



TEACHING NOTE

Suicide or Work-related Accident? Let there be no Ceremony between Us!

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CASE SUMMARY

The company was going through tough times, restructuring after an earlier merger and cutting operational costs because of a market downturn. Kamel Amad, a bright young Assistant Human Resources Manager at the company's French manufacturing plant, carried out his superiors' orders to dismiss a staff member. Not long after, the former staff member referred to as Mr P, set his car alight with himself inside it right near the company premises. Alarmed by possible connections that could be made with the company, Kamel's immediate boss, Mr De Saint-Just, was concerned all the rules had been followed correctly in the process leading to the dismissal. He was pleased to hear that they had been. Kamel had earlier been promoted. Mr De Saint-Just trusted him, and considered he did good work. But now they needed a plan to get the facts out to the media in a way that would not reflect badly on the company, and a means of working with staff so as to maintain control of the situation. Kamel overheard a staff-member calling the death not just a suicide but "a workplace accident". Looking over the files, he became aware of other suicides and suicide attempts among staff and ex-staff. Mr P's file contained copies of officially-registered letters sent to his home address. Some time later, a letter arrived from the attorney representing the family of the deceased advising they were planning on laying formal charges against the company for failing to exercise a duty of care in relation to Mr P's safety and physical and mental health. Kamel had been told to speak to the family and to attend the funeral. If he did, he wondered what he should say. Who was to blame? And what should be done about it?

OVERVIEW AND SOURCES

This case study examines a little-acknowledged form of work-related violence. It focuses on suicide of a recently-employed person where there are possible firm-related causes and consequences. It allows for consideration of employer responsibilities as devolved to

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the human resource management function in relation to the ongoing psychological health of employees - and immediate ex-employees in instances of dismissal or redundancy. It also draws attention to a particular dilemma facing an Assistant HR Manager and calls for students to think about how they personally might act in this situation. Links are made between work-related suicide and other forms of workplace violence.

The case study is based on real events, and is drawn from a narrative provided by the Assistant HR Manager. The actual conversation in the case is not reported verbatim as the original narrative was not tape-recorded, but it relates closely to what was recounted. The first author has no reason to doubt the veracity of the original narrative. Actual details of what is contained in the letters

were not revealed, but the evidence points to a documented case being made against Mr P in terms of his performance at work. The company is not named, nor is its industry sector revealed.

USEFUL BACKGROUND FOR INSTRUCTORS

Work-related suicides (as well as suicides in the actual workplace) have attracted attention in France with a recent news article quoting a union figure of 300-400 people a year – roughly one a day – committing suicide in France due to the pressure of work (Financial Times, 2008 – attached here as Appendix 1) – and some companies experiencing “a spate of work-related suicides” (Thébaud-Mony, 2007), despite overall suicide rates declining worldwide.

French companies in the spotlight include Electricité de France (EDF) alleged to have rotated large numbers of subcontracted and temporary workers through its Chinon nuclear facility, and to have utilized a practice known as ‘job management by dose’ where workers lost their jobs once they had absorbed an ‘acceptable’ limit of radiation. Eight suicides among subcontracted maintenance workers there were highlighted by the CGT trade union in 1995. EDF, Peugeot Citroën and Renault have all since experienced suicides among their workforce; some have been of highly-qualified managers and technicians. Peugeot Citroën had several worker suicides occur in a relatively short space of time. Trade union, Solidaires Industrie, blamed the “isolation of workers, widespread suppression of breaks, work stress, job cuts generating heavier workloads for those remaining and competition between employees for meager raises” for what was termed the desperate state of some employees in the auto industry (Laurent, 2007). In October 2006, an engineer threw himself off the fifth floor of the Renault Technocentre near Paris, a so-called monument of capitalism, where Renault built its latest models. The family did manage to get his suicide recognized as a workplace misadventure and were claiming the company was responsible. The unions later focused on the working conditions in the company which had committed to raising shareholder dividends by 250% and imposed ambitious production targets which involved workers in making a commitment to personal targets in a meeting with their manager. Refusing to sign would result in a recorded delivery / registered letter being sent listing targets and warning they must be met. Thébaud-Mony (2007) comments: “This exerts constant pressure, but allows no opportunity to discuss the problems created by the challenge”. Note, none of the companies mentioned above are the focal company in this case.

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An alternative form of work-related violence resulting in death involves not self-harm, but harm to others. The possibility of workplace shooting has been raised in the case in the wake of such events in the U.S. that have been well-publicized in France. It is not entirely a red herring as it potentially raises the stakes for students who don't take the suicide risk seriously. What if they were the potential victim of psychologically fragile person? One consultancy supporting firms in their efforts against workplace violence quotes U.S. Department of Justice statistics, as follows:

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the workplace is the most dangerous place to be in America.... In fact, workplace homicide is the fastest growing category of murder in the U.S. And homicide is now the leading cause of on-the-job death for women (and second leading cause for men). However, the real danger (and staggering cost in both human and financial terms) is the mountain of physical and verbal violence, of which murder is just the peak (representing only 0.05% of the 2 million victims of physical workplace violence / year). [Source: U.S. Department of Justice, BJS, 7/28/98]

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The same consultancy reports that just over a quarter of physical workplace violence in the US is recorded as having been committed by current employees (26%) and ex-employees (3%). Strangers, customers and spill over domestic violence are more common perpetrators. It also reports figures of over 400 000 annual workplace assaults with either a gun or a knife committed in the US (Workplace Violence Headquarters, 2008). The phenomenon of self-damage or harm to others in the workplace is certainly not insignificant.

Finally, bullying by the employer – as might be argued to have occurred in this case – is another more insidious form of work-related violence, and as hinted at here, potentially also a contributory cause of extreme and life-threatening acts of work-related violence such as suicide and homicide.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To broach a difficult subject – employee/ex-employee suicide – as an extreme but increasing form of work-related violence, in terms of its possible firm-related causes and consequences.
2. To discuss employer responsibilities for employees' and immediate ex-employees' psychological health.
3. To consider personal ethics in proposing solutions to deal with the crisis described.

COURSES AND LEVELS FOR WHICH THIS CASE IS INTENDED

This case can be used in Management, Organizational Behaviour, Organizational Development and Change or Human Resource Management classes where the focus is on organisational roles and human resource / management responsibilities. It is set in France, where workplace relationships range from very informal among peers and quite formal between different levels and classes of employee. The activity of building a documented case against an employee possibly prior to dismissal appears to be increasingly common in France, but is practiced also elsewhere. A detailed understanding of the French legal system or employment law is not essential for the successful use of this case. The point is not to debate points of law but to consider the extent of perceived employer responsibilities in relation to the wellbeing of employees (and immediate ex-employees).

A French language version of this case has been used most successfully with third and fourth year business students in France. The case could work equally well with postgraduates or more mature executive students.

This English language version of the case results from careful translation by an experienced case-writer working with the original author. It has been reviewed by three

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other English-speaking academics from around the world who have confirmed that it would likely work well with their local English-as-first/only-language students, or international students studying in English.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS AND TEACHING PLAN

This case is more useful as a basis for class discussion rather than for a graded homework assignment or exam. The latter would likely promote idealized answers based on what students felt the instructor wanted to hear, rather than prompt students to think about, defend and perhaps modify their views in light of what they hear from others. In the authors' experience, the case and the kinds of questions below do elicit strong views and active discussion among class members.

If, however, with a particularly homogenous class of younger students, the discussion follows strongly Friedmanite thinking, the instructor can usefully act as devil's advocate and take advantage of both the blurred lines in the case and the potential to further personalize it with questions such as the following: *What if the suicide occurred prior to or immediately after the dismissal (ie. if the man was still employed by the company, or was still being paid by the company)? What if the suicide happened on company premises as several have in France? What if there were letters from a legal counsel/psychologist in the file suggesting the person's psychological state was being adversely impacted by the way s/he was being treated at work? Would you feel the same way if something like this happened to one of your relatives or your partner? What are the chances of a psychologically unstable employee or former employee pulled a gun on you in the workplace or shopping mall?*

A suggested teaching plan with activities and questions which takes around 1.5 hours (including reading time) follows. Remaining class time could be devoted to a wider discussion of the phenomenon of work-related violence and means by which it might be managed as part of the Human Resource Management function. Additionally the article included on page 9 of this teaching note might be given out in order to allude to the significance of the work-related suicide issue and management response, albeit in a different company from the one focussed on in the case.

Instructors should feel free to use the case in a different manner from that suggested.

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Time	Activities, Questions & Prompt Questions¹	Alternatives
15 minutes	Read the case	Take only 5 minutes to read the first page of the case
15 minutes (maybe spend first five minutes discussing personal responses in pairs)	<p>Q 1 How do you see Mr P's death? Was it a straight suicide? Or was it a work-related accident? What seemed to have caused it? Who is responsible?</p>	After discussing this question, take 5 more minutes to read the second page of the case (or 10 minutes to read the remainder of the case)
20 minutes	<p>Q 2 Work-related suicides and homicides appear to be on the increase (see page 2 of this teaching note for French and U.S. statistics). What is the employers' role in relation to workplace violence? What aspects of employee wellbeing are firms responsible for / not responsible for? How can a firm look after the psychological wellbeing of its employees while they are on the job? What responsibilities does a firm have in cases of dismissal or redundancy? What is the most humane way to fire someone?</p>	
20 minutes List possible actions on whiteboard (prioritize if desired)	<p>Q 3 What should this company do next? Is it doing everything it should do? What more could it do? What specific actions might this firm take to prevent similar tragedies?</p>	After discussing this question, take 5 more minutes to read the third page of the case if not already read
15 minutes (maybe spend first five minutes discussing personal responses in pairs)	<p>Q 4 Workplace violence comes in a variety of forms including bullying or unreasonable behavior by employers or bosses. What evidence is there of bullying or unreasonable behavior by the employer or other personnel in this company? Do you think Mr de Saint-Just or Kamel could be accused of being a bully in carrying out orders from company headquarters? Why/Why not?</p>	

¹ The main discussion questions and a definition of workplace violence appear on Microsoft Powerpoint slides on page 10 of this teaching note to facilitate their use in the classroom.

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Do you think Kamel was being bullied by his boss? Why/Why not?

10 minutes

Q 5 What would you do in Kamel's position?

Response could be written

POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

This case is based on critical incident philosophy (Flanagan, 1954; Bouchard et al, 2007). It deliberately provokes a range of responses and not a single correct answer/solution to the case.

Q 1 How do you see Mr P's death?

Was it a straight suicide? Some students will likely argue Mr P's death was his own decision and the company was simply not responsible.

Or was it a work-related accident? Workplace misadventure is a legal term sometimes used to underscore the non-intentional nature of the outcome of acts that take place at work. Other students will possibly argue that it was an unfortunate accident for which the company may or may not be considered responsible depending on whether it the suicide was on site, Mr P was still being paid, what was in the letters and what the company was deemed to know about him. It is worth asking what the effects of a good number of official letters sent to a person over time might be. How might someone react to their first, second, twentieth such letter? What happens to people under stress? What might happen to their work performance?

What seemed to have caused it?

Organisational change, cost cutting, restructuring, adverse work performance evaluations are some possible answers. Individuals experience and respond to pressures differently.

Who is responsible?

Allow students to take the part of the company, or the family in answering this question.

Discuss responsibilities of each.

Juxtapose the idea of 'the business of business being business', with the responsibilities of a good employer.

What if Mr P had no close family living nearby? If he was psychologically fragile, whose responsibility was it?

Q 2 Work-related suicides and homicides appear to be on the increase (see page 2 of this teaching note for French and U.S. statistics). What is the employers' role in relation to workplace violence?

What aspects of employee wellbeing are firms responsible for / not responsible for?

Some students may suggest the bottom line here is legislative compliance with requirements regarding employee's physical health and safety in the workplace and from the effects of work. They may note that sometimes the effects of work endure beyond the employee's time at work, or extend beyond the actual workplace.

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Other students may claim responsibility extends to mental or psychological wellbeing even going so far as to suggest a happy employee is a more productive one (a slightly debateable point).

Note too that while organizational change has not been directly linked to workplace violence, effects of organizational change, such as job insecurity and perceived injustice in the workplace (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1994), are thought to have some bearing on personal changes in employees. Organizations may be presumed to have some responsibility, and indeed some interest in taking care of their employees through periods of restructuring and change. If they don't take care of those they are letting go of, morale and desire to remain may be lowered among employees the firm would wish to retain.

How can a firm look after the psychological well-being of its employees while they are on the job?

A variety of answers are possible ranging from buddy support systems, regular breaks, provision of independent counselling services, psychological testing, regular appraisal (a double-edged sword), formal and informal feedback mechanisms, employee surveys and consultation, worker input into reasonable goals and targets, union support, careful implementation of change management etc. There are plenty of good answers – but ask how feasible is their implementation in a climate of cost-cutting?

What responsibilities does a firm have in cases of dismissal or redundancy?

Most students will know the 'right' answer about fair and reasonable written warnings being given. And some will declare that such warnings appear to have been given in this case by way of the registered letters.

What is the most humane way to fire someone?

Some may suggest use of counsellors to support the dismissed staff member, use of job coaching and company-paid-for facilities to support the next job search, or retraining effort. Some could suggest the ongoing payment of salary for a certain time beyond what is required. All these things cost the company but could be balanced against the negative publicity and damage to the reputation of the company if nothing is done, or if self-harm or physical violence to others results.

Q 3 What should this company do next?

Is it doing everything it should do? Some students will likely say yes, in the circumstances the company is being proactive, getting straight onto preparing a crisis management plan. Others could argue that it is merely crisis containment that is going on.

What more could it do? The company could be more proactive. It could look at possible causes and prevention strategies much more specifically.

What specific actions might this firm take to prevent similar tragedies?

Possible suggestions are offered above in relation to Question 2, but if not already discussed, ensure they are raised here in relation to their feasibility in this company at this time. Addressing the legal situation will also be a priority.

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Q 4 Workplace violence comes in a variety of forms including bullying or unreasonable behavior by employers or bosses. What evidence is there of bullying or unreasonable behavior by the employer or other personnel in this company?

Use the prompt questions below only if the possibilities they suggest don't arise in response to the first question. Also offer a definition of workplace violence if students require it. See slide for following definition: Any harassing or threatening behaviour sent by employee or employer, physical or psychological, that involves elements of fear, isolation and exclusion, intimidation, assault or abuse constitutes violence (Mills, 1997).

Do you think Mr de Saint-Just or Kamel could be accused of being a bully in carrying out orders from company headquarters? Why/Why not? Let students debate this question, pitting those who agree against those who disagree and seeking reasons.

Do you think Kamel was being bullied by his boss? Why/Why not? There is less evidence here. It could be argued Kamel was complicit, but that overhearing the conversation and possibly picturing himself as a 'yes man', the revelations from the file and his subsequent deliberations would seem to suggest he might become less so.

Q 5 What would you do in Kamel's position?

A whole range of answers are possible from resignation, finding a more humane employer, seeking to become more proactive in suicide prevention at work, looking for other instances of organisational-induced stress and seeking to deal with causes and mitigate effects, checking employee personal files to identify other at-risk personnel, initiating monitoring of employees physical and psychological well-being, recommending work colleagues be given time off to attend the funeral, visiting the family of the deceased man, attending the funeral ceremony, dealing with crisis containment, to doing nothing.

Ensure students consider both reasons for and possible consequences of their suggested answers. Ask them if they think there is a best answer and what it would be. Have them question their answers in terms of 'who' they are best for. Best for the company? For employees? For Kamel? For Mr P's family? No one solution is likely to be best for all.

The case demonstrates that there are few simple answers in the wake of such an unfortunate tragedy. Better then to seek to prevent it occurring in the first place. Giving students a copy of the news article (see next page) at the end of the class may prolong their reflection on what appears to be a serious and mounting work-place problem.

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Experts warn over French workplace suicides

By Peggy Hollinger in Paris
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When [Renault](#) held a training session for its workers at its Technocentre outside Paris last year on how to spot signs of stress in the workplace, the French carmaker was hoping to address issues raised by the suicide of a 39-year-old engineer the previous autumn.

But any lessons were quickly overshadowed by the discovery the following day of another body near the training sessions. The carmaker has suffered three suicides in just over a year at its Yvelines site, two of which have been classified as industrial accidents because they happened on site.

The record sounds shocking, but according to experts on stress in the workplace, Renault is far from alone. Rival carmaker [Peugeot](#) and French utility [EDF](#) have also experienced similar traumatic deaths in recent months. According to official statistics, 300-400 people a year – roughly one a day – commit suicide in France due to the pressure of work.

Whether this is higher in France than elsewhere is up for debate, as numbers are very hard to pin down. A person who decides to commit suicide at work, may be motivated as much by personal reasons as professional ones.

However, the headlines given to Renault's traumatic experiences has put the spotlight on the pressures of the workplace. Marc Chenais, an adviser on workplace stress, says the increasing reliance on technology is one of the biggest causes of work-related depression. "People's autonomy is disappearing," he says. "In the old days an insurance agent would have been able to take an accident report, study the details and make his own decision about the payout. Today he receives the report, inputs it to the computer and that makes the decision."

Mr Chenais says there are warning signs for companies to heed when looking at the risks to their employees.

Renault recognised that the work at its Technocentre had been poorly apportioned, with some departments barely able to cope and others with too much free time. Another complaint is a feeling of powerlessness, which adds greatly to dissatisfaction and unhappiness, according to Mr Chenais.

"Look at workers in call centres," he said. "They have to answer phones within a limited time, only have a few minutes to respond and the computer tells them what to say. They are machines."

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Ultimately, employees value recognition and a sense of association within a company. “Not just money, but a thank you and recognition that something is well done,” he says.

In the end, minimising the risk of tragedies such as suicide is simply about “putting the human being back at the heart of the workplace”, he says. “We have to make work mean something again as people want to work. It is about giving them pleasure in what they do.”

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