



Work-related violence case studies

This case study focuses on Bryan Dolby, a self-employed window cleaner. Bryan works in the Grimsby area and carries out domestic and commercial work. He has a regular customer base. Generally, he collects payment from domestic customers by visiting their houses after completing the work.

This case study also includes information from members of the National Federation of Master Window and General Cleaners (NFMWGC), who are either self-employed or work in micro or small businesses. The Federation represents both window cleaners and general cleaners in the UK and has approximately 2500 members. Bryan Dolby is Chair of the NFMWGC.

Key risks

Grievances from customers:

These include, for example, access problems to a customer's house, ladder marks on a customer's lawn and accidental scratching of windows and sills.

Customer attitude:

some customers do not value the window cleaner's work and have the attitude 'You're only a window cleaner'. Such customers are more likely to be aggressive or impolite.

Business rivalry:

window cleaning is a competitive business and some cleaners try to undercut one another, especially the 'cowboys'. This can lead to violence and abuse.

Collecting money:

sometimes there are disputes over payment, or customers refuse to pay.

Location:

the risk of violence or abuse is higher in some areas than others.

Aggressive customers:

this can be caused by alcohol, drugs, having a 'bad day', shift workers who are woken up, etc.

Weather:

working in bad weather sometimes puts the window cleaner in a bad mood, and therefore less likely to be polite and helpful to customers.

Animals:

animals may panic or unnerve window cleaners, who may be attacked or bitten.

Personal characteristics:

many window cleaners are young men who by their nature are prone to taking unnecessary risks.

Examples of incidents

- A window cleaner had been doing a particular job for a while and had priced it at £10. Another cleaner, later discovered to be on the dole, quoted £8 for the job. They started to argue and fight.
- A window cleaner's van was smashed up while parked outside a job.
- A lot of verbal abuse from customers is experienced.
- A window cleaner was followed one evening while collecting money, causing him some anxiety.

Successful measures

Training and information**Competent workers:**

small business members of NFMWGC try to ensure, where possible, that only experienced and trained individuals are considered for working alone.

Key training messages:

- Be polite and helpful: always try to be polite with customers. Apologise if something goes wrong, and put it right straightaway, for example offer a free clean. This helps to defuse a situation and is probably the most successful measure.
- Walk away: leave an aggressive or potentially violent situation. If a customer will not pay, just accept it and terminate your service.
- Build a good reputation: this is worthwhile and will earn you respect and trust from within the community.
- A 'resilient' personality/attitude: window cleaners, especially if self-employed, need to deal calmly and tactfully with verbal abuse or customers refusing to pay, without letting the experience adversely affect the rest of their working day or week.

Work equipment**Mobile phones:**

window cleaners have phones for emergency use and to let friends or family know where they are. For example, Bryan calls his wife throughout the day to let her know where he is and when he expects to be back. If he works in premises where mobile phones are not allowed, he will call his wife before he starts and after he finishes. He also gives his wife the telephone number of the premises where he is working.

Job design



Buddy system:

this is useful in small businesses. If two people are working on the same job in a large office building, they may still be working 'alone' at opposite ends of a building. Employees keep in regular contact with each other throughout the day. There is also a radio in the company van.

Double up:

if asked to do a job in an area where you feel unsafe, take a colleague along. In Bryan's experience, customers usually understand if you tell them why you need an extra pair of hands. If it is not possible to take a colleague, do not do the job.

Vary the routine:

vary routes and times when collecting money and be aware of suspicious characters or behaviour.

Cheque payment:

ask for payment by cheque, if possible, reducing the need to carry cash.

Good physical fitness:

window cleaners are generally fit and active people. This helps if they need to get away quickly from potential trouble.

Less successful measures

Some measures are sometimes less effective than others, or have disadvantages:

Being polite to customers:

there may be less motivation for a window cleaner who is not self-employed to be polite and helpful to customers, because it is not their business that suffers as a result of aggressive incidents.

Not arguing with customers:

with the best will in the world, it is sometimes difficult not arguing with customers if they are in the wrong.

Avoiding involvement:

Sometimes it is not easy to avoid violent incidents. For example, if a window cleaner witnesses an abusive incident in a neighbouring house, they may feel it is their duty to help or to defuse the situation, even if they are putting themselves at risk.

Training problems:

self-employed window cleaners tend not to have any formal violence training. While some formal training might be useful (for example, dealing with difficult customers), there are practical barriers:

- Lack of existing formal training courses.
- Location: the industry is spread across the whole of the UK making it difficult to find one location which is suitable for everybody.
- Cost: every day off work is the loss of a day's income for a self-employed cleaner.

The benefits and the costs

- Very few violence problems are reported in the industry.
- Bryan has experienced few incidents of violence in his 19-year career.
- Bryan has run a successful business and maintained his livelihood for this time.
- Mobile phones are cost-effective, offering a safety and a business function, and are therefore assets to the business.
- Having a positive and sensible attitude does not cost anything.
- Accepting the loss of payment for the odd job can be ultimately cost-effective if it prevents an assault which leads to injury and time off work. Experience shows that many customers who complain and refuse to pay, sometimes relent when offered a free clean.



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