

# Keeping the Workplace Safe from Threats

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## Executive Summary

Today's organizations contend with a variety of workplace threats, including violence, harassment and stalking. This study seeks to answer several questions:

- What role do Human Resources (HR) professionals play in addressing workplace threats?
- What are the main sources of threats?
- How can one mitigate threats?
- Are there tactical differences between organizations that are perceived as safe and those that are not?

**Below is a quick overview of some of the key findings in the report**

**HR professionals view themselves as playing a crucial role in keeping the workplace safe.** Over 90% of respondents believe HR has an important or very important role in keeping the workplace safe from threats.

**Only about half of respondents agree that their workplace is safe from threats,** and just 13% strongly agree.

**Former employees were most often viewed as an organizational threat (30%),** followed by people not affiliated with respondent organizations such as spouses, partners and unknown strangers attempting contact with those inside a facility (17%).

### About this Survey

The survey, called "Making the Workplace a Safe Space," ran in the third quarter of 2018. There were responses from 890 participants, with 699 responding to every question. Respondents were HR professionals who are members of HR.com.

The participants represent a broad cross-section of employers by number of employees, ranging from small businesses with under 50 employees to enterprises with 20,000 or more employees. Just under 40% of respondents represented organizations with 500 or more employees.

Paycom, a leading provider of human capital management technology, partnered with HR.com and Dr. Larry Barton on this research.



**The most commonly cited warning signs of a threat are angry outbursts and hostility toward co-workers or the company.** Over 80% of respondents selected these two warning signs.

**Training employees is associated with safer workplaces.** Large organizations that are perceived as safe are more likely to train employees to spot warning signs than organizations perceived as less safe (83% vs. 62%). The same pattern holds for mid-sized and small organizations. Training may include live awareness programs regarding active shooter and hostile intruder situations and situational awareness at any location, including and especially parking lots and garages.

**A majority of organizations keep aggregate reports of threats.** Fifty-six percent said their organization collects such data, whereas a quarter do not, and 19% said they were not sure. They are more common among large organizations. When “Don’t Know” responses were removed, about three-quarters of respondents in large organizations said their organizations aggregate reports of threats.

**Having a crisis management plan and crisis management group are associated with safer workplaces.** A crisis management group is usually responsible for developing plans so the organization knows how to respond to crises and is ready to deal with a crisis should one arise. Safe workplaces are more likely than less safe ones to have a crisis management group (43% vs. 25%). Safer workplaces are also more likely to have a crisis management plan, though the differences in this area are not as large (54% vs. 40%).

*Disclaimer: This report is not a source of legal, clinical or other advice. This resource offers one framework for considering how to best evaluate and respond to a threat given the unique situation, culture and resources available to your organization. Always consult law enforcement, professional threat assessors and other experts as appropriate.*

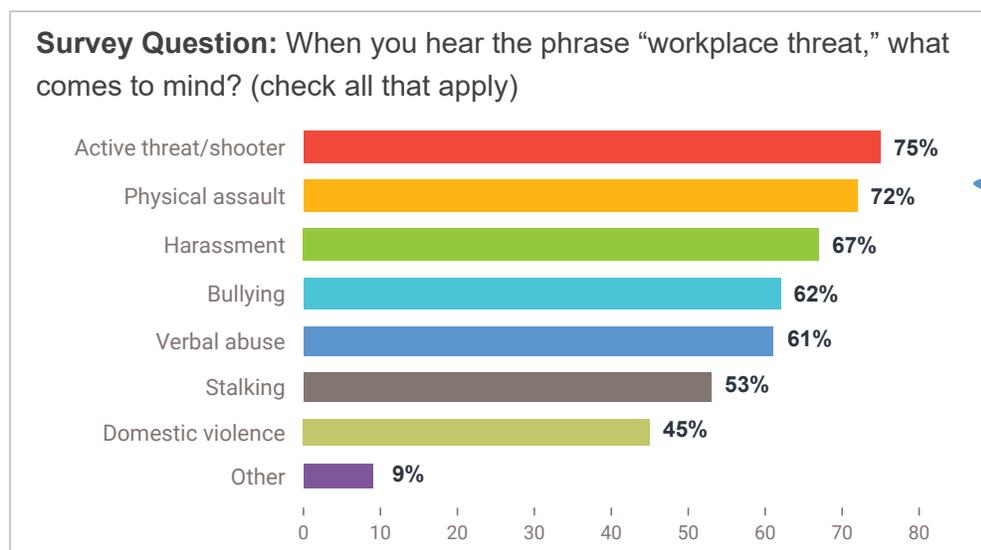
## What Does the Term “Workplace Threat” Mean?

**Finding:** When they hear the term “workplace threat,” three-quarters of respondents think “active threat/shooter”

Although most HR professionals will never encounter an active shooter in their workplace, this is the image that is top of mind when they think of a workplace threat. They are nearly as likely to envision a physical assault of another kind, such as with a knife, a fist or other weapon.

On one hand, this is understandable, since these kinds of threats are most likely to be reported by the news media and are often “worst case” scenarios. On the other hand, respondents are somewhat less likely to think about the issues of harassment, bullying and verbal abuse, even though these issues tend to be more common.

For an HR leader who is launching an initiative to deal with workplace threats, it is important to define what types of threats will be covered. After all, the phrase “workplace threat” will be interpreted differently by different people (such as IT professionals who may legitimately view a data breach as a genuine threat). Moreover, some threats will require different action plans than others. HR should consider framing the issue broadly (see the list of threats in the graph below) so that the less dramatic but perhaps more common issues — such as bullying, verbal abuse and domestic violence — are not overlooked.



The top two issues associated with “workplace threat” — an active shooter and physical assault — are dramatic images, but are unlikely to be the most common events in the workplace

## How Safe Are Today's Workplaces?

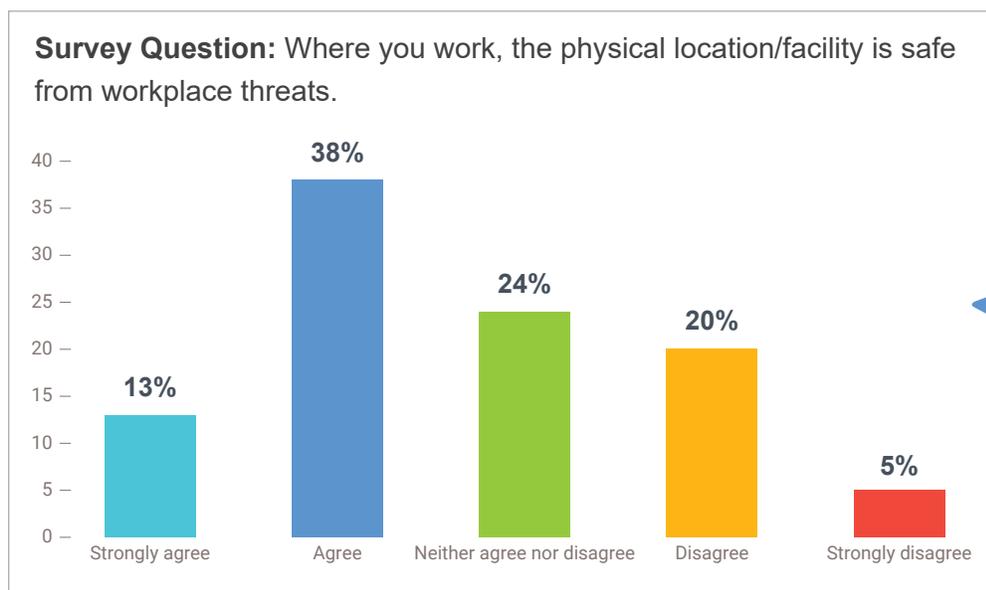
### Finding: Only about half of respondents feel their location is safe from workplace threats

While no place is immune from workplace threats, about half of respondents feel their physical location/facility is safe. Of real concern are the nearly 50% who do not feel their workplace is safe or are unsure. Even those who feel safe should do the due diligence to make sure their organizations *stay* safe.

This creates a genuine opportunity for HR professionals to actively engage with their security, and trust and safety partners on benchmarking of site and personnel security measures, including badge control, receptionist and guard preparedness and training, and if law enforcement has been invited to the site for briefings.

It is a good idea for HR to survey employees to see how they feel about workplace threats since their view may be different from HR's. Furthermore some basic analytics may show some groups are more fearful than others.

Managing workplace threats is both a matter of perception (feeling safe) and reality (being safe) and a good starting point is to measure current perceptions.



About half of respondents feel their location is safe from workplace threats

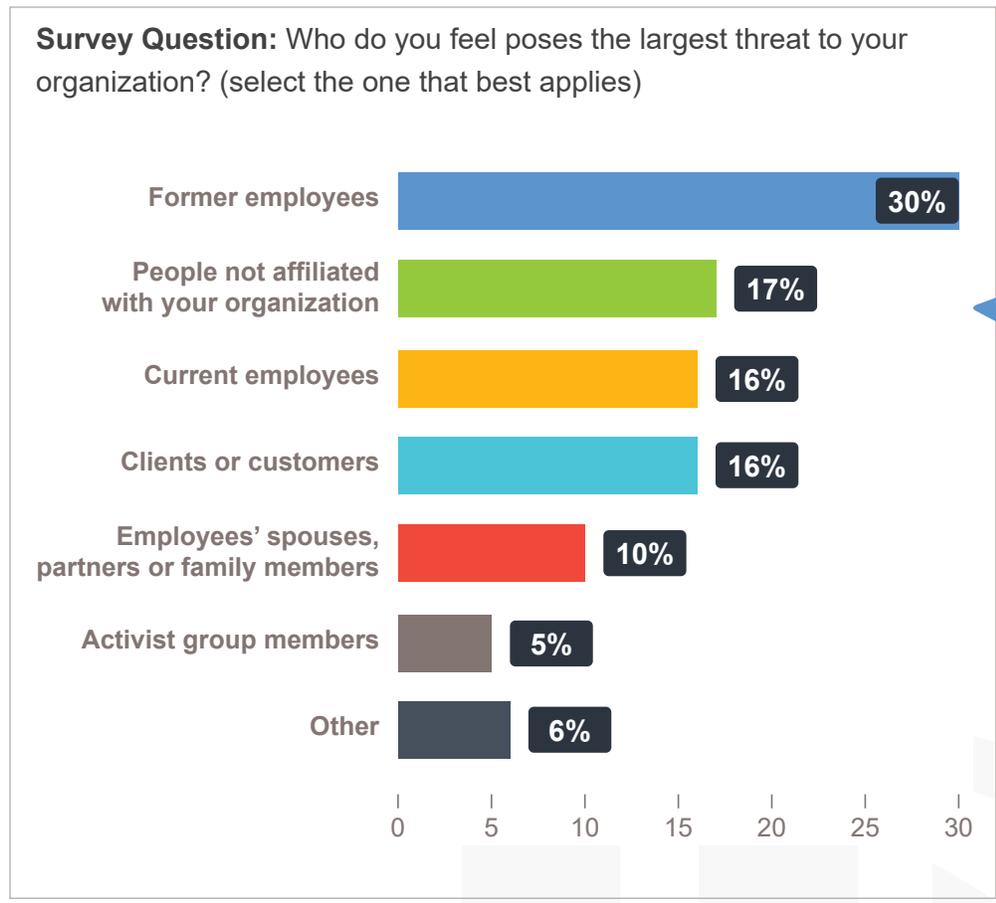
## What Are the Sources of Workplace Threats?

### Finding: Former employees are perceived as the greatest threat

There are many categories of people or groups of people who could pose a workplace threat, including employees, former employees, clients, unaffiliated people (such as a criminal committing a robbery) and others.

The important step for HR is to accept there are many different groups who could present a threat. Threat analysis should consider each of the different groups, what threats they might pose and how to mitigate those threats.

With former employees constituting the perceived greatest threat group, HR professionals may wish to revisit how separations are conducted, what words should be used and avoided, whether follow-up with a separated person could help better understand if the person is resilient and adaptive to transitioning in their life and related questions.



There is no consensus about which groups pose the greatest threats

## Who Keeps Employees Safe?

**Finding:** Nearly all respondents feel it's the organization's duty to protect employees from workplace threats

There is near-universal agreement that organizations have a duty to protect employees from workplace threats. The question isn't about whether to do it but how it should be done.

The duty of employers is clear, so the question is how this duty can be met.



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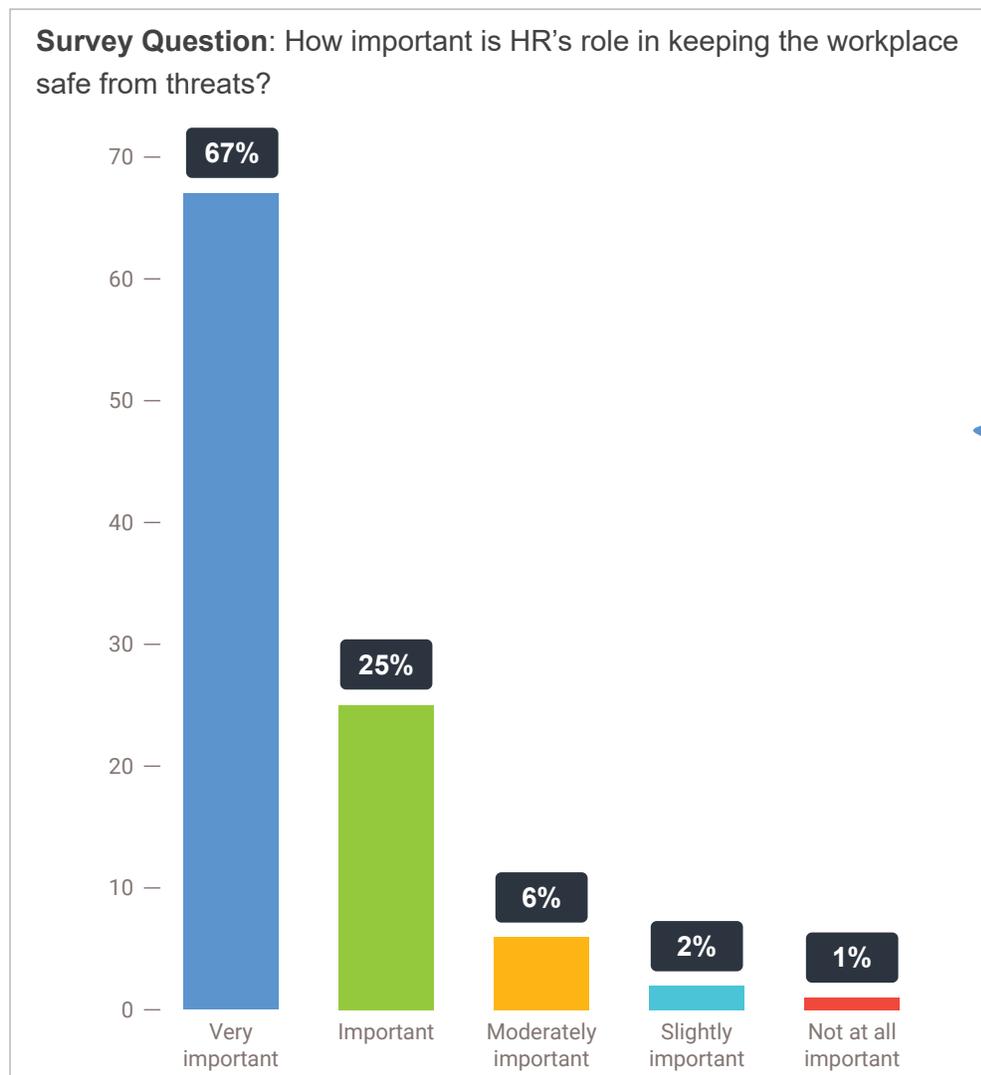
**Finding:** Two-thirds of organizations believe HR has a *very important* role in keeping the workplace safe

Over 90% of respondents believe HR has an important or very important role in keeping the workplace safe from threats. This by no means suggests that HR is the *only* group with an important role, but it does answer the question as to whether HR itself is expected to step up and be a leader in addressing this issue. HR leaders should embrace this role and understand that it is expected of them.



Please remember that the four general duties of all employers in the United States are the Duty to Care, Duty to Supervise, Duty to Act and Duty to Warn. Ensuring that you meet these expectations can be best achieved when HR leaders partner with their security and legal teams and collaborate with a qualified threat assessor.

Not only do employers have a duty to protect employees, HR plays a major role in fulfilling this duty.



Not only do employers have a duty to protect employees, HR plays a major role in fulfilling this duty

## Finding: Most large organizations employ third-party security whereas most small ones do not

In this study, there were some differences when the data was examined by size of organization. These differences apply to the use of third-party security firms. For the purposes of this paper, we broke organizations into three sizes:

- Small (99 employees or fewer)
- Mid-sized (100 to 999 employees)
- Large (1000 or more employees)

Although HR plays a role in keeping the workplace safe, other functions and entities can play key roles. In many cases, this includes professional, third-party security firms. Whether organizations use third-party security largely depends on organizational size. Whereas 60% of large firms use them, only 19% of small firms do.

Of course, HR may play a role in evaluating and, if needed, hiring such organizations. HR should be prepared to conduct — or help prepare — a threat assessment. In any situation, having a security agency should be seen as an aid in enhancing safety, not as a way to pass responsibility onto someone else.



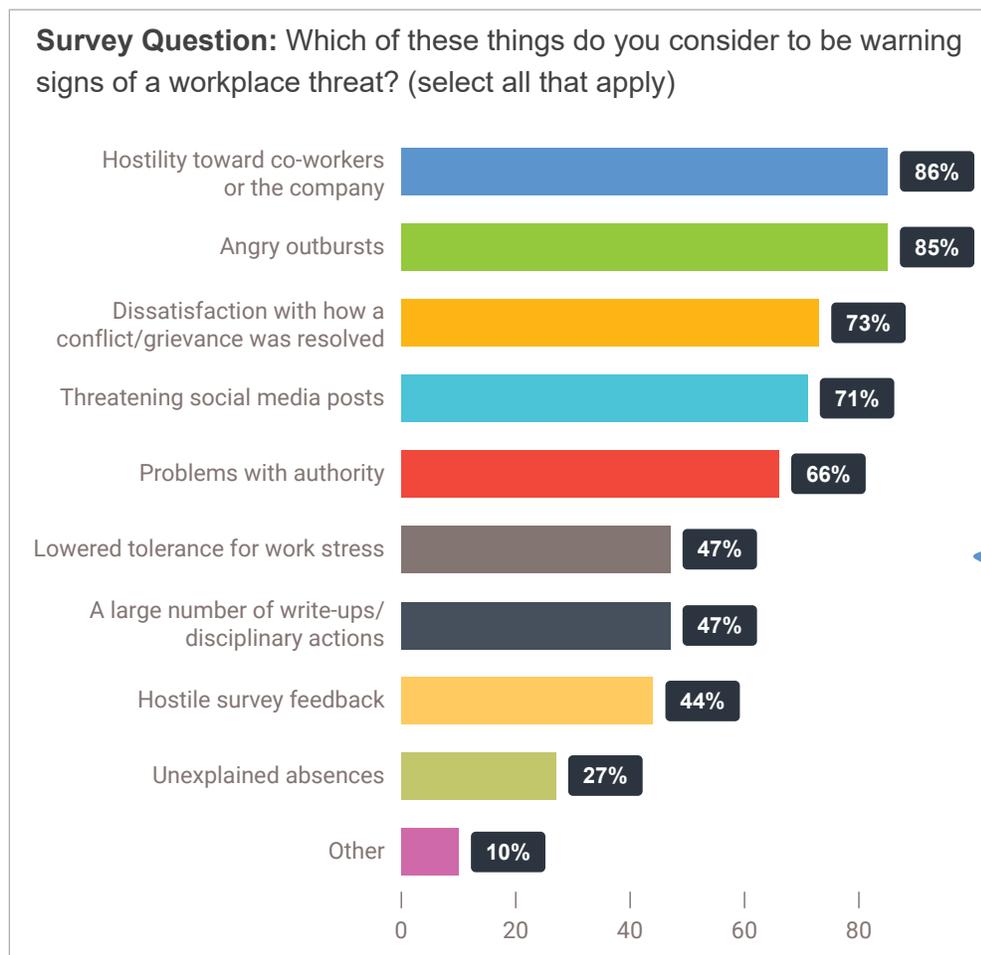
About a third of mid-sized organizations employ third-party security

## What Are the Perceived Warning Signs?

**Finding:** The most commonly cited warning signs of a threat are angry outbursts and hostility toward co-workers or the company

The good news in managing workplace threats is that there are often warning signs. In fact, on average, well over half of respondents chose five perceived warning signs listed in the survey question. The signs that stand out to more than 80% of HR executives are “hostility toward co-workers or the company” and “angry outbursts.”

HR should stay aware of such warning signs and document them as needed. The warning signs included in this question are not, of course, intended to be all-inclusive. There are various other potential signals.



There is a wide variety of signs that warn of workplace threats

## What Is the Role of Training?

### **Finding: Most large organizations train managers and/or employees to spot warning signs of workplace threats**

HR can't be everywhere all the time, so it is helpful if managers and employees can spot the warning signs of workplace threats. Overall, a small majority (56%) of respondents say their organizations train managers and/or employees to identify these warning signs.

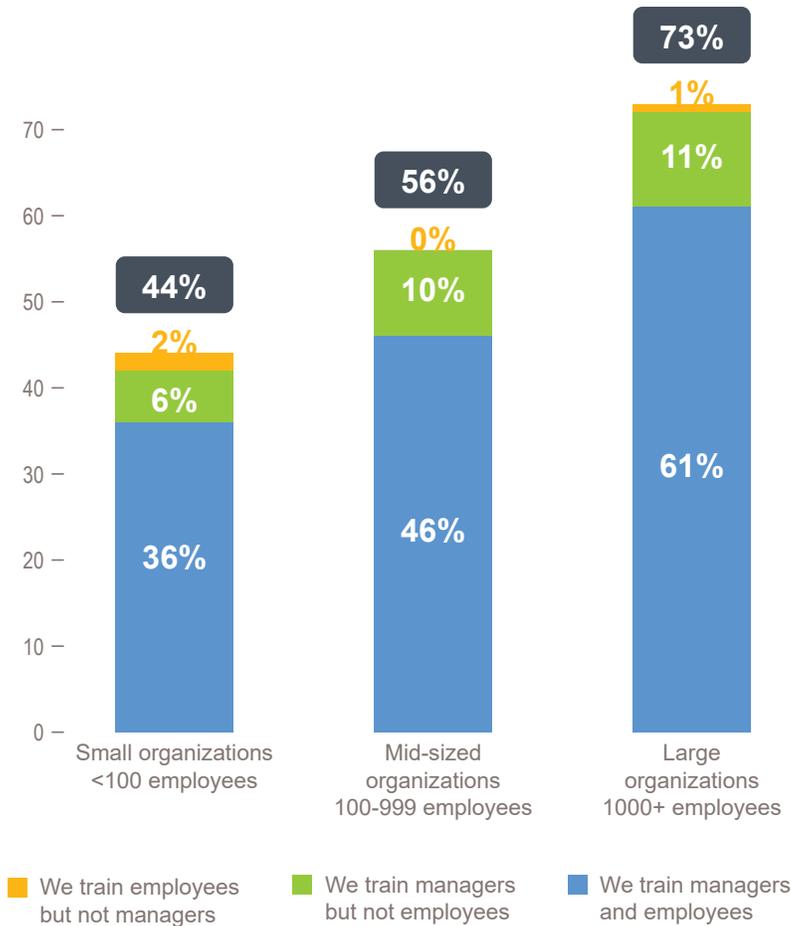
Since supervisors and co-workers often know an employee with risk factors far better than their HR generalist, discreetly seeking insight regarding life and personality changes or noteworthy recent events, comments in person or on a blog or social networking site and other actions can help the HR leader be more informed about potential remedies.

This is an area where there are substantial differences by size. Almost three-quarters of large organizations and over half of mid-sized organizations train managers and/or employees to identify these warning signs. Among small organizations, 44% provide such training.

If HR can create a level of basic awareness about possible warning signs, it will probably have a better chance of learning about issues before they escalate into serious problems.



**Survey Statement:** We offer training to help our workforce spot warning signs of threatening behavior.



A little over half (56%) of mid-sized organizations train employees and/or managers to spot warnings signs of threatening behavior



**Finding: Organizations that do not train the workforce about warning signs are most likely to indicate it's due to the constraints of cost or time**

The commonly given reasons for not training the entire workforce about the warning signs of threats were cost and time. Even when we evaluated the 53% of respondents who wrote in unique responses, those responses often boiled down to cost or time constraints.

However, these responses raise the questions, “Just how expensive or time-consuming is such training?” Some respondents and their organizations may be overestimating the time and cost associated with such training.

If HR’s assessment is that the risk of workplace threats is low — or if smaller organizations believe that the HR department can keep tabs on these issues on its own — then training all employees might not be needed. However, we believe it is prudent for HR to study the best training options and see which, if any, are warranted.



**Time constraints are most commonly cited at a barrier to workforce training on warning signs**

## How Do Organizations Identify Threats?

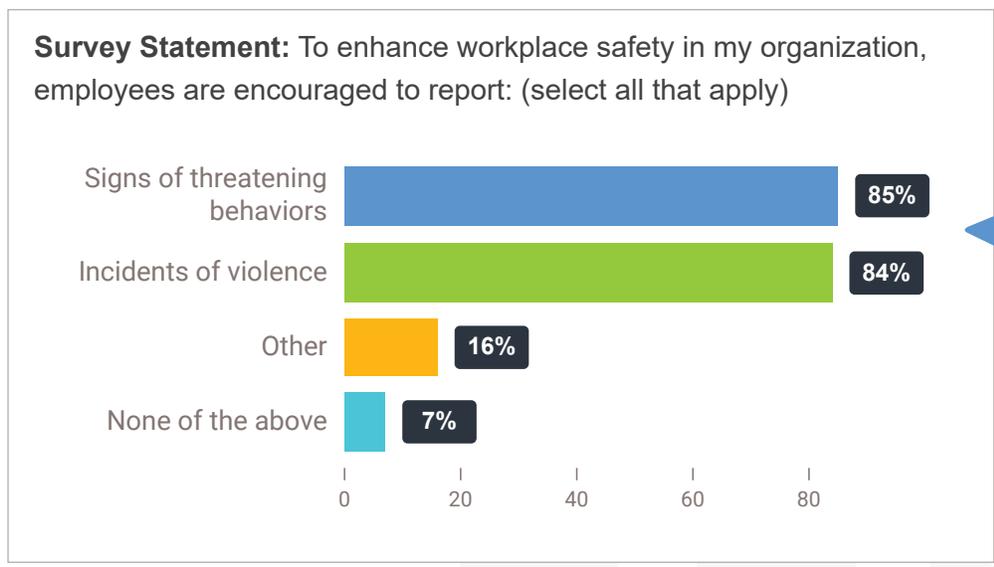
### Finding: Employees are encouraged to report signs of threatening behavior or incidents of violence

Over 80% of organizations encourage employees to report signs of threatening behavior and incidents of violence. Among those answering “Other,” the most common response was that employees were encouraged to report any concerns. More specifically, some respondents noted the employees were asked to report cases of harassment, bullying, angry employees, code of conduct violations, and people without ID badges.



The takeaway from the answers to this question may be that HR’s request to employees with respect to warning signs can be fairly straightforward. For example: “if something is clearly amiss (e.g. violence), then report it” or the more general “if something is concerning, then report it.” This reinforces the idea that training employees to be alert for warning signs might not need be a big project. It’s more a matter of encouraging them to act on something they already know or suspect could be a problem.

A person who is obsessed with a recent mass shooting and discusses this to the distress of others may need a discussion regarding the anxiety they are raising. A person who overtly mentions that, regardless of company policy, they keep a weapon in their trunk poses a far more serious, necessary evaluation and response by the employer.



Most organizations rely on their employees to spot problems, a fact that makes training especially important

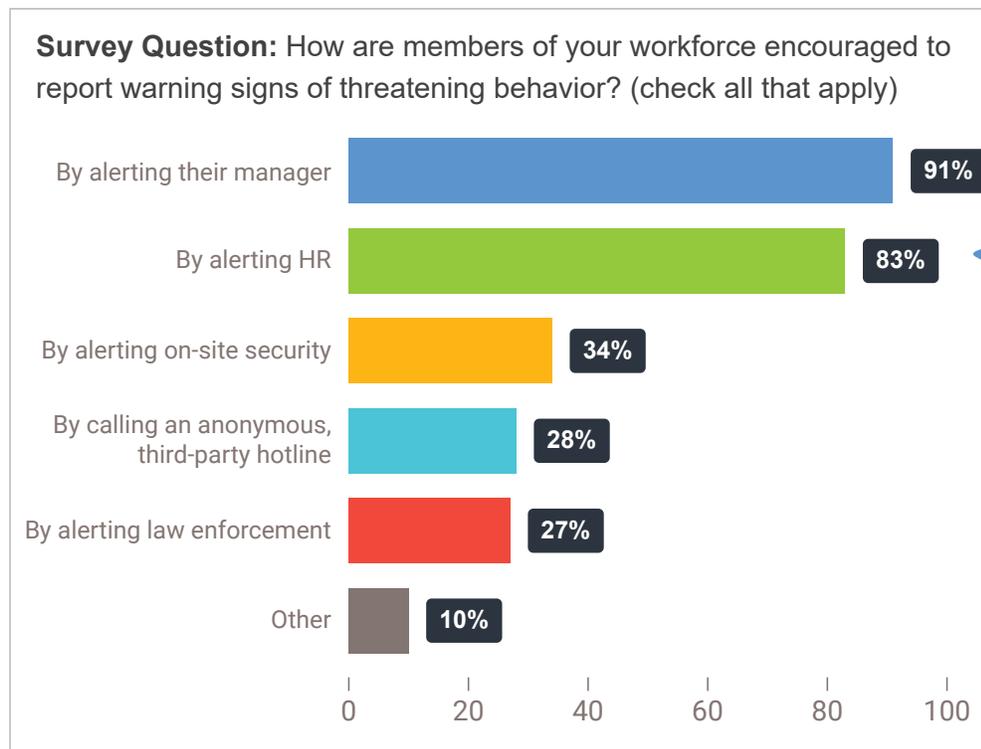
**Finding: Over 90% of respondents say they encourage employees to report warning signs to their managers**

The vast majority of participants say employees are encouraged to report warning signs of a workplace threat to their immediate manager (91%), followed by HR itself (83%). Whom is alerted will depend, of course, on the nature of the threat. In some cases, employees will go to managers who then, in turn, contact HR. In other cases, the manager may be the source of the threat, in which case employees would likely go directly to HR.

Some organizations have on-site security or an anonymous hotline for reporting issues. Over a quarter mentioned that employees are encouraged to call an anonymous, third-party hotline. In some cases, those hotlines may serve to enlist the help and advice of designated professionals.

The important thing is for HR to ensure employees know whom to contact for different types of threats.

In most responding organizations, employees are also encouraged to alert HR when they see signs of threatening behavior.



**In most responding organizations, employees are also encouraged to alert HR when they see signs of threatening behavior**

## To What Extent Do Organizations Aggregate and Assess Reports of Threats?

### Finding: Most organizations have a process for aggregating the reports of threats

If HR professionals are taking responsibility for overseeing the organization’s capability for dealing with workplace threats, then it’s likely that, sooner or later, leadership will want more information on the number and types of threats that are arising. A majority of all respondents (56%) said their organization collect such data, whereas 25% do not, and 19% said they were not sure.

This means, of course, that many organizations do not gather such information. Even if we only look at large organizations and remove the “Don’t Know” responses from the data, that still leaves nearly a quarter that do not have a process in place for aggregating reports of threatening behavior.



About three-quarters of large organizations have a process in place for aggregating all reports for threatening behavior

*Editor’s Note:* Percentages responding “True” after the “Don’t Know” responses were removed

### Finding: Over half of large organizations have a designated team for analyzing reports of threatening behavior

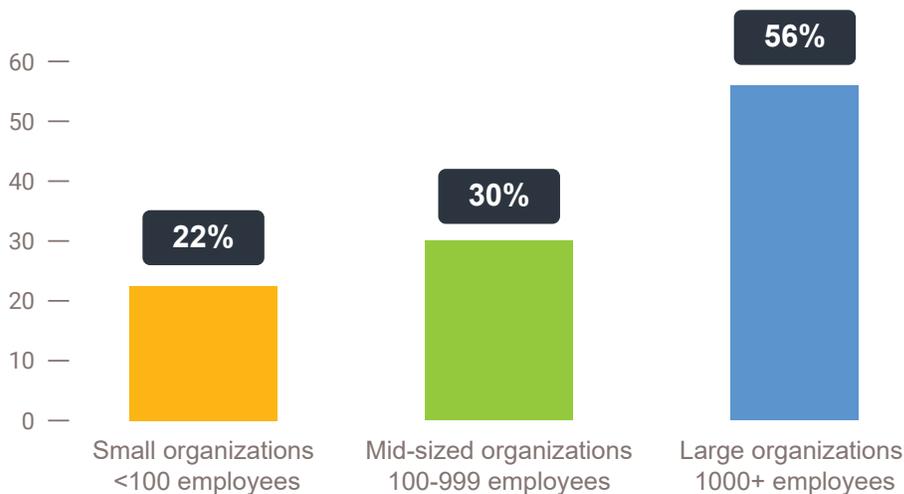
Among all respondents, only 35% said their organization has a designated team responsible for analyzing reports of threatening behavior, but this is another area where size makes a difference.

Among large organizations, the number is 56% whereas among small firms, the proportion is just 22%.

Whether organizations designate such a team likely depends on a variety of factors in addition to the size of the organization, such as the number of incidents, whether a single individual can be depended on for any analyses, and the degree to which leadership has prioritized this.



**Survey Question:** Does your organization have a designated team – such as a threat assessment team – responsible for analyzing all reports of threatening behavior? [Percent answering “Yes”]



Only 35% of all organizations have a designated team for analyzing reports of threatening behavior

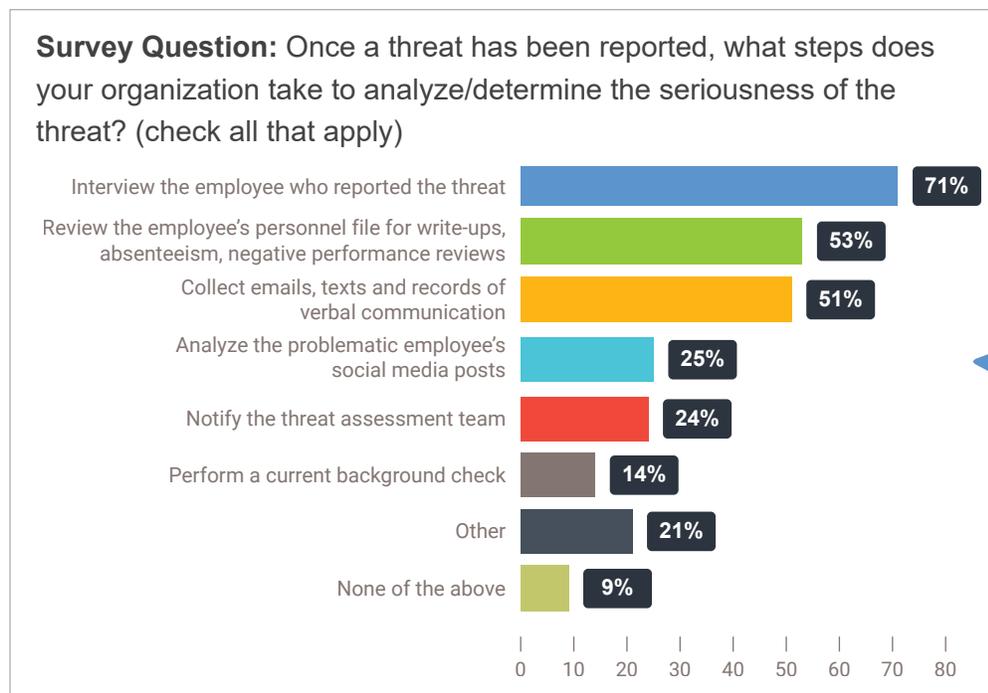
*Editor's Note: Percentages responding "True" after the "Don't Know" responses were removed*

**Finding: Most respondent organizations gauge the seriousness of threats by interviewing the employee who reported it**

Organizations tend to use multiple methods of analyzing and determining the seriousness of a threat. The most common source of information is an interview with the employee who reported the threat (71%), but there are a variety of other tactics. For example, a little over half of responding organizations review the employee’s personnel files and collect records of communication.

The most important of the “Other” responses was simply “all of the above and more, depending on the situation.” It may be helpful to have written guidelines that will help whomever is doing the review. We note that many employers are moving away from the term “investigation” in favor of “review” because the person who may have engaged in unacceptable behaviors may view the word “investigation” as punitive; a word such as “review” has the same impact without sounding like the employer has investigatory and police powers.

HR needs to be aware of the different mechanisms for investigating a threat and be ready to use the ones most appropriate for the situation. It may be helpful to have written guidelines that will help whomever is doing the investigation.



**Most organizations take multiple steps to determine the seriousness of a threat**

## How Do Firms Plan for a Crisis?

### Finding: Most large organizations have a crisis plan and crisis management group

Overall, only about half (48%) of respondents said their firms have a crisis plan, and even fewer (35%) have a crisis management group. However, whether an organization has a crisis management group and a crisis plan varies by size of the organization.

Only 21% of small organizations have a crisis management group, whereas a majority of large organizations (57%) do. Even if the organization is not large enough to have a crisis management group, we believe that HR professionals should, with senior leadership’s buy-in, develop a crisis plan that is appropriately detailed given the risks their organizations face. We also believe that if risks are high and complex, then it makes sense for HR to propose that a crisis management group be established.



Overall, about half of respondent firms have a crisis plan and 35% have a crisis management group

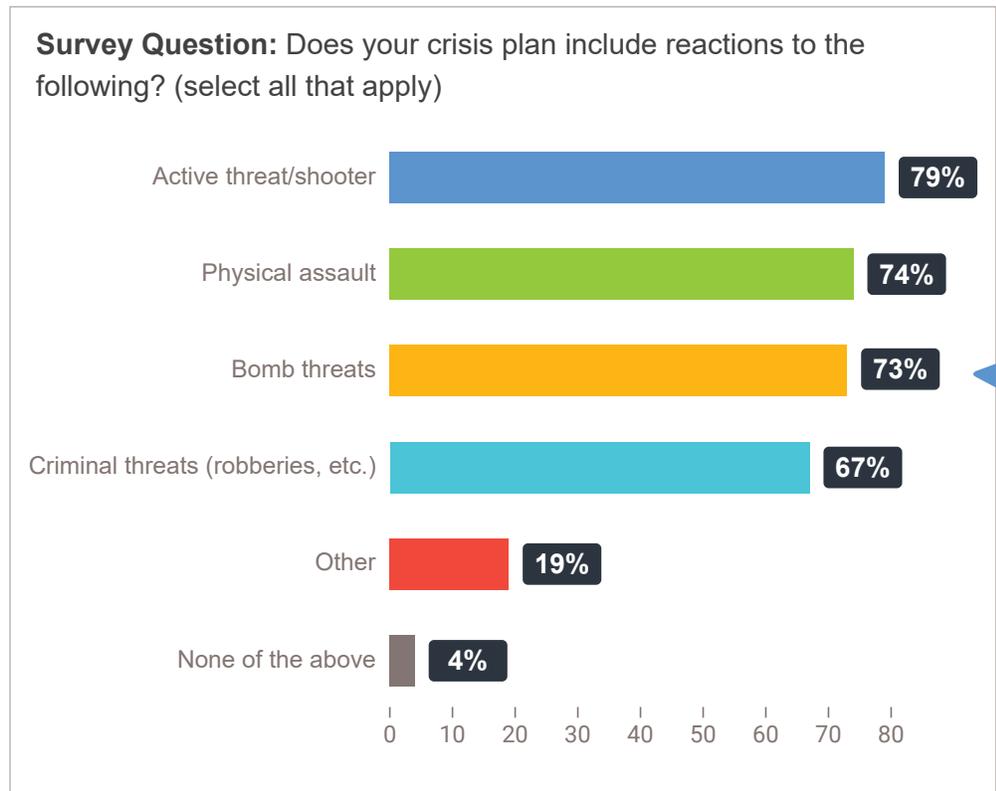
**Finding: Nearly 80% of crisis plans include a reaction to an active threat/shooter**

Of those organizations that have crisis plans, about three-quarters of the plans include reactions for active threat/shooter, physical assault and bomb threats. Slightly fewer (two-thirds) have plans for criminal threats. Among the write-in responses mentioned were a wide range of serious threats such as weather, fraud, terrorism, power outages, natural disasters, etc.



The likely threats depend on specific circumstances, so it is important for the organization to spend some time assessing risks. Although it's impossible to outline every contingency, taking the time to consider possible actions in the event of different dangerous situations could be invaluable in a crisis.

Crisis situations are often predictable, but the variations on them with regards to violence can be noteworthy. For instance, most crisis management plans discuss a fire but most do not discuss arson caused by an employee. It is this type of nuance that can and should be reflected as the HR team seeks to enhance its effectiveness.



Nearly three-quarters of crisis plans include a reaction in case of bomb threats

## How Do Organizations Mitigate Threats?

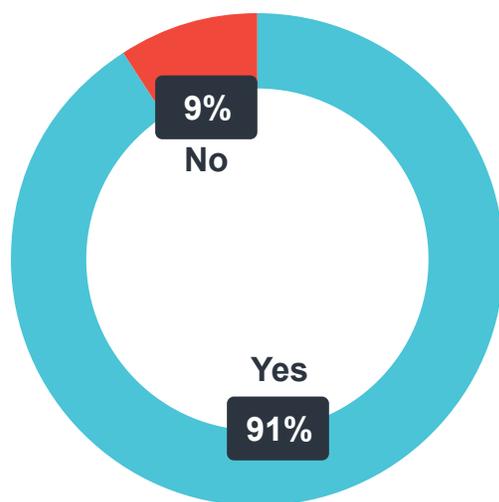
### Finding: Most organizations continuously monitor a threat that was deemed serious

Almost all organizations (91%) continuously monitor a threat that has been deemed serious. This suggests that, even among most organizations that lack a process for aggregating threatening behavior, most *do* have methods of continuously monitoring known threats.

How organizations monitor threats depends on the situation. In some very high-security facilities, for example, there are personnel who look in car trunks or at undercarriages for threats such as bombs. Within buildings, security may set up checkpoints and even scan carry-on items with x-ray machines. Security can also be made aware if certain outsiders — such as a former spouse of a current employee — are prohibited from a facility.

In other cases, monitoring is more a matter of maintaining awareness. For example, supervisors and staff can be repeatedly reminded to be on the lookout for anything suspicious and report it. Managers can provide regular updates on specific situations as necessary. In general, monitoring is often a matter of keeping relevant staff informed of what they should watch for.

**Survey Question:** Once a threat has been deemed serious, does your organization continuously monitor the threat?

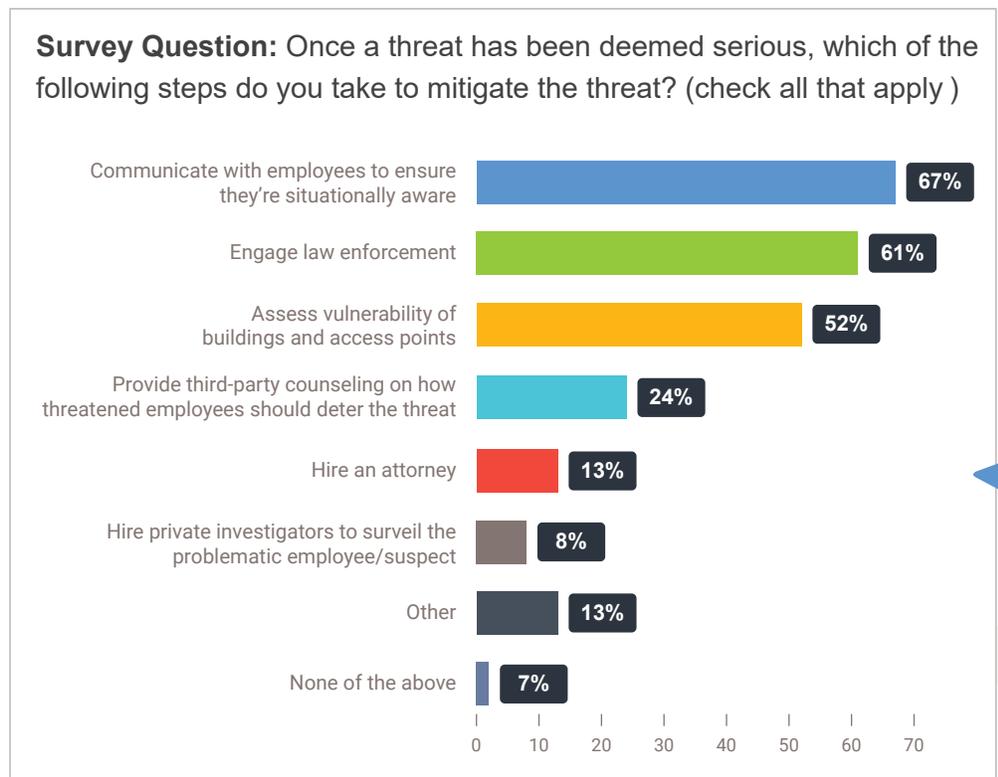


A large majority of organizations have some form of institutional memory that allows them to continuously monitor serious threats

**Finding: The most common means of mitigating threats is ensuring employees are situationally aware**

How organizations mitigate threats depends of course on the nature of the threat. The graph below lists many of the possible actions. HR professionals are most likely to engage law enforcement and communicate with employees to ensure they are situationally aware.

Since situations vary enormously, HR needs to be aware of the options it has at its disposal. It should also have some guidelines as to when to use those options. It's not often that HR will need to hire an attorney or private investigator, but it's worthwhile to have those options in the toolkit. In some cases, there may need to be investigations into situations. Depending on the outcome, these could, of course, lead to the dismissal of one or more employees. Prior to the separation of an employee, however, the employer may wish to ask two questions: 1) Is this a person with a problem or a problem person? 2) Should we engage our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to ascertain if their counseling service could help a person who has a genuine problem but does not constitute a safety risk?



**Many employers take multiple steps to mitigate threats**

## What May Make a Difference?

To gain insights into factors that might make a difference in keeping a workplace safe from threats, we divided respondents into two cohorts:

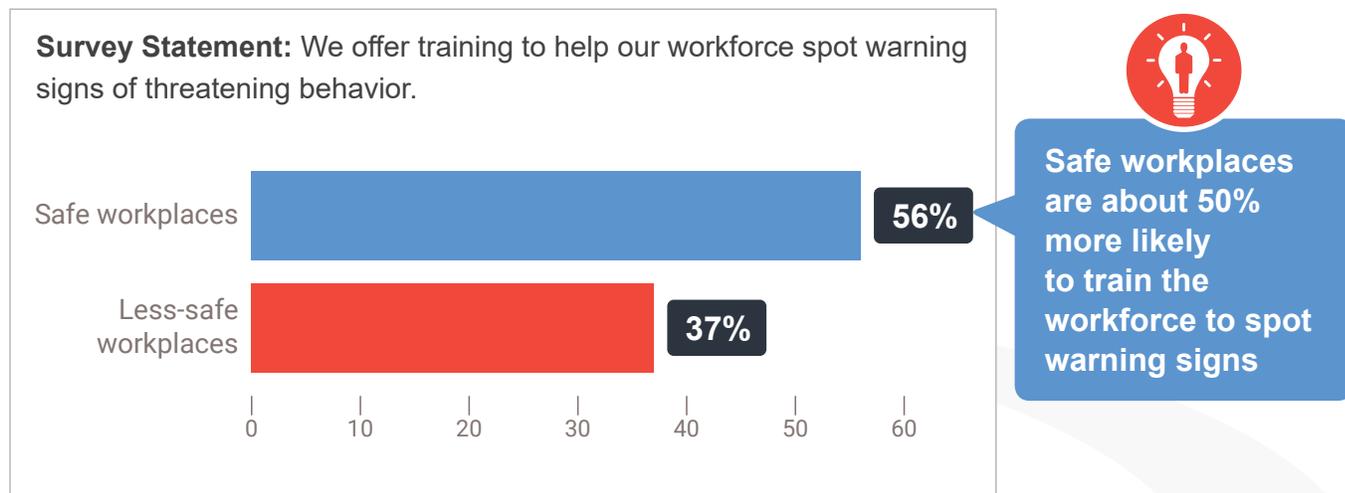
- Safe workplaces: Those respondents who agree or strongly agree that their location is safe from workplace threats.
- Less-safe workplaces: Those respondents whose employees neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree that their location is safe from workplace threats.

To ensure appropriate comparisons, we focus on data from large organizations.

Of course, we should note that correlation does not necessarily imply causation. However, these are areas worth examining for organizations intent on keeping their workplace safe.

### Finding: More than half of safe workplaces offer training to help their employees spot warning signs of threatening behavior

Whereas 56% of safe workplaces provide training to help their employees spot warning signs of threatening behavior, the same was true for only 37% of less-safe workplaces. This suggests that training may be one of the key ingredients to enhancing workplace safety.



**Finding: Even when focusing on large organizations, training is associated with safer workplaces**

Among larger organizations that are in the “safe workplaces” cohort, 83% provide training to help their employees spot warning signs of threatening behavior. The same is true for only 62% of less-safe workplaces.

Although the number of small and mid-sized organizations that provide training is lower than in large organizations, the general trend still holds. That is, organizations of all sizes who provide workplace safety training are rated as more safe than are organizations that do not provide such training.

As new employees join an organization, it is fair to suggest they compare not only the work environment, compensation and benefits but also whether the workplace has comparable, better or inferior safety measures such as badge control, surveillance measures and related efforts.

As new employees join an organization, it is fair to suggest they compare not only the work environment, compensation and benefits but also whether the workplace has comparable, better or inferior safety measures such as badge control, surveillance measures and related efforts.



Safe workplaces are about 25% more likely to train the workforce to spot warning signs



**Finding: Safe workplaces are more likely than less-safe ones to have a crisis management group**

When a threat is imminent or in progress, it is a crisis. A crisis management group is usually responsible for developing plans so the organization knows how to respond to crises and is ready to deal with a crisis should one arise. Safe workplaces are more likely than less-safe ones to have a crisis management group (43% vs. 25%). Safer workplaces are also more likely to have a crisis management plan, though the differences in this area are not as large (54% vs. 40%).

These differences are not just a matter of organizational size. Even when we confine ourselves to large organizations, safe workplaces are more likely than less-safe ones to have a crisis management group (62% vs. 51%).



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## Top Takeaways

What lessons can we learn from this research? Below are various key takeaways.

1

Regardless of size, companies that provide training, have a Crisis Management Team (including in some instances a sub-set who assess and manage people who may pose a risk), and have a plan to track the most challenging risks are rated as more safe than those who don't do these things.

2

**If it hasn't already, HR should step up to play a role — perhaps a leading role — in keeping employees safe from workplace threats.** Unless there is another group specifically responsible for handling workplace threats, then HR should take some responsibility without waiting to be told to do so by leadership.

3

**Challenge the argument that threat reduction is too difficult, costly or time consuming.** Determine whether such initiatives are truly costly or difficult, especially when compared to potential risk. There may well be cost-effective ways of training and raising awareness.

4

**Think about a wide range of threats, not just the most dramatic ones.** Particularly in the U.S., when people mention workplace threats the image of an active shooter often comes to mind. HR should be thoughtful in considering a wide range of possible threats, including more common ones such as harassment and bullying. A person with an emotional breakdown can be a risk to themselves and others, even if their suicidal ideation has occurred primarily at home.

5

**Think about the wide range of types of people who could pose threats.** As with any risk assessment, it's important to think widely rather than narrowly. Consider the more obvious risks, such as disgruntled former employees, but don't ignore less obvious ones such as employees' family members.

6

**Consider training employees to detect the warning signs and how to report them.** Employees tend to be the first line of defense in detecting threats. We think employers can empower them to fulfill this role via some simple training and guidelines on what to look for and how to report any concerns.

7

**Consider aggregating reports of threats.** This is especially true for larger organizations. Data on threats should be collected in one place so that leaders can see trends and patterns. Consider augmenting your team with a trained threat assessor who is available 24/7 by retainer to assist with high-risk situations. If they can avoid it, employers do not want their employees to first hear about a work-related tragedy from social networks or the news media rather than from the company itself. The employer should craft a clear message to employees, one that is first reviewed by legal counsel.

8

**Consider designating a team to analyze reports of threats.** If you are collecting data, someone needs to be responsible for reviewing it. Designate a team (or at least an individual) to keep an eye on the data and suggest a schedule of how often they should meet.

9

**Consider creating a crisis plan and crisis management group.** This starts with an examination of external data about workplace safety and violence and an analysis of internal factors. From there, the organization can determine whether it should develop a crisis management plan. It can also examine the utility of creating a crisis management group.

10

**Initiate actions based on analyses.** Once threat reports have been assessed, consider appropriate actions. Different situations will require different actions, but don't underestimate the value of communicating the issue to employees so that they are situationally aware. Such awareness can be a key factor in mitigating risks.

## About Paycom

A leader in payroll and HR technology, Oklahoma City-based Paycom redefines the human capital management industry by allowing companies to effectively navigate a rapidly changing business environment. Its cloud-based software is based on a core system of record maintained in a single application for all the functionality businesses need to manage the complete employment life cycle, from recruitment to retirement with apps widely used by the employee to enrich their workday. Dr. Larry Barton is the on-call threat assessor to Paycom and many other leading employers.

[paycom.com](http://paycom.com)

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The HR Research Institute is HR.com's research arm. HR.com strives to help create inspired workforces by making HR professionals smarter. Over 1.2 million HR professionals turn to HR.com as the trusted resource for education, career development, and compliance. We offer 400+ informative webcasts and virtual events yearly, the largest HR certification exam preparation program supporting SHRM and HRCI certification, a legal compliance guidance program, community networks, blogs, career planning, 12 monthly interactive HR epublications, plus 85+ (always free) primary research reports and corresponding infographics from HR Research Institute. HR.com offers the best training and networking for HR professionals globally 24/7/365. Please visit [www.hr.com](http://www.hr.com) and [hr.com/featuredresearch](http://hr.com/featuredresearch)

