

What can be done about violence at work?

As awareness of the problem of violence at work increases, knowledge of what can be done about it is growing. In particular, it is recognized by many experts that a comprehensive approach has to be adopted, rather than searching for a single solution to any problem or situation. The full range of causes which generate violence should be analysed and a variety of intervention strategies adopted. Responses to workplace violence are frequently ineffective because they are limited in scope, episodic and ill-defined.

It is now more widely understood that violence at work is not an isolated, individual problem, but a structural, strategic issue rooted in wider social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. The response should therefore be directed at tackling the causes, rather than the effects of violence at work through the adoption of a preventive, systematic, participative and targeted approach.

Preventive strategies

Rather than considering them to be random acts of violence by criminals, it is now being much more widely recognized that violence at work is potentially preventable. Experts emphasize the importance of a response which includes the most appropriate mix of measures according to the situation.

A participative strategy and a statement of intent

The common elements of preventive strategies and plans on violence usually include the involvement of all those concerned and a clear statement of intent which reflects a real commitment from all parties concerned to recognize the importance of the fight against violence at work. This is usually accompanied by the establishment of a written policy.

Selection and screening

Selection tools, such as written tests, interviews, performance tests and psychological tests are commonly recommended. These may help to identify individuals who are more tailored to certain jobs, who are less likely to get stressed, frustrated or angered, and who may therefore be less prone to violent workplace responses. However, the effectiveness of screening has been questioned, as have the limits which should be imposed on such practices. In particular, *psychological, alcohol, drug and genetic* testing are under scrutiny.

Training

Regular and updated training is essential to the prevention of violence. Such training involves instilling interpersonal and communication skills which can be

used to defuse and prevent a potentially threatening situation. It helps to improve the ability to identify potentially violent situations and people. It gives employees knowledge of the nature of client aggression, the motivations of aggressors, clues to impending aggression and how to respond to emotional clients.

Information and communication

The circulation of information, open communication and guidance can greatly reduce the risk of violence at work by defusing tension and frustration among workers. The circulation of information is of particular importance in removing the taboo of silence which often surrounds cases of sexual harassment, mobbing and bullying. Information sessions, personnel meetings, office meetings, group discussions and problem-solving groups can prove very effective in this respect. Staff should also be informed of the best way of coping with aggression by means of guidelines and staff development programmes on violence at work.

Effective communication with clients and the public can also do much to prevent violence. For example, the provision of information to patients, their friends and relatives, is crucial to lessening the risk of assault in hospitals, particularly in cases involving distress and long waiting periods.

Physical environment and layout

Design elements of the work environment can play an important role in the prevention of violence, including:

- *general factors*, such as ventilation and thermal control; seating, especially where waiting is involved; comfort and size of waiting rooms; noise level; colour and light; and toilet facilities. Other design factors include controlled entrances, alarms, security screens and guards, protective barriers and surveillance systems to alert colleagues if urgent help is needed.
- *protection-specific design*, for which conditions vary greatly between locations and industries. For example, in cash-handling businesses, it is recommended that bulk cash-handling areas be located as far as possible from entrances and exits, while in educational institutions, it is suggested that the reception area should be located as close as possible to the main entrance. Moreover, the perceived effectiveness of specific measures can vary. In some countries, screens around bus drivers have been found to reduce assaults, while in others emergency buttons and hidden microphones have been found to have a greater deterrent value.

Work organization and job design

Work organization and job design are key issues in developing preventive strategies against workplace violence. For example, effective means of reducing tension and avoiding aggression between workers and in their contact with the public include ensuring that: staffing levels are appropriate; tasks are assigned according to experience and competence; tasks are clearly defined; working hours are not excessive; and shifts are adequate to a particular situation.

Changing work practices to limit dissatisfaction from clients is also extremely important. The most influential factors in reducing client aggression are speedy and efficient service, which can be facilitated by strategies such as staff rotation for particularly demanding jobs, scheduling more staff at peak periods, tailoring client flow systems and keeping waiting times to a minimum.

Organizational solutions may include changing the job or system to reduce the face-to-face contact with the public, thereby limiting opportunities for violent behaviour. The improvement of cash-handling procedures and the introduction of automatic ticket dispensers/collectors and cash machines can also assist, although it is important to ensure that, because staff are less visible, these measures do not make violence a greater risk for members of the public instead.

Dealing with violent incidents

While prevention is by far the best way of addressing violence at work, it is important for workers to be prepared and procedures to be established to defuse difficult situations and avoid violent confrontation.

Defusing aggression

Even in the most difficult situations, there is often some room for manoeuvre before violence is initiated. Many guidelines have been developed which recommend ways of minimizing the risk of a violent incident taking place.

In this respect, personal attitudes and behaviour are extremely important. A person who is on the brink of physical aggression has a number of choices: to attack, to retreat or to compromise. It is necessary to guide them towards the latter two, for example by staying calm, speaking gently, slowly and clearly, trying to talk things through in a reasonable manner and avoiding an aggressive stance, such as crossed arms, hands on hips, wagging a finger or raising an arm, all of which challenge and confront.

Immediate action after violent incidents

Depending on the nature and gravity of the violence, police intervention may be required, especially in the case of major incidents. In any case, the importance of *recording and reporting* workplace violence is emphasized by all experts. The recording and reporting system should cover all incidents,

including both minor and potential incidents where no actual harm has resulted. Apparently trivial events should not be neglected, since they may become relevant later, for example to assist in detecting persistent patterns of behaviour or an escalation in aggression. Employees should know how and where to report violent acts or threats of violence, without fear of reprisal or criticism.

The victims of violence can experience a wide range of disturbing reactions and may need psychological help to deal with the distressing and often disabling after-effects of a violent incident. *Debriefing* is recommended in all but the most trivial cases, usually in the form of meetings, preferably run by staff and involving as many people as possible who were involved in the incident. It is also generally recommended that *trauma-crisis counselling* should be incorporated into the post-incident response, either through qualified staff or outside specialists. Finally, especially in the case of major violent incidents, some victims may need *long-term support*, which may include extended professional counselling, legal assistance with compensation procedures, rehabilitation and help in redeployment.

Monitoring and evaluation

Finally, it is necessary to review and check the effectiveness of measures which are taken to prevent and deal with violence at work. This should take the form of monitoring the results of the changes that have been introduced, using a system through which employees can provide regular feedback, so that the impact of the changes can be evaluated and any remaining problems or any change in the nature of the problems can be detected.