 instances of fatal workplace violence.

Less than 20 percent of the companies targeted in such attacks beefed up security or took other internal prevention steps. It is not known how many called police before the attacks took place.

The analysis found many companies fail to identify risks or teach managers how to defuse the tensions that can precipitate an attack. They frequently fail to react when workers say that they're scared. And they often fail to take extra precautions to enhance security, even after an event such as a firing or discipline hearing that could trigger an attack. One company, Honeywell, hired back an employee who served four years in prison for fatally strangling a co-worker; then he killed again.

USA Today's findings are supported by other research.

“In more than 100 instances that I studied, in every case there was evidence to suggest this person was hurting and had a potential for aggression,” says Jeff Landreth, a senior vice president with New York-based Guardsmark, a security services company. “We found the threats were ignored.”

Some employers, however, say they've done everything to prevent violence – and that there is no way to know when a disgruntled employee will kill. Mental health experts have been known to determine an employee is no threat, only to have the worker turn deadly. Workplace experts and federal agencies do provide threat assessments to help determine when employees may become dangerous.

Some experts also say companies are doing a lot to prevent attacks but that more can be done to make workplaces respectful places where employees are treated fairly.

“It’s very common that companies will beef up security,” says James Alan Fox, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. “Their level of awareness is higher.”

Most workers who lose their jobs don’t become killers, making it hard for employers to know when to worry. From 1997 through 2001, there were an average of 61 fatal attacks each year by a co-worker or former co-worker against a fellow worker. During that same time span, an average of 2.9 million workers involuntarily lost their jobs each year, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Still, workplace attacks by employees are a reality today, with killings more common now than in the early 20th century. But that’s not necessarily because guns are more available. Fox says that today’s workers suffer from less job security, pay disparities between workers and executives, and high stress – creating a more volatile environment.

Signs of violent tendencies

On a spring day in 1995 shortly before noon, James Davis parked outside Union Butterfield, a tool company in Asheville, N.C., where he’d been fired two days earlier for fighting. He walked in the front door with a semiautomatic rifle and pistol.

Davis, 56, fired about 50 shots, killing three employees, shooting them in the back, face and leg. Some workers hid under desks or dived to the ground to evade the bullets as Davis walked with calm determination. One survivor froze, too terrified to run. When Davis was done, he lit a cigarette and quietly surrendered to police.

Signs of Davis’ violent tendencies had existed for years, according to a lawsuit and interviews with survivors. He’d choked a co-worker, according to the lawsuit filed after the shooting, and threatened to take everyone with him when he left.

But his employer, Union Butterfield, didn’t take security steps to prevent the crime, according to the lawsuit by family members against Union Butterfield, as well as Dormer Tools, another company that shared the building space, and others. The two companies didn’t lock the doors, add extra security or monitor the parking lot, the lawsuit states.

“If there was some sort of security in place, maybe it wouldn’t have happened,” says Linda Allman, 59, of Weaverville, N.C. Her husband, Gerald, 52, was killed in the attack. “I would give back everything I have to get him back.”

Union Butterfield declined to comment, but company officials have argued in the past that Davis was required to get psychological counseling and that there was no way of knowing he would attack.

Widows of two of the murdered men were awarded nearly \$8 million from Dormer Tools and Union Butterfield in a jury trial. Dormer appealed and later settled out of court. The company did not return calls seeking comment.

Critical mistakes

Often, employers make critical mistakes.

In December 1987, David Burke, 35, an airline ticket taker fired from USAir for allegedly stealing, boarded a plane at Los Angeles International Airport with a concealed .44-caliber gun. Also on the plane was his boss, Raymond Thomson. Burke waited until the plane was aloft, then shot his former boss and fired his gun at others. Investigators believe he also shot or otherwise attacked the pilots. The plane plowed into a hillside near Paso Robles, Calif., killing all 43 on board.

Because his employer had never confiscated all of his work identification, Burke had been able to move unchallenged through the airport, according to Ronald Wecht, a San Francisco lawyer who represented family members who sued the airline and others. They received more than \$20 million in out-of-court settlements.

US Airways spokesman David Castelveter says that now, when employees resign or are fired, workers must turn over identification and any other credentials.

Companies sometimes hire workers who have been violent before and fail to react when they threaten violence again. At least half of the offenders in cases analyzed by USA Today had previous convictions for criminal behavior or had previously acted violently.

At Honeywell in Minnesota, maintenance worker Randy Landin strangled a co-worker to death and was released from prison after four years. After his release, he reapplied at Honeywell. The company hired him back as a custodian to work in Minneapolis, according to a state appeals court ruling.

But he got into confrontations at work, so the company transferred him to other facilities, according to the ruling. At one of those facilities, he befriended a co-worker, Kathleen Nesser. In 1988, he left a death threat on her locker, according to an appeals court ruling that followed a lawsuit filed by Nesser's estate. He stopped coming to work and resigned on July 11. On July 19, he killed Nesser in her driveway with a close-range shotgun blast.

The lawsuit was settled after an appeals court in Minnesota said the case could go to trial. Honeywell officials did not comment on why he was rehired, saying the decision was made before Honeywell was acquired by AlliedSignal and renamed Honeywell International.

A Honeywell spokesman said in an Associated Press story at the time that he didn't know the specifics but that "the philosophy we have is that we don't discriminate when it comes to hiring practices."

Today, officials say Honeywell International has always had a strict zero-tolerance policy to protect employees from violence in the workplace. And they say that the company conducts background checks and doesn't hire applicants convicted of violent crimes.

Companies sometimes allow tension-filled work environments that can give rise to violence: The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said this week that a shooting occurred last year at Lockheed Martin in Meridian, Miss., after the company permitted a racially charged atmosphere to grow at the factory for years. The EEOC said the company was aware of the hostile work environment in Meridian but failed to stop it. Doug Williams shot 14 people there, killing six. Twelve of the 14 victims were black. Williams, who killed himself, was white.

Ignoring warning signs

Many employers believe it can't happen to them.

New policies to prevent violence were adopted after a fatal 1998 shooting at the state Transportation Department office in Greeley, Colo. Accountant Robert "Scott" Helfer, 50, had a history of arguments with supervisors. As a meeting was held to discuss employee complaints against him, he shot and killed equal employment representative Sharlene Nail and wounded Karla Harding, a regional transportation director. Helfer was later shot and killed by a state trooper in the parking lot.

Today, the organization has a way to track workers' behavior if anything seems abnormal. Disciplinary processes may be handled with security officers present or employees may have to pass through metal detectors before such meetings.

"You don't expect it. You find ways to rationalize their behavior," says Harding, 46, who was shot in her hand, shoulder and leg in the attack. "In his own way, he was giving clues. People blew it off. Now, we're a lot more careful."

Companies often don't warn employees they may be in danger or train supervisors how to intervene when troubling behavior surfaces. When a killer strikes, in nearly eight of 10 cases, evidence indicates the attacker targets his victims, rather than randomly shooting, according to the analysis of cases by USA Today.

Some employers say they've done all they can and that they never imagined a disgruntled worker would turn deadly.

Workers such as Michael Rahming, 50, a painter at Fairview Developmental Center, an organization for people with developmental disabilities in Costa Mesa, Calif. Rahming had a history of confrontations and had alleged that he was mistreated because he was black. Fairview sent him for psychiatric evaluations, officials say, and tried to help him.

But on July 30, 1991, Rahming shot and wounded a supervisor, killed another, then drove his truck across the campus in search of his final victim, the boss – executive director Hugh Kohler.

He found Kohler in a hallway. The two made eye contact. There was no rage in Rahming's face. Just determination.

“Oh, no.” Those were the words Kohler said just before the bullet hit, thrusting him back with the force of a body punch. The bullet went into Kohler’s skull about a quarter of an inch, then ricocheted back. Still alive, Kohler fought with his attacker. Rahming shot him a second time, and this time the bullet dug a furrow across the top of his skull.

At one point the attacker placed his hands around Kohler’s throat. Kohler shoved Rahming out the office door and braced his body against it, jumping back when bullets flew through the wood.

“I felt how focused he was, how mission-driven,” Kohler says. “It wasn’t rage.”

The cat-and-mouse game continued until police arrived and subdued Rahming, who was sentenced to 60 years in prison.

Kohler continued in his position for 12 years, despite chronic pain caused by nerve damage to his head and spine from the attack. In 2003, doctors told him he could no longer work, and Kohler, who is now 55, went on disability retirement.

In the opinion of Michael Naughton, who served as Rahming’s defense lawyer, Fairview should have done more to prevent the attack, such as ordering Rahming into therapy.

Naughton, now an Orange County Superior Court judge, says Rahming had a history of confrontations, and psychiatric evaluations before the shooting warned he had “paranoid tendencies.”

“They all figured he was disgruntled,” says Naughton. “The problem was he had mental health problems of a really serious nature.”

Kohler says he did everything he could, including sending Rahming out for three psychiatric evaluations. He says all three evaluations stated that, although he was probably paranoid, he was fit for work.

Says Kohler: “My mistake was I never saw him as a time bomb that would explode.”

The final psychiatrist’s report stating Rahming was fit for duty arrived a week after the shooting.

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