Is HR Helping or Hurting Your Security?

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In theory, the Human Resources (HR) Department is one of the most powerful tools an organization has for improving security and reducing insider threat (both deliberate and inadvertent). In many organizations, however, HR makes security worse. This tends to be especially true in large organizations.

Rather than working to improve security, far too often HR becomes the enemy of employees—the much hated and feared tyrannical Rule-Maker, the condescending Insulter of Intelligence, and the Squasher of Productivity, as well as the Secret Police, Judge, Jury, and Executioner.

The common failure of HR to address employee disgruntlement is a particularly serious missed security opportunity that has important implications for the insider threat. There are a number of motivations for deliberate inside attacks. These include: greed; ideology,

political activism, and radicalization; terrorism; coercion/blackmail; desire for excitement; the phenomenon of a self-identified Cassandra; disgruntlement; and (maybe) mental illness. Of all of these, disgruntlement is often the most straightforward to mitigate. But all too often, HR takes troubled or unhappy employees and turns them into enraged, disgruntled employees bent on retaliation.

It is particularly dangerous to have—as is often the case—phony or missing grievance and complaint processes. The same is true for missing, bogus, or ineffective employee assistance programs to help employees with, for example, addiction problems, financial difficulties, mental health issues, and domestic strife including domestic violence. The best metric for success for these grievance and employee assistance programs is that they get used a lot. HR and senior executives, however, often brag about how little these programs get used in their organization, as if this were a sign of strength! Instead, it is a sign that employees recognize the programs to be useless, fraudulent, and/or dangerous to use.

All too often, HR fails to encourage effective, proactive methods for improving employee morale and reducing employee turnover. The latter is a particularly serious economic and security problem when there is a high turnover rate for security officers or IT specialists.

Moreover, HR often fails to watch intelligently for common precursors to insider attacks. These include **changes** in an employee's:

- hygiene
- performance
- rule compliance
- use of drugs or alcohol
- signs of aggression or hostility
- being late for work or a no show
- not getting along with co-workers

(The challenge, of course, is that while many insider attackers will show these precursors well before an attack, the vast majority of employees who exhibit such changes will never attack.)

Too often, HR fails to intelligently oversee appropriate and proportional disciplinary action. HR typically loves scapegoating after security incidents. HR often dangerously mistreats contractors, retirees, and terminated employees. And, of course, HR misogyny and racism has a long history, as does making inept and uninspired hiring choices [1].

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Certainly HR charlatanism is nothing new. I was recently reminded of this by looking at some management textbooks from 100 years ago. In particular, I read some of the popular HR guides to "reading" and evaluating character based on an individual's physical attributes. (See, for example, references [2] and [3].)

This kind of pseudo-scientific nonsense is called "physiognomy". It involves attempting to assess a person's character, personality, or optimal work assignment based on his/her outer appearance, especially of the face or head. Physiognomy has a very long history, going back thousands of years. While social scientists in the late 19th and early 20th century increasingly recognized physiognomy as quackery and it fell somewhat out of favor, the "theory" continued to be taught in college and used to some extent by businesses and HR ("Personnel") Departments more than two decades into the 20th century.

Judging character and temperament using physical attributes was typically presented as very "scientific" and objective [2,3], but it was neither [4,5]. And it was often racist and sexist.

Some samples of the "scientific" facts taught by one prominent 20th century proponent of physiognomy for HR purposes, Katherine M.H. Blackford, offer a flavor of this "methodology".

According to Blackford, indications of impulsiveness in a potential employee could be spotted if the person had "blonde coloring;…small, round retreating chin; small size;…short head; short, smooth fingers, with tapering tips; a keen, alert, intense expression" and if "….He walks with a quick step, sometimes almost jerky."[2]

Generally [3], "Thinkers" have a triangular face, and "Doers" (such as laborers) have a square face. "Mental-Motive" types, a combination of the two, have a squarish forehead and a triangular lower face. "Organizers" have a somewhat roundish face. Interestingly, Blackford did not require quantitative measurements in order to judge someone based on their face; qualitative assessments by the observer were adequate.

Blackford had particular opinions about "fat men". She believed fat men tend to be calm. She also maintained that, "Mentally, the average fat man is not very keen on abstruse subjects, does not care much for theories, doesn't delve very deeply into scientific and philosophic study, and is not much given to 'isms'. Wherever you find a crowd of radicals and fanatics together, you will almost always find a crowd of lean and hungry looking people." [3 page 21]. (The idea that young and hungry people might tend to be the social agitators, rather than well-fed fat and older people, especially 100 years ago, would not seem to require physiognomy!)

Interestingly, even Blackford appears to have had some concept of insider threat: "When employers select men unfitted for their tasks, assign them to work in environments where they are handicapped from the start, and associate them together and with executives in combinations which are inherently inharmonious, it is inevitable that trouble should follow."[2]

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Nowadays, HR charlatanism and the use of pseudo-scientific nonsense is unfortunately not a relic of the past. Polygraphs (an "invention" from the same era as the Blackford textbooks) are an example of pseudo-scientific nonsense that is still alive and well in many corporations and government agencies. Other common HR charlatanism includes the arbitrary rejection of (or sometimes failure to properly reject) employment candidates with minor (or even major) criminal and drug histories. Questionable policies and hiring decisions based on (often easily spoofed [6,7]) drug testing is another common area of HR charlatanism, as is sloppy background checks and the frequent failure to motivate good security and safety practices. There are many other examples of dangerous and foolish HR policies and practices that harm security.[8]

Traditionally, if HR Departments are evaluated at all, they are usually evaluated from a business, management, or compensation/benefits perspective. It is a huge vulnerability, however, not to periodically evaluate HR from a security standpoint, focusing especially on Security Culture and insider threat mitigation. This is probably best done by external Vulnerability Assessors who are less susceptible to retaliation and "shooting the messenger" than internal personnel. External assessors also offer a more objective view and tend to be less constrained by the organization's politics and cultural problems.

When HR fails to support good security—or even actively undermines it—security managers can help the organization by pushing for a security evaluation of HR policies and

practices, or at least warning HR, managers, and senior executives that HR is creating serious security vulnerabilities. Given that doing these things may put your own job at risk, it is often not an easy thing to do. A safer alternative may be to try to provide some of the security countermeasures yourself that HR is failing to provide. For example, as a security manager, you (and subordinates) can watch for the precursors to insider attacks if you have good formal and informal relations/communications with employees, contractors, supervisors, and managers.

You might even be able to partially mitigate disgruntlement. For example, you could exploit (or encourage others to exploit) the so-called 80% Rule: when an employee is disgruntled, if someone in the organization with even a little authority will simply listen to, validate, and empathize with the employee, approximately 80% of the time the employee will feel significantly better about the problem, himself/herself, and the organization as a whole. Remarkably, it isn't even necessary to agree with the employee about their complaint(s), or fix whatever is bugging him or her—though, when possible, a sincere attempt to fix the problem can go a long ways towards eliminating the disgruntlement.

When HR isn't doing what they need to do to reduce security vulnerabilities (especially in regards to engendering a healthy Security Culture and mitigating employee disgruntlement), perhaps it is up to you as a security manager to try to compensate for HR's arrogance, ignorance, recklessness, and incompetence when it comes to security.

Notes and References

1. Paul Goodman (1911-1972) famously noted that "Few great men would have got past Personnel."

2. Katherine M. H. Blackford and Arthur Newcomb, *Analyzing Character: The New Science of Judging Men: Misfits in Business, The Home and Social Life,* 1916.

3. Katherine M. H. Blackford and Arthur Newcomb, "Reading Character at Sight", Independent Corporation, 1918.

4. *Physiognomy*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physiognomy.

5. Ironically, recent research suggests that *some* personality traits can be correctly judged from physical appearance including self-esteem, degree of extroversion, and religiosity. See Laura P. Naumann, et al., "Personality Judgments Based on Physical Appearance", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* **35** (12) 1661-1671 (2009). Usually it is possible to determine these things simply by chatting briefly with a person. It is not clear, moreover, how much of this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, for example, people have a tendency to think an introvert should look a certain way, a given individual may come to be an introvert partially because that is what people expect him to be based on appearance and/or because he himself thinks he looks like an introvert.

6. Roger G. Johnston, Eric C. Michaud, and Jon S. Warner, "The Security of Urine Drug Testing", *Journal of Drug Issues*, **39**(4), (2009), http://jod.sagepub.com/content/39/4/1015.abstract.

7. Roger G. Johnston, "What Alligators and Russian Dopers Can Teach Us About Security", http://tinyurl.com/hxddv72.

8. See, for example, Liz Ryan, "Why Does Everyone Hate HR?", http://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2015/06/05/why-does-everyone-hate-hr/#5b73697d28a1, and Fast Company, "Why We Hate HR", http://www.fastcompany.com/53319/why-we-hate-hr.