



## Summary

# Violence by third parties at work

### Contact

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Every day, organisations are confronted with aggression by third parties. Limited figures are available, but this aggression appears to become increasingly bolder, especially in urban settings. Understanding difficult customers is important, but when something serious happens, organisations generally fully back their personnel.

At the request of the Flemish social partners at nine organisations in Flanders, the Foundation Innovation & Work conducted a study into their aggression prevention and aggression management policy in 2011-2012. In these organisations, employees come into contact with the public, but are not confronted directly with violence in the same way as police or security agents. Information was gathered based on interviews with company managers and employee representatives, and based on company and internet documents. The study does not provide an exhaustive overview of all the initiatives that companies take, but especially focuses on measures taken against verbal aggression.

It was conducted at three companies with a public function (public bus service for Flanders *De Lijn*, Flemish employment and training service *VDAB*, and Belgian postal service *bpost*), as well as at three smaller and medium-sized organisations and family businesses (*Antwerp Tax*, *Elektro Taelman*, Koninklijke Apothekersvereniging van Antwerpen – the *Royal Pharmacists Association of Antwerp*) and three large organisations (*Carrefour*, *Media Markt* and *Heilig Hart Hospital* in Leuven).

## 1 Diverse causes for especially verbal aggression

These organisations are faced with verbal, physical and even criminal aggression. Incidents are not always reported, but verbal aggression occurs most frequently. Sources of customer aggression are: products and services that do not meet customer expectations; a lack of or poor communication with customers; less than optimal procedures and infrastructure; reactions and behaviours by customers themselves; reactions on the part of staff; external circumstances; legal regulations to which organisations must comply, but that evoke resentment, and so on.

## 2 The principles of the prevention pyramid

Many organisations that come in contact with the public are increasing their efforts to limit aggression. There are legal regulations, but investing in prevention also means investing in people and their well-being, work quality and the quality of products and services, so that customers are satisfied with what they receive. The application itself of the legal regulations was not examined in the study.

A systematic approach to the problem of aggression includes: recognising and acknowledging risks; a risk inventory in order to find solutions; registration of incidents; risk evaluation and an action plan; performing actions and monitoring the progress and results.

An assessment tool for providing focus to an aggression management strategy is the prevention pyramid, made up of five prevention levels with various actions. Each level contributes to a comprehensive prevention policy. There is a broad base at the bottom that includes all of society. There are four action levels within the organisation: level one with actions to improve the general working climate (for example the development of quality services and a positive personnel policy); level two with general prevention measures (for example pleasant working and reception areas, limiting customer waiting times); level three with specific prevention measures for specific problems (for example, training on aggression management, camera surveillance for theft prevention); level four with corrective or remedial actions (for example intervention, calling for assistance; incident reporting and registration; assistance and support for victims; restoration of damage).

The actions can cover different domains: organisational, physical/technical measures, personnel measures, measures for customers, and actions with partners (external prevention services, the neighbourhood, police, lawmakers, and so on). Prevention is a matter of concern for the company, employees, employee representatives, policy makers, prevention services and third parties.

### 3 Systematic prevention and follow-up

*De Lijn* and *VDAB* explicitly use these principles as the basis for their elaborately developed aggression management policy. Other organisations use parts, but do not explicitly refer to these principles. Some organisations appeal to experienced external prevention services and consult other companies that have already developed a comprehensive policy.

Problems of verbal, physical and criminal aggression are usually approached as a totality. Measures are often linked to multiple forms of aggression: camera surveillance has a preventive function *and* a curative function in the case of physical and criminal aggression. Assertiveness training in turn focuses on dealing with verbal aggression.

The respondents especially describe prevention measures, with less focus on corrective and follow-up measures. In a number of cases they refer to fundamental prevention such as the introduction of a quality manual in pharmacies that is intended to ensure proper patient care more generally, and indirectly contribute to preventing conflict. Organisations especially want to create a positive climate for their customers. The main measures stated have to do with preventative training for dealing with aggression, infrastructure and ICT resources that contribute to preventing and combatting aggression, support from colleagues and managers at critical moments, and follow-up. When aggression takes place, the aim is to react quickly against the aggressor and in support of the victim.

## 4 Employee representatives involved

When employee representation is present in an organisation, incidents and actions are always discussed with the employee representatives. The employee representatives themselves emphasise the support of managers, reporting and registering aggression, preventative training for all employees, and the suitable care of employees who fall victim to aggression.

*Leen Baisier (2012), Geweld door derden op het werk. StIA/SERV, Brussels, September 2012*