

Prevent Workplace Violence Before It Starts

Employee screening, clear security policies and a watchful eye may help avoid or minimize potentially dangerous events

By Martin C. Daks

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the term "workplace violence" triggers images of high-profile tragedies like the one that occurred in April at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. There, an employee who had received a poor job review and thought he was going to be fired smuggled a gun into his NASA office and murdered a colleague before shooting and killing himself.

Fortunately, few workplace confrontations rise to that level, say FBI and other experts. But that doesn't mean it's safe to ignore stalking, intimidation and other forms of behavior that may escalate into violence if left unaddressed.

"Workplace violence is a fluid concept," says Marcus Felson, a professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University in Newark and a researcher at the school's Crime Prevention Service for Business. "One issue is that it doesn't always have to occur directly in the workplace. Say a pizzeria worker is assaulted while making a delivery; that's still an act of workplace violence."

But even when trouble occurs within the workplace walls, the aggressor isn't always a fellow employee. "Workplace violence can arise out of interactions with customers," says Felson. "Just look at the way that most state motor vehicle departments have at least one police officer stationed inside. People are standing on long lines and are being shuffled from one line to another. It's the kind of setting that can easily provoke an angry reaction from a person renewing a license or engaging in other transactions."

The sheer number of potential flash-points can make it difficult to secure a company against someone who snaps and lashes out in an office, a retail facility or other setting.

"Part of the problem is that although we have access controls that can help ensure that

only authorized personnel get into an office or other area, it may be that very person who starts acting aggressively," says Michael Toto, director of sales at Integrated Systems & Services Inc. The Cliffwood company designs and installs alarm, access-control, video-surveillance and other systems. "Closed-circuit and other monitoring devices can help to alert security once a situation starts, but we're still some ways from being able to automate the entire monitoring and alert process."

Psychology is a key component of preventing or at least containing the problem, says Kurus Elavia, CEO at Gateway Security Inc. in Newark. His company provides security and other services for Newark Liberty International, JFK International and LaGuardia airports, **>> See VIOLENCE on page 18** and to health care and other facilities.

At a basic level, companies should consider running background checks and psychological screening tests on prospective employees, says Elavia. Companies should also develop formal policies that prohibit abusive or other dangerous behavior, and communicate them to employees through signage and other methods.

"Additionally, security personnel and management should be trained to recognize suspicious behavior, including sudden changes in an employee's behavior, so there's a greater chance that they'll realize a situation is developing even before something happens," says Elavia. "Other examples include a person who comes in wearing a bulky coat even though the weather's warm, or an employee who suddenly comes in with a knapsack, even though he or she never before carried one. Basically, you're on the lookout for clothing or accessories that can conceal weapons."

If security or management personnel become suspicious, they may have to tread



a fine line between trying to prevent an act of violence and violating the rights of a potentially innocent person.

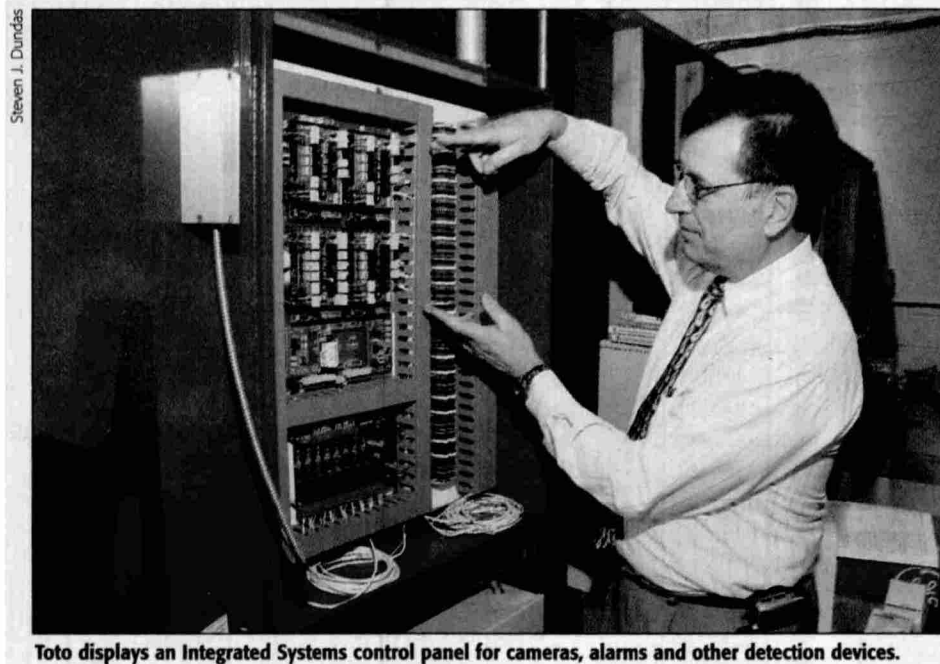
"There's no single textbook response," cautions Elavia. "But generally, if the situation appears to be serious, you may try to steer the suspect into a room or other part of the building where they'll be isolated from most other people while someone else contacts the appropriate authorities. Meanwhile, try to talk to the person in a non-threatening manner and see what's going on, in an attempt to defuse the situation."

Of course, if trouble appears imminent, or has already developed, it's vital to get people out of the area as quickly as possible.

"When I'm in a facility," says Toto, "one of the first things I do is to check the fire doors and other exits to be sure they're operating properly. It can be vital to have an accessible escape route." ♦

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***Sometimes it's a matter
of talking calmly and trying
to defuse the situation.***



Toto displays an Integrated Systems control panel for cameras, alarms and other detection devices.