

Top risk factors for potential workplace violence

By [AdvocateDaily.com](#) Staff

Canadian employers don't take threat assessment seriously enough, Toronto workplace violence consultant [Denise Koster](#) tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

Koster, principal of [Koster Consulting Associates](#), says it's becoming increasingly commonplace for businesses to conduct bomb scare drills in addition to more traditional fire drills. But virtually none prepare for instances of workplace violence carried out by current or former employees, or their family members, she adds.

"We have a false sense of security in this province and in the country as a whole when it comes to the possibility of someone coming into the workplace to harm individuals," Koster says. "There's a tendency to look at this as a U.S. problem that doesn't happen here.

"Unfortunately, that is not the case, and there is an increased potential for incidents of workplace violence as a result of a number of factors that put extra stress on individuals," she adds.

Koster says taking a proactive approach can help organizations minimize their risks, and that previous high-profile instances of workplace violence — such as the [murder](#) of a Windsor nurse by her former colleague and the [murder-suicide](#) carried out by a former Ottawa transit worker — offer lessons for preventing future repeats.

"Generally, violence doesn't start with a shooting or a stabbing — that's when it ends," she explains. "Workplace violence is on a continuum that starts with a feeling of being done wrong. I believe organizations need to look at stressors, whether physical, psychological or social, on individuals in the workplace in order to identify situations before they occur."

According to Koster, here are the top six indicators employers should watch for:

- Declining performance
- Excessive displays of temper
- A history of testing the limits of an organization's rules
- Unresolved grievances within the workplace
- Increased absenteeism or lateness
- Changes in behaviour

Koster says other warning signs, such as alcohol or drug abuse or marital problems, may be harder for employers to detect. However, she adds that they still tend to manifest themselves in some of those listed above.

"I often hear executives say that employees' personal issues aren't their problem because they're here to do a job, but I think that's unfortunate," she says. "Any time someone is terminated or has a verbal or written warning issued to them, employers should be looking at the potential for that individual to become violent.

"They need to be cognizant that something could happen — not only while they are in the office space, but also at a later date. In the Ottawa case, it was three months later that he came back and shot his former colleagues.

"Organizations can never let their guard down," Koster adds.

When threat assessments are carried out internally by untrained professionals, she says they tend to be ineffective and biased by the assessors' previous experience with the workers.

"When I conduct a threat assessment, any inherent biases are removed," Koster says.

"Information about the subject is gathered in a systematic way, and that data is assessed using a screening tool that determines the present level of risk. As new information emerges or circumstances change the assessment is updated and customized safety plans are developed."

She is a graduate of Gavin de Becker's Threat Assessment and Management Academy in California and uses the [MOSAIC](#) tool he developed to assess risk based on a series of questions about the individual's actions and history.