

Mitigating risk: the importance of workplace threat assessments

Canadian companies need to do much more to protect their employees from violence in the workplace, including conducting proactive threat assessments, Toronto workplace violence consultant [Denise Koster](#) tells AdvocateDaily.com.

Employers seem to suffer from “wilful blindness” when it comes to the potential for attacks by fired or disciplined employees or by violent partners of employees, says Koster, the founder and principal of [Koster Consulting & Associates](#) who specializes in the prevention, intervention and investigation of both workplace violence and elder abuse.

“Workplace violence threat assessment is a field, particularly in Canada, that is not something many employers build into their company’s safety protocol,” she says.

The unaddressed risk, which can cause major emotional distress for all employees, comes from three main sources: angry staff members, irate former employees and stalkers pursuing their targets, Koster says.

Canadians like to think they are different than other countries and that horrible events such as mass shootings couldn’t happen here, but they are wrong, she says.

“For our own self-preservation, we tend to downplay situations and say that’s only things we see in the news. But we’re hearing about it more and more. Companies do monthly fire drills and have full strategies on how to deal with fire, and yet they generally don’t address the threat of someone coming in with a gun.”

When violence does occur, it’s usually not out of the blue — there is almost always a series of events that lead up to it, Koster says.

She outlines the psychological steps that sometimes occur when a person is terminated from a job: “They suffer trauma, which triggers anxiety. They might see that problem as unsolvable, usually after a series of attempts— they can’t get that job back, they’re losing their family — and after that, the frame of reference for them becomes more narrow. They become increasingly self-centred and focus on self-preservation, and think ‘What difference does it make if I do something because I’ve exhausted all my options?’”

Before suspending or terminating an employee, managers should have a meeting to discuss what they will do if the person becomes violent or shows signs of becoming violent, and develop a protocol for that, Koster says.

In certain situations she has advised clients to have security in the room when a termination is taking place. It’s also important that they not let down their guard if nothing happens immediately.

People often have subjective opinions about who is likely to be violent, or they use profiling, she says.

“They’re not trained to be able to make that call. When you do a formal risk assessment, it’s really the opposite of profiling in that it’s applied to known individuals and explores actual behaviours in circumstances that surround that individual. So you’re not just saying, ‘You know what? Jane’s lovely. She doesn’t have a mean bone in her body, but we’d better watch out for that Bob!’”

There are a variety of methods for conducting an objective threat assessment, and one of the most useful for Koster is [MOSAIC](#), a tool developed by California security expert [Gavin de Becker](#). MOSAIC is a computer-assisted method of assessing risk based on an individual’s actions and history rather than on such generalizations as gender, race or socioeconomic level.

The trained assessor answers between 35 to 46 inquiry areas about the individual and the computer program combines and analyzes the results to produce a risk rating.

Koster took advanced training at de Becker’s academy in 2013. She says the type of questions the program considers include: is the person known to have a weapon; do they use drugs; have they ever had contact with the police?

MOSAIC began in the 1980s as a tool to assess and screen threats and inappropriate communications but has since been expanded to assess threats against judges and public officials, as well as workplace dangers and domestic violence.

“I feel confident using this system, which is used worldwide,” Koster says. “It removes my own and my client’s subjectivity and bias.”