

Case Study: Assault

Circumstances

The incident took place at the front desk of a busy city centre police station. A member of the public (MOP) had been sitting for an hour in the waiting area, to keep an appointment with a particular police officer. The officer on the desk had told his colleague that his visitor was waiting, but he had been detained on other business and the MOP became angry at having to wait for an hour to see him. Eventually, after being told by the desk officer that he was still not available, he lost his temper, picked up the flat screen computer monitor on the counter and threw it at him, causing serious head injuries.

The front desk was open at the front and the desk officer's computer monitor and telephone were positioned on the counter within reach of members of the public. The risk of assault was known: the desk had formerly been fitted with a full height protective screen, but this had been removed on the orders of the senior officer at the station 3 weeks before when some of the desk officers had complained that the screen was getting in the way of communication. Instead, a panic button had been fitted below the counter in order to raise the alarm in case of trouble.

There were other potential weapons in the waiting area, such as lightweight chairs, a wall-hung fire extinguisher and the telephone on the desk.

No formal risk assessment had been carried out prior to the screen being removed; neither had the safety rep been involved in the decision. Indeed, the senior officer had not been competent to carry out a formal or informal risk assessment.

Case study work

Step 1 - Gather information.

Step 2 - Analyse the data gathered

Step 3 - Identify the necessary risk control measures

Step 4 - Draw up an action plan and prioritise the control measures

CASE STUDY: ASSAULT Q&A

STEP ONE: GATHERING INFORMATION

(1) Where and when did the adverse event happen?

At the front desk in the waiting area of a busy police station.

(2) Who was injured/suffered ill health or was otherwise involved in the adverse event?

A police officer working at the front desk was assaulted by a member of the public.

(3) How did the adverse event happen? Note any equipment involved.

A member of the public (MOP) had been sitting for an hour in the waiting area, waiting to keep an appointment with a particular police officer. The desk officer had told his colleague that his visitor was waiting, but he had been detained on other business and the MOP became angry at having to wait for an hour to see him. Eventually, after being told by the desk officer that he was still not available, he lost his temper, picked up the flat screen computer monitor on the counter and threw it at the officer, who suffered head injuries as a result.

The front desk was open at the front and the computer monitor and telephone were positioned on the counter within reach of members of the public. The desk had formerly been fitted with a full height protective screen, but this had been removed by management 3 weeks before when some of the desk officers had complained that the screen was getting in the way of communication. Instead, a panic button had been fitted below the counter in order to raise the alarm in case of trouble.

In the waiting area there were a number of lightweight chairs and a fire extinguisher hung on the wall.

(4) What activities were being carried out at the time?

The desk officer was sitting behind the counter, speaking to his assailant. A number of other members of the public were also sitting in the waiting area. The police officer concerned was occupied with another, more urgent matter.

(5) Was there anything unusual or different about the working conditions?

No – there was usually a group of people in the waiting area. The desk officer did not suspect that the member of the public was likely to present a particular danger. If he had done, he would have pressed his panic button to raise the alarm.

(13) Did the workplace layout influence the adverse event?

Yes, the computer monitor could be reached from the front of the desk and used as a weapon. In fact, there were other potential weapons in the waiting area, such as the lightweight chairs, fire extinguisher and the telephone on the desk.

(14) Did the nature or shape of the materials influence the adverse event?

Yes, the flat-screen computer monitor was light enough to be lifted and used as a weapon.

(15) Did difficulties using the plant and equipment influence the adverse event?

Yes, the original full-height screen made conversation difficult between the desk officer and members of the public, and that influenced the decision to remove it.

(16) Was the safety equipment sufficient?

No, providing a panic button as a sole substitute for the screen was not sufficient.

(17) Did other conditions influence the adverse event?

No.

STEP TWO: ANALYSIS

(18) What were the immediate, underlying and root causes?

(a) *How/Why*

- 1 The police station front desk was open at the front
- 2 A waiting member of the public lost his temper
- 3 He picked up the computer monitor on the desk and threw it at the desk officer
- 4 He suffered head injuries

(b) *Immediate causes*

- 1 The screen had been removed from the front desk in response to complaints about communication with members of the public
- 2 The flat screen computer monitor was within reach of a person standing in front of the desk
- 3 The monitor was not secured to the desk

STEP FOUR: THE ACTION PLAN AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

(22) Which risk control measures should be implemented in the long and short term?

Control measures	Completion date	Person responsible
Fit front desk with a rising screen	As soon as equipment can be procured	Premises manager
Secure computer monitor to the counter	Without delay	Premises manager
Secure waiting area chairs and resite fire extinguishers	Without delay	Premises manager
Install CCTV camera in front desk area	As soon as equipment can be procured	Premises manager
Train desk officers in defusing difficult situations	As soon as can reasonably be achieved	Senior police officer

(23) Which risk assessments and safe working procedures need to be reviewed and updated?

There was no written risk assessment for the front desk area. This should be carried out as soon as possible by a person who has received sufficient training and information to be able to do so.