

Loss Prevention Standards

Violence to Employees

Introduction

Employees dealing directly with the public may face aggressive or violent behaviour, such as verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Violent attacks can have a profound impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of the workforce.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related violence as:

“Any incident, in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work”.

Most at risk are those employees:

- Providing a service
- Undertaking cash transactions
- Delivering or collecting goods
- Representing authority
- Working alone or unaccompanied

Such activities can be found in many occupations, e.g. the retail sector, petrol stations, parcel delivery, estate agencies, health and welfare sector, private security services, healthcare professions and provision of youth or community services.

Working in an atmosphere of threat is profoundly damaging to the confidence and morale of employees. For employers, there are costs in terms of:

- Reduced efficiency
- Sickness absence
- Bad ‘image’, which may result in high staff turnover and/or inhibit recruitment

Scale of the Problem

Findings from the 2015-16 Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) show that:

- 350,000 adults of working age in employment experienced work-related violence including threats and physical assault
- There were an estimated 698,000 incidents of violence at work, comprising 329,000 assaults and 369,000 threats
- 1.3% of women and 1.5% of men were victims of violence at work once or more during the year prior to their interview
- It is estimated that 56% of victims reported one incident of work-related violence whilst 18% experienced two incidents of work-related violence, and 26% experienced three or more incidents
- 4,697 injuries to employees, where the ‘kind of accident’ was ‘physical assault/act of violence’ in Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland). This represents 6.5% of all reported workplace injuries. Of this figure, there was one death (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR))

It must be assumed that the high percentage of repeat victims is more likely a result of the working environment rather than any attributable of the employee. They suffer violence as a direct result of where they work and what they do.

The employees most at risk are those working in the protective services, e.g. police, prison officers and in the health sector and associated business.



Tackling the Problem

The expense of effective preventive measures is likely to be very small, and key steps to managing the risk of violence are:

- Determining if you have a problem
- Assessing the size and nature of the risks (the risk of violence should be included in the risk assessments for relevant tasks/duties)
- Deciding what action to take
- Acting on your decisions
- Reviewing the effectiveness of the actions taken

Guidelines can only be general since the extent and nature of the risk of violence vary considerably. The main aspects that must be assessed include:

- The working environment
- Information Systems
- Home visits/work away from office or base
- Training
- Need to plan to cope with violence
- The aftermath of incidents

The high percentage of repeat victims leads to the conclusion that changes in the workplace should have a significant effect on reducing the incidence of violence. Workplace changes coupled with anger management/conflict resolution or avoidance should deliver even greater benefits.

Working Environment

The physical environment of buildings, waiting rooms and reception areas may significantly affect the likelihood of outbursts of aggression and violence. Factors to consider include:

- Ease of access and means of escape
- Ease of contact (sight or sound) with colleagues
- Alarms and panic buttons for use in an emergency

Simple changes in working practice such as not taking cash or prohibiting unaccompanied working can significantly reduce risks.

Information Systems

There should be a system to provide employees with information about the likelihood of aggression or violent assault, which must be updated regularly in the light of new information or events.

A system for reporting incidents of aggression and violence should be established. Employees should be encouraged to report any incident of violence and there should be appropriate, robust procedures in place, which address any issues resulting from such reports.



Unaccompanied Working/Working away from the Office

Employees visiting customers or service users may be at a higher risk from violence. In these cases, the main method for the prevention of violence is the ability of the employee to both recognise potential signs of aggression and prevent situations from escalating or withdraw from “at risk” situations.

Support measures for employees include:

- Avoiding unaccompanied working
- Keeping a detailed plan of employee’s whereabouts
- Regular, e.g. hourly, reports to base
- Procedures for assessing potential risk
- Providing information and training on situations likely to carry a risk of violence
- Adopting suitable procedures for work away from the premises and/or unaccompanied working, e.g. two-way radio links, personal alarm systems

However, lone working is encountered in other sectors and at fixed locations and premises, e.g. late night work at petrol stations.

Training

Training in prevention and management of violence should be available to all employees having contact with the public. Suitable topics for inclusion in a short course are:

- Causes of violence
- Recognition of warning signs
- Relevant interpersonal skills
- Details of arrangements devised by management
- Methods of defusing aggression

Planning to cope with Violence

It is important to have a plan for dealing with violent incidents when they occur.

Management arrangements incorporated in such a plan should include the following:

- What action individual employees are expected to take - for example, in the event of robbery to not offer resistance
- Plan for control through a named person or team with specific responsibilities to defuse and handle acts of violence
- Comprehensive rules that are easy to understand and recall quickly
- Clear guidance on reporting procedures, both physical recording of event details and notification to others
- Making employees aware that such a plan exists and their own role within it

Aftermath of Violence

Each workplace should have a proper system for recording and investigating accidents and ill health. This should include any violent event whether or not it has led to damage or injury. The recording system should aim to collect sufficient material for a thorough analysis of the event, and should include:

- What happened
- Why it happened
- How it happened
- What could be done to prevent a recurrence

The analysis should make recommendations on how to prevent a recurrence and should also facilitate monitoring of violent events by providing a statistical database on cause, effect, nature of event, location, time of day, etc.



Key Action Steps

- Assess the extent of the problem by encouraging employees to openly discuss experiences of violence
- Consider the environment in which customers are waiting. Is there sufficient information about likely waiting times to reduce anxiety? Is the environment welcoming with activities to reduce boredom such as magazines and children's toys?
- Could employees quickly alert their colleagues in the event of an assault? If not consider the provision of panic buttons or personal attack alarms
- Devise systems to protect employees working away from the premises and/or unaccompanied. This could include regular contact with base, personal communication equipment and information on any situations that they are entering. Special arrangements should be made for "high risk" visits
- Provide training to all employees on how to recognise and deal with violent situations
- Devise a policy and arrangements on the issue of violence to employees and ensure that all employees are aware of any duties they have under such a policy
- Ensure any acts of violence resulting in major injuries are reported to the appropriate authority as outlined within RIDDOR

Additional Information

- The HSE have a section of their website dedicated to [work-related violence](#).
- They also have a range of dedicated guidance, available to download from their website as follows:
- [Violence at Work – A Guide for Employers](#)
- [Working Alone](#)
- [Preventing Violence to Retail Staff](#)
- [Work-related Violence: Case Studies and Managing the Risk in Smaller Businesses](#)

Further risk management information can be obtained from [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#)

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