In this series, we are reviewing some of the implications of personnel management for information security. In several previous articles, I discussed practical considerations in how to terminate employment with the least possible suffering and the lowest threat to security. In this article, I want to look at the social and psychological effects of employment termination in a bit more detail.

What, no farewell party? Alas, security does interfere with the more obvious signs of friendliness. The problem with a farewell party is that there may be litigation if employees leaving under a cloud feel humiliated when most people get a party but they don't. Generally it makes sense to treat all departing employees the same if the termination is involuntary.

However, nothing stops a humane and sensitive employer from encouraging employees to arrange an after-hours party even for people who have been fired.

On the other hand, if a resignation is on good terms, the employer may even arrange a celebration, possibly during working hours and maybe even at company cost.

A firing or a resignation on poor terms has two psychological dangers: effects on the individual concerned (embarrassment, shame, anger) and effects on the remaining staff (rumors, resentment, fear).

Both kinds of problems can be minimized by publishing termination procedures in organization documents provided to all employees; requiring all employees to sign a statement confirming that they have read and agreed to the termination procedures; and consistent application of the termination procedures.

The personal shock of being fired can be reduced by politeness and consideration consistent with the nature of the reasons for being fired -- although even nasty people should not be subject to verbal or physical abuse no matter how bad their behavior; treatment consistent with that meted out to other fired employees; and generous severance arrangements.

I once had to leave a wonderful company because of reasons beyond the control of the employer and myself. Neither the company nor I wanted to terminate my employment. The owner of the company offered to continue paying my salary until I found a job -- and urged me to take all the time necessary to find a satisfactory job. His generosity eased the shock of having to leave my friends and colleagues.

Organizational turmoil can be reduced by convening organization-wide or departmental meetings to brief remaining employees on the details of significant termination; open discussion, including understanding how people respond to rupture of relationships. The remaining employees may have to suffer grief (a process, not a state).

Grief is a normal and healthy response to disruption of relationships (e.g., death of a loved one,
divorce, and even the loss of a co-worker). Some people value social relationships more than other aspects of their work and may be especially affected by firings. Grief involves stages of denial, anger, mourning and recovery. Trying to forestall such responses by denying that people legitimately have feelings is foolish and counter-productive. It is far better to encourage those who are upset to voice their feelings and to engage in constructive discussion than to clamp down pointlessly in a futile attempt to suppress discussion.

Style

The way an organization handles job termination affects more than internal relations. It also influences its image in the outside world. Prospective employees will think twice about accepting job offers from an organization that maltreats departing employees. Clients may form a negative impression of a company’s stability if it abuses its own people. Investors may also look askance at a firm that gets a reputation for shoddy treatment of employees. Bad employee-management relations are a warning signs of long-term difficulties.

Finally, just in case you are wondering if this is still a security column, yes indeed! All of the factors mentioned above affect the foundation for sound information security. People are the key to effective INFOSEC, and disaffected employees and angry ex-employees are still important threats according to many current studies. For example, the annual computer crime survey published by the Computer Security Institute in March 2000 (see <http://www.gocsi.com/prelea_000321.htm>) suggested that computer crime threats to large corporations and government agencies come from both inside and outside their electronic perimeters, confirming the trend in previous years. Seventy-one percent of 643 respondents detected unauthorized access by insiders.

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