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## Office security: Don't take it lightly

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**Office  
Security:**  
Don't  
take  
it  
lightly.

Drawing by Geo. Price: Copr. © 1942, 1970  
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

"I saw a man back there earlier. I thought he was here to clean typewriters. He didn't look like a crook." This tearful account of a theft, by a secretary who has returned to her desk from an office errand to find her handbag missing, is taking place more and more frequently in offices large and small throughout the country. If she is lucky, her purse or handbag will be found, minus the money it contained, at the bottom of a nearby stairwell. If not, she will face the additional anguish of having locks changed in her home or apartment, notifying stores, oil companies and banks to report stolen credit cards, and enduring the tortuously slow process of having a driver's license replaced. Then too, there is often the pain of losing irreplaceable photos and other personal items.

For some reason, the feeling persists that a thief should look the part. Perhaps because of the image burglars have been given in cartoons and illustrations—that of either a thin, stealthy man in a peaked cap or an ex-pug with a broken nose and cauliflower ears. In either case, the mask and a satchel filled with burglary tools are standard gear. On the contrary, the success of the thief often depends on his legitimate appearance. The professional thief dresses to fit the circumstances of his nefarious specialty.

The parlance the professional thief uses to describe the specialists of his trade is colorful and informative. First there is the "door shaker," who roams the halls of apartment and office buildings looking for unlocked doors. There is also the "punch and grab man" who wields either a jimmy to grab (force) fragile locks or a vice plier to punch (unscrew) the core of a lock. The "loid man," as you might suspect, slips a strip of celluloid into the door crack to release a spring lock.

A "cat" is usually a small thief who is able to wriggle through a transom, vent or tiny window to burglarize an apartment or office; and the "ledgeman" is a close relation, as the name suggests.

In contrast to such specialists, who may concentrate on residences and thus work a normal nine to five shift or elect to join the night people and focus their attention on offices or warehouses, there seems to be a growing legion of "grab and run" thieves who roam the halls of modern office buildings during working hours looking for a quick score. These are often drug addicts, deviates and others in the petty theft echelons of the crime world. The target might be anything from a purse or handbag left on a desk, a jacket draped over a chair (with a wallet, keys or credit cards in the pockets), or merely a hat or coat. Anything of value might disappear in his wake.

While thievery of this type is not the most dramatic of office building crimes, it is probably the most common. State and metropolitan police do not keep separate figures on the incidence of office crime, but if this type of criminal activity is just keeping up with the overall crime rate the situation would be considered serious. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the 1970 national crime rate was 144 per cent above the 1960 figure.

**T**he insurance industry has reason to believe that the rate has increased much more sharply. According to the Insurance Information Institute, the insurance rate to cover a New York office against the risk of breaking and entering started at \$10 per thousand coverage ten years ago. Today the

same coverage starts at \$40. The premium for office robberies has also quadrupled.

The same situation prevails in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston and many other cities.

No matter where the modern office building may be located, the reasons it is so vulnerable to crime are the same. The multiple entrances a large building must have—and which fire laws require—make entrance and escape surprisingly easy. In large multi-tenant office buildings there is a constant coming and going of messengers, delivery men, repairmen, maintenance and cleaning people, clients and customers. The more traffic there is, the greater the risk that unauthorized people will gain access to secretarial and private offices. Therefore, visitor control is one of the most important parts of an office security program. It is the first line of defense.

Another problem is the impersonal nature of many offices. The more people in the office, the greater the risk of unauthorized entry. Few people will question the presence of a stranger if he looks as if he is there on business. Security experts say that because office security is everyone's job, it often becomes nobody's. This leaves a situation in which a thief, once past the reception area or allowed to enter through other unguarded doorways, might roam unchallenged in corridors and office areas or gain access to restrooms.

One of the main concerns of office building security directors, particularly in New York City, has been restroom crime. Unlocked restrooms have become the hangout of deviates and hiding places for thieves and robbers. A thief may enter a corporate restroom during the day, hide until the office



## Office Security:

closes, then emerge to steal whatever he can and get out by a predetermined route. The modus operandi of a robber the New York City police have dubbed "The Men's-Room Bandit," is simply to wait there until a holdup prospect arrives. As a result of this obvious weakness in building security, many companies have taken to locking restrooms as a way of deterring criminals.

Office security requirements differ, of course, in the seventy-eight H&S offices, depending on a wide range of factors: the city; the office location within the city; the type of building and degree of security offered by the owner; office layout and size, or the number of staff people in the office. As a result, security practices in H&S offices no doubt differ greatly from city to city. There is one element, however, that should be a part of every office security program. It is common sense—the factor that could prevent much of the crime that takes place in offices during working hours.

There is no way to tell how an individual might react in certain crime situations—in an instant of fear, surprise or anger. But consider now, without the influence of the latter three elements, what the correct reaction would be in the following situations:

A handsome, well dressed young man steps off the elevator and breezes through the reception area. He smiles and nods a greeting to the receptionist. Though she doesn't recognize him, the receptionist assumes by his manner he has been here before and obviously knows where he wants to go and whom he wants to see. In this situation, she should:

- a) Return the smile and cheerfully ask, "May I help you?"
- b) Assume that since the visitor is in such a hurry his business must be urgent and interference would not be appreciated.
- c) Alert a girl friend down the hall that a live one is heading in her direction.
- d) Notify the office security director or his deputy that an unauthorized visitor is in the office area.
- e) All of the above.

The correct answers: **(a, d and c,** in that order). Obviously, **(a)** should be the first reaction in this situation. A polite, friendly but firm offer to help takes but a few seconds and carries the implication that the receptionist does not know the visitor or his business with the firm. If he is there legitimately, the visitor will usually respond with his name, that of the person with whom he has an appointment and other information if requested. If the visitor ignores the question and continues on by without responding, then **(d)** becomes appropriate and the office security director should be alerted. Finally, a friend down the hall should be alerted to the fact that an intruder is heading her way.

Of course, the action a person *should* take in security situations and the action a busy secretary *would* take, may be quite different. Take this purely hypothetical situation, for example: A secretary returning early from lunch glances

into her boss's office to see a stranger furtively ransacking the desk. In your judgment, do you think the H&S secretary *should*:

- a) Confront him.
- b) Ask if she may help.
- c) Try to block his means of exit.
- d) Leave as quickly and quietly as possible.
- e) Find out if her karate lessons were worthwhile.



The answer is **(d)**. Never try to deal with intruders. Get out of there and get help. In the event that you are spotted by the thief, yell as loud as you can and move as fast as you can. It is too late for answer **(b)** since he is helping himself.

Another typical security situation could involve H&S people at all staff levels:

A kindly little old man in clerical garb and carrying a battered umbrella limps along the hallway toward the big corner office. He smiles as you approach, touches his starched collar with a gnarled finger, coughs plaintively and introduces himself as Father Flimflam. He explains that he has come to extend his best wishes for a cheerful Christmas and accept Mr. Haskins' annual contribution to the Lonely Order of Volunteer Evangelists. Credentials? Of course. He extends a well-thumbed card and on it you can plainly see, in raised Old English letters, the initials of his organization spelling LOVE.





In such a situation the correct procedure would be to:

- a) Explain that Mr. Haskins has been dead almost 70 years, denounce the man as a fraud and throw the rascal out.
- b) Explain that Mr. Haskins is in conference and have him wait in the reception area while you dial the security director.
- c) Mutter Dickensian epithets, pick up the nearest phone and shout, "Get me the police!"
- d) None of the above.

To begin with, security experts do not recommend reaction (a). A kindly little old con man, when trapped, can turn into a violent melange of elbows, knees and vituperation (as can kindly little old con ladies). Besides, the butt of an umbrella can leave an awful welt. Reaction (c) would probably work, depending on the age and temperament of the H&S person involved, but the most practical solution would be (b). Wish the gentleman a merry Christmas, head for neutral ground, and let the building security force take the problem off your hands.

Obviously this last security situation is exaggerated, but only as a reminder that sympathy is one of the con artist's best tools and almost any combination of dress, physical infirmity or charity affiliation that might evoke sympathy could be used to gain entry for purposes of theft or fraud.

Since office crime situations vary so widely it is difficult to set specific procedures for dealing with thieves caught in the act, but common sense should dictate the safest and most effective action. As for preventive action, however, there are a number of ways H&S people can discourage office theft:

- ▶ Keep handbags, tape recorders and other portable items of value

out of sight when not in use.

- ▶ Make sure that entrances are covered at all times by a receptionist or a temporary substitute. Unguarded entrances should have one-way locks.
- ▶ Instruct all who act as receptionists in standard procedures of alertness and reaction as well as in procedures to discourage the would-be thief who visits H&S to "case" the office.
- ▶ Become acquainted with neighbors, tenants whom you meet in hallways, elevators or restrooms and warn one another when suspicious persons are noticed.
- ▶ Make sure you know who your office security director and his deputies are and where they can be reached.
- ▶ Keep the building security phone number handy.
- ▶ Look for weaknesses in your office's security from a thief's point of view and make necessary adjustments.

There are any number of alarm systems, electronic locking devices, signals and other security equipment that can be installed to deter office criminals. Some companies use closed circuit television monitored by receptionists in the daytime and guards at night. Others use infra-red cameras that can take pictures in complete darkness, or photo-electric beams of invisible black light which, if broken, trip alarms. Other alarms are activated by noise or vibration in an immediate area. There are hidden cameras that can be activated by the slightest movement of air. One large New York City corporation has installed, on the one door leading to its office area, a special lock that can be opened only when an employee pushes ten buttons in the proper sequence. After working hours the combination changes and, with limited exceptions, employees cannot get back in.

Such installations are expensive and are effective where the burglary problem is critical, but only to a degree. Equipment alone cannot guarantee security. Experts warn that some of the people who are installing security equipment by day could burgle by night, turning off the system as they enter and turning it on as they leave. The professional thieves also know that a spray of talcum powder will fluoresce in a beam of black light, making it as obvious and as easy to get past as a stick of wood. Accounts of spectacular robberies of museums, banks and other buildings, in spite of the use of sophisticated surveillance and alarm systems, indicate that there is no such thing as absolute security, no matter how much is spent for it. Some security experts say, in fact, that the main trouble with sophisticated electronic security systems is over-reliance on them.

The best defense against office crime is still the individual, the one who stands to lose. Awareness that the problem is serious now and seems to be getting worse; that personal items left unattended on desks, chairs or file cabinets could disappear in an instant; and that security is everyone's responsibility, can greatly reduce the risk of theft in every one of our offices. □