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**FEATURE ARTICLE**

# If You Don't Ask, You May Not Find Out - A Pre-employment Screening Strategy for Discovering Prior Workplace Misconduct

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## Don't Rely on Just Part of the Story

As you develop pre-employment screening strategies, don't overlook tools and procedures that solicit admission of past behavior from both the applicant and past employers. If you ask not, you will never uncover the real history of violence, criminality, drug use, thefts, terminations, sexual harassment, discrimination, and a host of other potential landmines that can be avoided.

Some executives may want to turn a blind eye because they have never experienced workplace violence. Show them the headlines.

"Shooter Kills 5" was the headline in the Tampa Tribune New Year's Eve 1999. The article read "A Tampa hotel worker described as having 'evil in his face' went on a shooting frenzy Thursday, leaving five people dead and three wounded before he was captured, police said. The rampage left a waterfront hotel in chaos, vacationers scurrying for safety and visiting football fans stranded outside their hotel room."

Interestingly, the Radisson Bay Harbor hotel, where Silvio Izquierdo Leyva went on his shooting spree on New Year's Eve, is only two blocks from where Paul Calden left his carnage a few years earlier. Coincidence? Yes, that it happened in such close proximity. No, because violent applicants become our violent employees. And for the company, willful blindness is often punished by juries as gross negligence.

The media reported that the former employers of Paul Calden paid over \$50million to the plaintiffs to settle their claims of negligent hiring, retention, and security because they never asked about his past history of violence. Ultimately, Paul Calden left two more victims...his two former employers' pocketbooks...in the wake of his murderous rampage.

Don't be the next victim because you forgot to ask the right questions, the right way, and always before making the hiring decision. You only get one chance to make the right hiring decision, or you may end up with months or years of dealing with the unqualified or violent employee. All because you didn't ask.

## One Strategy for Uncovering Past Misconduct

The applicant is the best he or she will ever be when applying for a job. He looks his best. She smells her best. They both claim to be the best. With more and more retailers conducting drug testing, checking criminal histories, verifying references, and often conducting multiple interviews, why are so many frustrated because of increasing losses due to uncontrolled turnover, shrinkage, and increasing workplace violence? One possibility is a commonly overlooked approach in applicant screening protocols...self-admission.

Loss prevention experts agree that the best predictor for future misconduct is past misconduct. But, will applicants admit to past criminal or violent behavior if asked? Surprisingly, yes, as long as the questions are properly presented. If you ask not, you receive not.

Most employment questionnaires attempt to predict future behavior based on the applicant's attitudes about drugs, theft, or past employers. Other questionnaires attempt to predict future work performance based on the applicant's personality traits. Few of the most commonly used screening tools are based on getting applicants to admit past misbehavior.

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One major retailer who does use an admission-based questionnaire to ask applicants about their history of violence, criminal behavior (not just convictions), current drug use, theft, turnover, and work performance compiled the following revealing statistics:

- 2 per 1,000 admitted to an unsolved murder.
- 1 percent admitted being wanted by the police or courts.
- 7 percent admitted committing felonies in the previous five years.
- 9 percent admitted criminal convictions in the previous seven years that were not listed on the employment application.
- 6 percent reported to a probation or parole officer.
- 1 percent admitted criminal convictions for pedophilia (sexual contact with children).
- 4 percent admitted criminal convictions involving theft, fraud, white-collar crime, credit cards, or stolen property.
- 85 out of the first 5,000 applicants admitted to a murder.
- 1 percent admitted being forced to leave a job for threatening to kill coworkers.
- 11 percent admitted receiving written reprimands in the previous 24 months from a supervisor.
- 1 percent admitted taking a gun to work with plans of killing a supervisor in the previous 24 months.
- 2 percent threatened employees with violence in the previous 24 months.
- 1 percent threatened supervisors with violence in the previous 24 months.
- 1 percent hit a customer in the previous two years.
- 1 percent used illegal drugs on the job in the previous month.
- 5 percent smoked marijuana weekly.
- 2 percent used cocaine in the previous month.
- 1 percent sold illegal drugs in the previous 24 months.
- 3 percent gave sweetheart deals (free food or merchandise) to friends or relatives in the previous 12 months.
- 3 percent admitted being in trouble more than once at work in the previous 12 months for not doing his or her job.
- 4 percent admitted working from an open cash register to steal in the previous two years.
- 6 percent admitted stealing over \$24 from work in the previous 24 months.
- 2 percent stole over \$100 from work in the previous 24 months.
- 1 percent admitted sexually harassing coworkers in the previous 24 months.
- 1 percent admitted discriminating against customers or coworkers in violation of EEO guidelines in the previous two years.

These are applicants the retailer might have hired if not for using an objective biographical pre-employment questionnaire.

Whether or not an employer uses a questionnaire to uncover bad behavior, managers must remember that the applicant is the single best source for information. The most common reasons hiring managers give for not asking hard hitting questions are "I didn't know we could" and "I thought I might offend the applicant" and "I never expected people to confess."

The reason people confess is because the question was asked. However, the questions must be properly phrased and always asked of all applicants who are being considered for hire.



*Steven C. Millwee is president and CEO of SecurTest, Inc., a national crisis management and applicant-screening firm. He is the author of The SecurTest System, a pre-employment screening system.*

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