

FAIRFIELD COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Killings prompt HR reassessments

Alexander Soule

Appeared On: Aug-13-10

The workplace massacre in Manchester has triggered a significant reassessment of human resources policies among companies in Connecticut and Fairfield County – both in terms of sensitive one-time events like disciplinary actions and in terms of ongoing relations in the work force.

Stamford resident Louis Felder was among eight victims killed in Omar Thornton's rampage Aug. 3 at Hartford Distributors Inc. Called into work that day accompanied by a union representative, Thornton had been shown videotape catching him in the act of stealing beer, with the company allowing him to resign rather than be fired. As he was escorted out of the building, Thornton asked to go to the kitchen for a drink of water, only to emerge shooting with two handguns he had stashed there.

Thornton then called 911, and in a chilling tape obtained by the Hartford Courant spoke of the killings in conversational tones with a dispatcher, saying he had been motivated by racial harassment at work, a claim disputed by Hartford Distributors and the Teamsters Local 1035 union that represents workers there.

Even as funerals were being held for victims, the tragedy continued to play out in workplaces – an employee at New Haven-based Fusco Management Co. L.L.C. was arrested for reportedly commenting he understood the killer's mindset. After he was taken into custody, Derby resident Francis Laskowski called the arrest "ridiculous" and stated he had made no threat.

If the largest mass murder in Connecticut history, the Manchester shootings were preceded by multiple other instances of workplace violence in the past year. Last October, police SWAT teams swarmed an XL Capital office after an armed, former employee assaulted a manager. And the Occupational Health and Safety Administration administered a rebuke last month to Danbury Hospital, stating lax security policies contributed to several violent incidents by patients including the shooting of a nurse, who survived.

If those incidents did not hit home, the Manchester attack certain did. The Stamford-based human resources consultancy OperationsInc received multiple calls from companies wanting advice on how to handle sensitive job terminations, according to CEO David Lewis.

"I have an employer who has a tough termination and they are convinced they need to have security on hand," Lewis said. "What's already started to happen – I don't think panic is the right word, maybe overreaction – is that security companies are getting calls

already that, 'We have to (terminate) someone, can you send a guard over?'"

At the very least, Lewis and others say employers need to review and update their policies regarding sensitive employee-management topics like workplace relations, hiring and firing.

Known triggers for "desk rage" are negative performance reviews or less formal criticism; conflicts with coworkers; changes in one's role at a company; stress from increased workloads; and disruptions outside the workplace, whether related to family, finances or another reason.

Processes and workplace environments also play a major factor however, including lack of defined rules for workplace conduct; inadequate training; shoddy screening of new hires; overbearing management; and lack of support systems for employees.

Policies cannot plate cubicles in armor, however, noted Daniel Schwartz, an attorney in the West Hartford office of Pullman & Comley L.L.C., who addressed the topic in his blog on workplace law.

"There may be some employers that want to use this incident to revisit their own policies or ask what they could do to reduce the risk of workplace violence," Schwartz stated. "Metal detectors at the doors? Armed guards? Allowing employees to bring guns into work? More training? 'Zero-tolerance' on workplace violence policies? Reviewing social media websites?"

"Ultimately, all I keep asking is whether there (is) really anything to 'learn' from this incident other than being reminded of the fact that bad things happen to good people," he added. "Despite all the guidance and advice that can be given, the awful truth is that there really is no way to prevent tragedies like this from ever occurring. An employer can do everything 'right' and yet still a rampage ensues by someone committed to carrying out a terrible crime."