The psychology of the insider

trying to understand it

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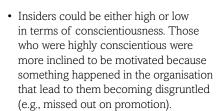
Understanding the human element of the 'insider' problem is crucial if we are to find effective means to detect, deter and prevent this crime.

MOTIVATIONS

Very little scholarly work is available on the personality and psychological characteristics of insiders. This brief report provides a summary of the literature in this area and highlights some key points from our own research conducted on insiders. An insider is understood here to be a person or group of people who work for an organisation that deliberately harms that organisation.

In general, researchers have claimed that insiders are typically: risk-taking, impulsive, manipulative, narcissistic, self-deceptive, defensive, emotionally unstable, have low self-esteem, amoral, unethical, prone to fantasising and lack conscientiousness (Turner & Gelles, 2003; CPNI, 2013). The motivations behind an insider attack include: disgruntlement, personal gain, stress, financial problems, disagreements or conflict with co-workers (CPNI, 2013; Moore et al., 2011; Shaw & Stock, 2011). In our own work, which examined 99 case studies of insider attacks (76 of which were frauds), we found similar findings, including:

- Insiders appeared to be narcissistic (i.e. a person who has a sense of entitlement and seeks admiration, attention, prestige and status) and Machiavellian (manipulative, charming and highly ambitious).

> There is no easy answer, or simple psychological profile.

- Insiders could be either high or low in terms of conscientiousness. Those who were highly conscientious were more inclined to be motivated because something happened in the organisation that lead to them becoming disgruntled (e.g., missed out on promotion).

- Some insiders were impulsive – especially those who were addicts (drug, alcohol, shopping).

- We also found that many of the insiders, in hindsight, seemed very stressed at the time (some of these experiencing a personal life issue outside of their workplace).

Although case studies where line managers, HR, security, co-workers and the insiders themselves are interviewed are a useful method to tap into the psychology of an insider, they have shortcomings. Observations can be unreliable and fellow co-workers and employers can miss important details. Given this limitation, we carried out a second study where we traced employees' attitudes towards work, counter-productive behaviours and emotional states across time.

In this second study, we followed these people over nine months, asking them to complete survey data at three-month intervals. At the outset of the study, we also obtained their psychological characteristics. Asking the individuals themselves about their personality and their current emotional state and behaviour, can arguably provide more valid and reliable data. Moreover, insiders are known to engage in counter-productive workplace behaviours (some of which are attacks themselves) and so, rather than directly ask participants if they had committed a crime (something they might not have admitted to), we asked them to complete a survey that is commonly used by organisations. This work allowed us to narrow down the list of key personality characteristics to: 'Narcissism', 'Low on Agreeableness (personality trait manifesting itself in characteristics that are perceived as kind, sympathetic, cooperative, warm and considerate)'; highly anxious and less impulsive individuals (i.e., those who scored high on 'Lack of Premeditation'). Notably, stress did not appear to be a predictor. Low impulsivity was contrary to previous findings and theories about insiders. In hindsight, however, this might be explained by the fact that many insider attacks need time and planning if the criminal is to successfully execute the crime (especially for crimes such as internal fraud). We also found that individuals whose exchange commitment (i.e., those who felt their efforts has been recognised by the organisation) changed from high to low were more likely to engage in counter-productive workplace behaviours.

Overall, both these studies revealed some new findings about the psychological make-up of insiders. Importantly, they suggest that they is no easy answer, or simple psychological profile. We need to consider a more complex mix of personality, emotional state, and employees' attitudes towards work, if we are to improve detection, deterrence and prevention methods.