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Q&A

Asking the tough questions for employers

Steven Millwee has made a business out of nosing into job applicants' business.

By KRIS HUNDLEY, Times Staff Writer
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TAMPA -- Steven Millwee, a former sheriff's detective, has built a successful company out of the old adage that you won't learn anything unless you ask. In his case, it means teaching employers how to pop questions that can get job applicants to admit to their flaws, even involving criminal or violent behavior.

Among the questions: "How many people have you killed, not including war?"

Millwee is president and chief executive of SecurTest Inc., a Tampa company that specializes in tools for screening potential employees and preventing workplace violence. Millwee, 49, started the company in 1978 after five years as lead detective with the unsolved murder unit of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. It had \$1-million in revenue last year. He is also chairman and past president of ASIA International, an association of more than 32,000 security professionals.

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In an interview with the St. Petersburg Times, Millwee talked about security and screening for business in a post-Sept. 11 world. Here are excerpts:

* * *

Q. Your company claims that, using its questionnaires, employers can get applicants to reveal everything from past drug use to criminal behavior. How do you do it?

You ask open-ended questions that help a person rationalize their behavior. "How many times have you smoked marijuana in the last week for relaxation?" "How many times did you hit a supervisor in the last 24 months because he upset you?" Most screening tests are predictive, asking people how they feel about certain behaviors. Our test is a biographical admissions test. The questions put an emphasis on the part of the question that makes the behavior okay to admit to.

* * *

Q. Do people really admit wrongdoing on these questionnaires?

Half of 1 percent of the people who have taken the test have admitted to a murder. If you ask the question and ask it in the right way, people will tell the truth.

* * *

Q. Who are your customers and how much does your questionnaire cost?

We've got 6,000 clients. Our biggest category is convenience stores, then there are retailers, security guard companies, fast food restaurants and resorts. The cost is \$7 to \$25 per applicant, with price based on volume. Applicants can take the test on computer, do a paper and pencil version or an interactive voice questionnaire by phone. The tests are sent here for processing, and we file a report.

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Q: What do you think is the biggest mistake employers make?

The people who do the hiring are not trained in what to look for. They're trained in what they can't ask, and that's excellent training. But most never go through a course on what you can ask.

The applicant comes in to the interview looking and smelling his best and the employer wants to fill the position; he's there trying to sell the organization to the applicant. The interviewer often spends more time talking about the organization and far less time is spent with the applicant talking about their qualifications. The applicant goes out the door and the employer doesn't know any more than when the applicant walked in.

People are so afraid to ask the wrong questions, they won't ask the right ones. I understand it's hard to ask someone sitting across the desk from you, "How many people have you killed, not including war?" That's a tough question. That's why it's better asked on a questionnaire.

* * *

Q. What impact, if any, did the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 have on your business?

It put security on everyone's mind and crystalized for management executives that without human assets, they have no company.

The level of fear in employees is at an all-time high. Violence at work has been the No. 1 concern among employees for the last three or four years. I'd say the average business has reacted well to these concerns.

* * *

Q. In addition to the testing program, SecurTest does threat assessments. When are those initiated and how are they performed?

If an employee tells their supervisor they're concerned a co-worker might go postal, I go in and have the employer and select employees answer a

225-item questionnaire about this worker. After a risk assessment, I come in for an investigation and intervention. My approach is one of "unmerited mercy," which is a Biblical term which means giving mercy that is not earned and undeserved.

I talk to the employee and try to gain their trust and build rapport. Once they admit to having violent ideations, obviously they can't stay. The employer can't hold onto that risk. So we work out their departure so they can resign with dignity. We structure what will truthfully be said about them to potential employers and then, most importantly, we try to outsource them for counseling at the employer's expense.

That way they leave the organization without a focus on the organization. The worst thing an employer can do is simply fire someone. That sends a message of finality, and the employee goes off and stewes about it for eight months and comes back with a gun.

I stay in contact with the employee for a month or so, calling to check on him. I try to help the employee find resources and acclimate themselves to another job. You treat them with respect and try to soften the blow.

* * *

Q. Writing the reference letter for a violent employee must be the toughest part.

Actually that's the easiest. You say Joe Smith worked here for such and such a period. He voluntarily admits anger management problems and that he acted inappropriately. Importantly he has received psychological counseling. And we wish Joe the best.

The world is full of individuals who either feel disenfranchised, disrespected or that they haven't gotten the proper breaks in life. They'd better learn to adjust.

And the reality is, most employers don't check references. Of the 100 or so violent employees I work with each year, I've gotten phone calls on less than 1 percent.

* * *

Q. What happens when an employer learns an applicant is admitting to murder?

I have a major fast food chain as a client. One day the president called me and said they asked a long-time executive in the accounting department to take the test because he was applying to be chief financial officer.

On the questionnaire, the guy admitted to a murder. The company president wanted to know what to do.

So I did a phone interview with the fellow, asking him a series of open-ended questions. And when I came to the question about "How many people have you killed, not including war?" He said he'd killed his best friend. He was 19 years old in the Army and one night he was drunk and he drove off the road and killed his friend, who was a passenger in the car. He served 18 months in military jail and was dishonorably discharged.

Now what relation did a DUI manslaughter 24 years ago have with his current job? None. But I recommended the company hire him with the stipulation that he would not get a company vehicle and he would not be allowed to transport any employees, guests or vendors.

This person had been in Alcoholics Anonymous and done all the right rehabilitative things, so he poses no greater risk than anyone else. But to protect the company's assets, I thought those restrictions were necessary. The company did that and the guy is still CFO.

Just having information does not mean an employer should make an instant knee-jerk reaction. It's a challenge, because about 40 percent of the applicants who take our test on the surface disqualify themselves by admitting to some very bad behavior over the past two years. But people have got to work while the employer has to assess the level of risk he's willing to assume.

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