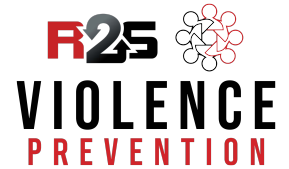


Post-pandemic, occupational violence looms as new...

By TICKY FULLERTON



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Post-pandemic, occupational violence looms as new threat

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In March 2020 when a Bankstown mother and daughter were caught screaming and scrapping with another woman over toilet rolls the video went viral.

It was disturbing expose of what stress can do to ordinary people.

In the last three months as lockdowns have lifted workplace violence is now so prevalent that the leading Australian risk firm Risk 2 Solution has been inundated with calls on what to do about it.

“There is the mask wearing, there is general anxiety and fear of people travelling, sitting next to someone, there is vax versus anti-vax and there is staff that are under stress having to enforce these mandates,” says Joe Saunders who runs the R2S national practice on occupational violence and aggression.

“There also just people carrying around a lot of residual stress, worried about finances. When you are under a lot of stress anything can set you over the edge, and we start seeing these breakthrough flashes of anger and abuse.”

R2S chief executive Dr Gavriel Schneider believes workplace aggression now ranks with cybersecurity as a top five risk issue for customer-facing businesses. And business is unprepared.

“It’s not just about work safe, lost time and injuries. It is psychosocial health, service outputs, staff retention, brand and reputational damage. It’s a true strategic risk,” he said.

R2S looks at cyber, cultural and compliance risk. Even before Covid, it identified workplace violence as an emerging threat which, apart from healthcare, was badly under-researched. There was no accepted best practice model.

Two years ago R2S ran Australia’s biggest survey across businesses in retail, customer service, security, liquor and hospitality, public transport, healthcare and education. Thirty-two per cent reported physical injury as a result of occupational violence or aggression and 76 per cent reported emotional or psychological injury.

Schneider remembers a review the firm did for a large government department.

“We were told no, our people are resilient. It is part of the job so they should expect to get assaulted, spat on, followed home or threatened – to which our response was that, no, that’s blatantly negligent.”

Covid has been the aha! moment for workplace violence.

“It is not just companies that have customer facing staff. Look at death threats to ministers, in the political sector,” Schneider says.

“The coping mechanism to reduce occupational violence and aggression comes back to social cohesion and good support structures. Curing Covid has taken away the social cohesion. We have taken away the interpersonal skills, the support. We have taken away people’s freedom of choice.

And we have also put the pressure on frontline staff to implement laws, like you can’t serve unvaxed people.”

As staff return to the workplace Saunders says his clients face new problems.

“We have now got intra-staff aggression and violence happening, where people who have perhaps been working from home in past few months are now having to cohabit again.

“Those people are not the same people that left in 2020. Those people have been sitting in their own echo chambers on their own Facebook feed.

“You’ve got people now that have been radicalised left or right and have become very pro- or anti-vax. And now they are sitting beside each other and finding each other intolerable because their political views diverge.”

In the US aviation sector, the Federal Aviation Administration is reporting a 3400 per cent increase in aggression on aircraft.

In Australia, R2S is now working with Virgin Australia on the challenge. The firm’s other clients range from state and federal government departments and local councils and listed companies.

Schneider says Australia is behind many countries that have taken on the problem. And that our enviable OH&S system and high levels of compliance have made the country less agile, not more.

Australian companies have siloed mental health, safety, governance and risk into different baskets.

When hit with new levels of occupational violence, they are finding that more security guards and cameras cannot fix the problem.

The bulk of research on workplace violence comes from the US and for good reason. “In a culture where there are a lot of firearms and mass shootings, the consequences are a lot higher. There has been a lot more effort put into prevention,” Saunders says.

“The learnings on being able to recognise someone under stress, someone who is not coping, recognising problematic behaviours of concern: those things tie in no matter how they end up, whether a mass casualty event, or just someone knocking over a display stand on the way out of the bank.”

Because Australia has not suffered the same extremism, Saunders believes that a creeping build-up of workplace aggression has been swept under the rug with a long-term strategic impact facing leadership. “It’s a risk that has been assigned to not even the chief

security officer, sometimes an operational manager, as a risk they have to address. That’s not really owning that risk.”

Schneider says there is a disconnect in senior leadership down to the frontline. “You have someone in an executive team sitting in a pretty comfortable office never being screamed at by customers,

never being spoken to in a rude manner by staff, not getting any of the hate emails and they naturally reach the conclusion to say this isn’t a problem.”

For some of his clients, Schneider says the situation is made worse after they recently tried to remove authority from frontline decision-making staff.

“We said hold on, the only person who can actually decide whether somebody is threat to them, right there and then is the person dealing with them.” That requires not only education but a broad level of policy support that builds a safer environment.

One sector crying out for help is education.

“Even before Covid there were ongoing reports of kids bringing knives to school, threatening teachers, parents threatening teachers, and the general consensus feeling that education is not a safe nor mentally healthy place to be working” Schneider says.

Fast forward to now and there has been a huge rise in frustration targeted at teachers.

R2S is working with the Teachers’ Health Fund on a risk culture project that kicks off with personal safety and de-escalation of violence. Saunders, with four kids of his own, says there is plenty of low hanging fruit to make teachers safer.

“Anecdotally, a lot of that risk is coming from parents, not the kids. In nearly every teacher interview I’ve done, they have sat me in a room where I am between the teacher and the door. If I was angry and aggressive, the teacher has no avenue of escape and no communication. These are very basic controls that would never happen in healthcare.”

Beyond that, a fundamental shift in culture is needed.

Schneider points to how violence against paramedics was tackled. “There was a huge education campaign to say this is not acceptable. You can’t assault paramedics. It wasn’t just training. They did get training. It was building a culture that these sort of things are not acceptable.”