



Theft in the Workplace

Patrick Onions, The Knowledge Studio discussion forum, 26 November 2011

Although they wouldn't admit it, many people have pinched something from their workplace. It may have been something small from the office stationary cupboard, and it may not seem like it's stealing. After all, it's only some staples, right?

Wrong. While many employers will turn a blind eye to small discrepancies, there's no getting away from the fact that the more things have to be replaced, the greater the cost to the employer. That cost has to be offset somehow and most of the time the effects will be passed on in the form of lesser bonuses and incentives for staff. Financial consequences are not the only by-product. A suspicious employer or intrusive measures for example can make the work environment hostile and non-productive.

This is all pretty obvious stuff, but theft by employees is a recurring problem that seems to challenge retailers large and small on a daily basis. It is a complex issue and there is no magic bullet that can be successfully applied to every situation. Is there an answer? We believe there is an answer to be found in Knowledge Management; giving employers a strategy to actively fight the problem and the knowledge to do so.

Action begins with gaining an understanding of the situation. How does retail theft manifest itself in your particular workplace? Who steals? Why do they steal? What do they steal? How are they able to steal? For example, there are many reasons motives for theft; lack of appreciation at work, poor bonus and remuneration schemes, or following bad examples from those in a higher position.

As with many things in life, communication is a key element in the strategy. Involving staff not only discovers topical answers to these primary questions, but it is inclusive and draws out issues and attitudes that fundamental to choosing the right solution. It can provide meaningful 'hard' input to more conventional security too, not just where to position cameras but useful nuggets like finding that losses during early morning pre-opening can be significantly higher than at closing time.

Whatever the reasons, it is important that issues are treated at the source and not left to flourish. Not just through CCTV systems or security guards, but through a focus on prevention rather than closing the stable door after the goods have gone. Application of knowledge management to one

such situation has revealed that concise, clear job descriptions, well defined policies, formal and informal recognition, fair employment practices, informative training and leading by example are significant in helping employees feel comfortable at work and knowing their boundaries. Easy to follow security systems, approachable managerial staff, confidential and anonymous theft reporting systems and good housekeeping are then effective in supporting the fight.

Knowledge management offers employers an expansive box of tools and techniques to help employers find and apply the knowledge they need. It is able to do so in a way that engages employees in a friendly manner, builds a vigilant and cooperative team, and strikes a healthy balance between being firm and effective and showing staff they are needed, important and valued.