

Assessing for Violence and Positive Job Performance

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Introduction

Any time incidents of workplace violence make the news, businesses and employees wonder if someone at their office might be the next to lash out. But how would you evaluate the potential for violence? Is it even possible, not to mention legal, to accurately assess which employees and job candidates might be most likely to perpetrate violent acts? The answers lie in how personality assessments are structured and evaluated.

What to Look For

Though the research is not entirely conclusive, three personality traits seem to be the common denominators of workplace violence and violent criminals in general: low locus of control, negative affectivity and interpersonal insensitivity.

People with a low locus of control do not feel that they are in control of their lives. They tend to be fatalistic and perceive that things happen to them randomly, rather than as a result of their actions. They often feel persecuted and victimized by others. Over time, feeling out of control can result in a high level of stress, which may lead to irrational or violent action against themselves and others. According to the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH), "Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury."

Negative affectivity, or attitude, refers to a person's way of looking at the world. People with a high level of negative affectivity:

- See the glass half empty instead of half full
- Look for hiding agendas and conspiracies, and
- Are likely to be cynical

High levels of negative affectivity have been shown to be statistically significant in predicting poor job performance. In other words, poor attitude tends to mean poor performance.

Criminal and violent offenders have lower levels of interpersonal sensitivity and have a much lower need for affiliation than non-offenders do. Moreover, they don't necessarily view interactions with others as positive experiences. They tend to be loners, are less likely to be concerned about the needs and feelings of others and believe that others are not concerned about their needs and feelings. Therefore, they are less likely to care that their actions may hurt other people.

Statistical Accuracy

Testing specifically for the potential for violent behavior may be illegal and is most definitely inaccurate. Since most employees do not attack their co-workers, workplace violence is still a statistically rare occurrence. Because statistics are based upon probabilities, any time you try to predict a rare occurrence, accuracy is compromised because there are fewer data points from which to measure. In short, testing specifically for negative behaviors alone provides inaccurate test results. Therefore, assessments designed specifically to identify "high-risk" candidates may eliminate too many people because the false positive rate can be high.

Test for High Scores

While low scores in these three areas may suggest a tendency toward violent behavior, high scores in the areas of locus of control, attitude and interpersonal sensitivity are highly correlated to strong job performance. The logical conclusion, then, is rather than look for those who score poorly, employers should look for and hire people who achieve high scores in the areas that are statistically accurate predictors of positive job performance.

Results in Action

When an Ohio-based manufacturing plant opened, every candidate was given a battery of assessments, including tests for negative affectivity. Minimum cutoffs for negative affectivity were not established for this plant. Instead, a compensatory evaluation model was chosen, allowing the overall average score to cancel out lower scores in other categories. Nine months after the plant opened, Select International reviewed the original test

scores of everyone who had been terminated, quit or gotten into serious conflicts with supervisors and co-workers at the plant. We found that 70% of those people had negative affectivity scores significantly higher than the rest of those who were hired. As a result of those findings, minimum cutoff points were instituted for negative affectivity scores and were applied in the next round of testing and hiring at the plant. Employee turnover and erratic behavior among the workers dropped significantly after minimum cutoffs were applied.

Conclusion

By looking for positive indicators and establishing minimum cutoff scores below which you will not hire, employers can comply with the law and also locate the best employees while simultaneously learning which employees may have the highest propensity for violence. By testing for these positive characteristics, hiring people who score the highest, and establishing a test score below which you will not hire, employers can weed out potentially dangerous poor performers and find the best people at the same time.