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Planning for the worst-case scenarios



ADAM MOORE

Crisis Reality Training founder Jesus Villahermosa speaks on workplace violence prevention and mitigation at the CEC Business Technology Conference, held Oct. 13 at the Coralville Marriott.

Security expert stresses importance of training, preparation for workplace violence

By Adam Moore

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If you own a business, Jesus Villahermosa Jr. has a blunt message for you:

You can't stop someone who is determined to commit an act of violence at your workplace.

"No one can ever eliminate risk," said Mr. Villahermosa, founder of Crisis Reality Training. "There is no way to stop the next shooter if they're determined to shoot. The question is, what can do you to mitigate the threat?"

Over the course of his hour-long

keynote speech at CEC's Business Technology Conference, held Oct. 13 at the Coralville Marriott, the former sheriff's deputy and SWAT member drove home the importance of having a plan for crisis situations and training all staff members how to respond.

"You gotta have something in place," he stressed. "It doesn't mean that our buildings have to be turned

into prisons; we just have to know that training is critical."

Unfortunately, according to Mr. Villahermosa, despite the sobering statistics behind workplace violence, most businesses remain woefully unprepared.

There are more than 800 homicides in the workplace every year, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and homicides remain the second leading cause of fatal occupational injuries for all workers. And yet, two-thirds of organizations surveyed by the Center for Crisis Management reported having no training programs in place to help employees deal with violence or the threat of violence. Fifty-six percent reported having neither training nor a formal method for tracking threats.

Fortunately, he noted that there are some basic, low-tech steps that can be taken to improve security in the workplace. He recommended that every business establish a check-in/check-out system at their entrance – a system that only about 15 percent of keynote attendees acknowledged having – and that businesses with secure entrances rigorously enforce policies against 'tailgating' or 'piggybacking,' which is when people with keycards allow others to enter behind them.

Companies must also develop threat reporting and tracking systems within their organizations, and senior-level

administrators need to be able to recognize the warning signs of workplace violence. That includes knowing who responds to threats, and what specific questions need to be asked to determine if the threat is viable.

"The warning signs, when they're there, they're there," Mr. Villahermosa said. "You'd better have a plan to monitor them."

He noted that in addition to the human costs of failing to monitor and anticipate threats, there's a growing business cost as well. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has said that businesses that receive a written complaint or notification of a "foreseeable event" are now required to act upon it.

"If not, your potential liability is through the ceiling," he said, relating the story of a bank in Washington state that was notified of inadequate lighting in its parking garage but failed to act on it. A jury later issued a \$2.5 million judgment against the bank after an employee was attacked in the garage at night.

Mr. Villahermosa also advised businesses to evaluate their hiring and firing practices to avoid potential conflicts down the road. Businesses must conduct thorough background checks before a hire and refine their processes for letting people go when it inevitably

happens, he said, citing a 2004 USA Today article that found 60 percent of fatal workplace attacks in the past 30 years were related to terminations.

"Are we terminating as a matter of business, or with empathy and compassion?" he asked.

When it comes to technological solutions to workplace violence, PA systems remain the most effective means of notifying employees of mass emergency or lockdown situations, as cell towers often overload during crisis situations. But there are new tech products on the market that can potentially save lives. They include smartphone apps that employees can use to automatically initiate a facility lockdown from anywhere, and allow employees or students to check in with law enforcement or security staff in a virtual headcount.

Other systems enable security staff to send out a text message alert to any mobile device within their facility, regardless of whether the phone is registered with the company or not.

But despite these new technological capabilities, Mr. Villahermosa said it only works if employees are properly trained and empowered to use them.

"You can't just make it a see-tell-show [training] model," he said. "Tell-show-do is the best model there is. Tell and show, but then let them do it for themselves." CBJ