



## Workplace threats demand strong response

### Program helps determine at-risk employees

By Mike Dempster

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If an employee said he was fed up with his job and wanted to kill senior management, what would your company do?

Or how would you handle an employee's estranged husband loitering outside the company building? A female worker being stalked?

It's grim stuff to think about, but it is a reality in today's world. "We don't think of Western Canada as a place where employees threaten (to kill) managers, but it happens a lot more than we think," says Heather Gray, who is working on two such cases in her home province of Saskatchewan.

"When an organization calls me, they are really struggling with what to do. Now that it (the threat) is out there, they can't just ignore it."

A month ago, I wrote about Gray after she packed a Calgary seminar with a discussion on bullying in the workplace.

An equally fascinating component to the work she does revolves around threat assessment, and whether people who make threats are capable of acting them out.

Gray is the lone consultant in Canada to use a scientifically based computer program to assess threats. Called Mosaic 2000, the program is also used by the Toronto Police Service and by a private Canadian organization for internal purposes.

In the U.S., versions of Mosaic are used by organizations that include the CIA, the U.S. Supreme Court Police (to measure threats against the Justices), and by the U.S. Capitol Police (to screen threats directed towards members of Congress.)

In a nutshell, the program allows Gray to deal with workplace threats, domestic and stalking situations. She inputs information about the person (there are 48 categories) and

the computer program compares it to similar cases where the outcome is already known. The database contains more than 24,000 cases.

Gavin de Becker & Associates of California designed the program. De Becker is considered one of the world's leading experts in predicting human behaviour concerning violence.

As a former member of the Regina Police Service, Gray spent 20 years as a constable on patrol, as a crisis negotiator and a detective. She became a consultant in January 2001, and as word spreads about Mosaic, she's receiving calls from across the country.

Companies find themselves in a real dilemma when an employee makes a threat to kill someone, says Gray.

Management can call police, but the response may not be satisfactory. Should the company suspend, fire, or investigate the employee? And what about security for the remainder of the employees?

Gray's role is to assess the threat, and offer solutions. Using information from the company, from co-workers and other associates – the person doesn't need to know he or she is being assessed – the computer program measures circumstances and context. For example, it considers at the time of the threat if the individual was having financial or marital problems or has access to firearms.

If the program finds that the individual's profile presents a serious threat, the company has to remove the person from the organization with great sensitivity.

"According to Gavin de Becker, in almost all cases where someone has done a mass shooting, or some equally violent thing at a workplace, they felt they had been stripped of their dignity," says Gray.

"Even if this person is hated by everyone, it is important that whoever handles the termination . . . do it with an inordinate amount of respect. It must be viewed as a fair process and give hope for the future. These are key things to successful termination."



In the case where a person is deemed a low risk, the company may be able to offer counselling or coaching to help the individual.

Employers also face decisions when employees are stalked, or fear the actions of estranged spouses or partners. The company must consider what might happen to the individual, but also to all company employees. The cases aren't easy.

"Even if there are threats, or stalking evidence, people often say they don't feel they're getting much help from police," says Gray.

Individuals can resort to restraining orders, but the procedural process is likely to fuel the anger of the stalker/spouse, she adds.

(As a macabre footnote, De Becker's website notes that its researchers gain insight into stalkers by studying more than 400,000 obsessive and threatening communications stored in a warehouse. The items include death threats, thousand-page love letters, facsimile bombs, razor blades and notes written in blood.)

In stalking or domestic cases, Gray follows the same procedure of inputting information into the computer program.

She then counsels the organization on how to proceed in the criminal system, and perhaps pursue counter-surveillance (a detective) for the protection of the victim. If the individual has guns, the point must be made to authorities to intervene and take away weapons and not allow the individual to acquire any more, says Gray.

As part of her job, she helps the company through the bureaucratic hoops. Often when citizens need help from police, they just don't know what to ask for.

"It's a subjective business, and the help you get sometimes depends on who you get that day. You need to know what to do, or take it to a higher level if you're not satisfied."

Gray praises companies that provide tests to measure a person's "emotional intelligence," or people skills.

Companies that offer counselling and coaching to help individuals improve their communication skills, deal with stress and work in a team environment may prevent the type of problems Gray encounters.

"You often hear 'so and so just snapped. The pressure got to them.'"

But no one "just snaps," says Gray.

"De Becker says violence, when it finally erupts, can be seen ahead of time – like water coming to a boil. There are things detectable beneath the surface if you know what to look for."