How Secure Are Security Guards?
The tragic nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, raised scores of questions for politicians, community leaders, managers and law enforcement. But one challenging issue is: How was the Islamic extremist shooter employed as a gun-carrying security guard?

Global security giant G4S emphasised that its employee, Omar Mateen, was off-duty at the time of the massacre, but that did not prevent the news causing an eight percent drop in the company’s share price on the London exchange, which slashed about £200 million pounds off its market value.

Most importantly, it exposed a critical issue in the security industry, namely the vetting of employees and the impact when they do wrong. Rogue employees are a risk in every industry, but for security companies, frontline employees are in a position of special trust, sometimes with life or death control over others, with many carrying firearms in the course of their work.

The full facts of the Orlando shooting will probably not be known for a long time. Yet there are already important lessons from the crisis facing the security company and the way it responded to the inevitable intense scrutiny which followed. Within hours of the shooting, G4S issued a statement expressing shock at the event and confirming that Mateen was an employee. But it was the next statement, eight hours later, which set the tone for the company’s response.

“We are deeply shocked by this tragic event. We can confirm that Omar Mateen had been employed by G4S since September 10, 2007. Mateen was off-duty at the time of the incident. He was employed at a gated retirement community in South Florida.

“Mateen underwent company screening and background checks when he was recruited in 2007 and the check revealed nothing of concern. His screening was repeated in 2013 with no findings.

“We are cooperating fully with all law enforcement authorities, including the FBI, as they conduct their investigations. In 2013, we learned that Mateen had been questioned by the FBI but that the inquiries were subsequently closed. We were not made aware of any alleged connections between Mateen and terrorist activities, and were unaware of any further FBI investigations.

“Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victims of this unspeakable tragedy, and their friends and families.”

As a crisis statement it ticked a few boxes – expressed shock and sympathy and coldly stated the facts. But it failed to express any regret at the company’s own actions, avoided admitting any fault, failed to say they would review their own processes and failed to concede any responsibility to the client where they had placed their security guard. Moreover, it suggested the company was completely unprepared for what was to follow.

After every crisis, four things almost always happen:
1. There is a hunt for someone to blame.
2. Someone steps forward and says they saw the warning signs.
3. Every past fault and failure is dug up and re-examined.
4. Every action related to the crisis is subject to blame to share around and G4S appeared unprepared for what was to follow.

Every crisis produces more than enough blame to share around and G4S appeared determined to divert responsibility. Its original statement and subsequent comments repeatedly emphasised that the 29-year-old man had been cleared by the FBI and that the company was not advised he had been on a terrorism watch list. G4S also emphasised that 15 percent of its US-based employees are rescreened each year. However, the company failed to comment on the fact that Mateen had been hired a few months after being dismissed from the training program of the Florida Department of Corrections after talking about bringing a gun to school.

Predictably, a former co-worker, Daniel Gilroy, came forward and told reporters that Mateen was racist, sexist, homophobic and frighteningly aggressive. “This guy was unhinged and unstable. He talked of killing people. Everything he said was toxic, and the company wouldn’t do anything.” G4S said it had no record of any such complaint and took the unusual step of publishing Gilroy’s positive statements about his colleagues made at the time he left the company.

Most importantly, it exposed a critical issue in the security industry, namely the vetting of employees and the impact when they do wrong.

G4S is no stranger to controversy and the incident invariably led to the media resurrecting a host of past problems to highlight the issue of vetting employees, not least the notorious case in 2009 when a G4S security guard stationed in Iraq shot dead two colleagues in Baghdad after displaying signs of psychological imbalance. According to the Guardian, a BBC investigation found that G4S had been warned on multiple occasions that the man was not fit for duty, but continued to employ him. A coroner’s inquiry in the UK found that G4S had not adequately vetted the British national.

While some parts of the media focused on the company’s historical misdeeds, others turned a laser focus onto every aspect of the employment of the Orlando gunman, Mateen. For example, one enterprising newspaper uncovered the fact that the psychological evaluation form supporting the company’s application for Mateen to get a state licence to carry a firearm as a security guard was not signed by the psychologist listed on the form. The company put it down to a clerical error.

The newspaper pointed out that no one claims the employment licence played any role.

By Tony Jaques
in helping Mateen commit the murders, but the story highlights that, in the aftermath of a crisis, every possible aspect will be subjected to extreme scrutiny; that actions taken long ago, or in the heat of a crisis, can be forensically examined months or even years later in the cold hard light of an inquiry or courtroom. Look no further than the investigation into the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, or the Lindt Café siege in Sydney.

What is important here is that none of this should have come as a surprise to G4S. And none of the lessons should be a surprise to other companies. In any crisis, the basic steps are simple: state the facts to the extent they are known, be willing to apologise, express empathy and explain what will be done to prevent it happening again. The key failing for G4S was not giving any explanation or assurance about what it could do to improve vetting of its staff (or to admit that there was in fact any shortcoming).

G4S is one of the world’s largest employers, with over 600,000 staff. But no matter how large or small the organisation, the lessons are the same:

• to recognise that a single employee can bring high-profile reputational risk
• to have robust systems in place to weed out rogue individuals
• to be able to demonstrate that every effort is made to ensure compliance
• to listen to and respond to warning signs
• to admit mistakes and be willing to address them.

For any company which tries to argue “we have so many people, how can we be sure about every one”, the final word should go to Warren Buffet, one of the world’s richest men and CEO of the immensely successful company Berkshire Hathaway. In one of his famous blogs to managers he wrote:

“Somebody is doing something today at Berkshire that you and I would be unhappy about if we knew of it. That’s inevitable. We now employ more than 250,000 people and the chances of that number getting through the day without any bad behavior occurring is nil. But we can have a huge effect in minimizing such activities by jumping on anything immediately when there is the slightest odor of impropriety. Your attitude on such matters, expressed by behavior as well as words, will be the most important factor in how the culture of your business develops. Culture, more than rule books, determines how an organization behaves.”

G4S and every other security company would do well to heed his wisdom.

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