

# 8 signs point to potential workplace violence

News that two HR practitioners were among those murdered in a mass shooting in Aurora, Ill., on Feb. 15, has HR professionals taking a fresh look at how to identify potentially violent employees.

Police say the gunman had worked at Henry Pratt Co., a manufacturer outside Chicago, for 15 years. He reportedly came to work armed, opening fire during a meeting where he learned he was being terminated.

Among the victims were HR Manager Clayton Parks and Trevor Wehner, a Northern Illinois University student who was interning in the company's HR department. Three other employees died at the scene. The assailant was also shot and killed.

It is too soon to know if anything could have prevented the tragedy in Aurora. However, workplace safety experts say it's often possible to identify employees who might pose a threat. According to Dennis Davis, a former police SWAT team liaison who now directs client training for the employment law firm Ogletree Deakins, employees prone to workplace violence often display warning signs long before they act out.

Davis urges being alert for workers who display any of these eight warning signs of violent behavior:

- 1. Fascination with weapons.** That's different than ownership of weapons. Worry about those who seem obsessed with guns.
- 2. Substance abuse.** Research shows a big correlation between substance abuse and violence.
- 3. Severe stress.** Everyone experiences stress, but people with a tendency toward violence allow stress to become an excuse for violence.
- 4. Violent history.** "Once people cross that moral, ethical or professional barrier into violence," Davis says, "it's a lot easier for them to do it the next time."
- 5. Lower productivity.** Employees with a tendency toward violence have a harder time keeping a consistent level of productivity.
- 6. Poor peer relationships.** Loners are more likely to act violently because they don't have a social network to work out problems.
- 7. Poor personal hygiene.** These people have moved into the dangerous "I don't care" phase.
- 8. Drastic personality changes.** It's a myth that you need to watch out for ultra-shy or ultra-outgoing employees. Davis says, "You need to pay attention to the person who flip-flops between the two."