

**Violence and Aggression in the Workplace**  
**BDO Dunwoody Weekly CEO/Business Leader Poll**  
**by COMPAS in the *Financial Post***  
**for Publication February 26, 2007**



**COMPAS Inc.**  
**Public Opinion and Customer Research**  
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## **1.0 Introduction**

According to Canada's business leaders and CEOs, little has changed in terms of the intensity of, form of, or precautions for violence in the workplace from almost three years ago. COMPAS revisited the issue of workplace violence with panelists, who were originally polled in May 2004 on the same subject, and found the following key findings:

- The most prevalent form of violence continues to be verbal aggression while a sizeable minority have witnessed and/or experienced physical aggression, including throwing and destroying property and even shoving;
- Alcohol and drugs, poor management and morale, and personal issues are widely believed to contribute in some part to workplace violence;
- Aggression continues to be unrelated to the aggressor's position in the organization and an appropriate reprimand is given in most but not all situations.

These are the principal findings from the weekly business web-survey conducted by COMPAS for the *Financial Post* under sponsorship of BDO Dunwoody LLP.

## **2.0 Screaming and Yelling, Followed by Destruction of Property and Preliminary Violence (e.g. Shoving) are Most Common Forms of Violence**

Most business leaders have witnessed some form of violence or aggression while at work. Respondents were asked to what extent they had experienced various acts of hostility using a 7 point scale where 7 means definitely experienced the act or something very similar and 1, the opposite. As shown in



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table 1, screaming and yelling was the most commonly experienced violence, earning a mean score of 3.9.

*Table 1: Experience with Various Types of Workplace Violence<sup>1</sup>*

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
<b>Screaming and yelling very loudly for a long period of time</b>									
February 2007	3.9	17	13	16	7	8	15	22	2
November 2004	3.2	20	4	6	8	9	15	38	0
<b>Purposefully destroying company property out of anger</b>									
February 2007	2.6	11	3	10	6	5	10	52	4
November 2004	2.6	14	5	3	6	9	9	54	0
<b>Throwing a telephone, chair or other office item across the room</b>									
February 2007	2.6	13	5	6	5	5	8	57	2
November 2004	2.3	12	4	4	4	4	8	65	0
<b>Blocking an entrance or doorway and refusing to move</b>									
February 2007	2.2	8	4	3	5	7	8	62	2
November 2004	2.1	8	3	4	4	4	12	66	0
<b>Being shoved or pushed by a boss, colleague or client</b>									
February 2007	2.0	5	5	4	4	2	5	70	5
November 2004	1.8	7	1	1	4	3	9	74	1
<b>Being physically attacked</b>									
February 2007	1.9	8	0	5	2	2	8	71	4
November 2004	1.5	4	1	2	0	2	7	84	1
<b>Bringing a weapon to work for the purposes of intimidation</b>									
February 2007	1.2	0	1	2	1	1	5	86	5
November 2004	1.1	0	0	0	1	0	4	95	0

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<sup>1</sup> (Q1) There's been some talk in the media about workplace violence and aggression. The following are some acts of workplace violence or aggression that some people have reported experiencing. Using a 7 point scale where 7 means definitely experienced this or something very similar and 1, the opposite, to what extent have you experienced or witnessed someone...[RANDOMIZE].



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A sizeable minority report having observed the throwing or destruction of property as well as behaviour that could be characterized as blocking or shoving. A smaller minority reports witnessing an unambiguous, direct physical assault. Very few have direct knowledge of an employee's bringing a weapon to the workplace.

The following are examples of workplace violence as experienced or witness by our panelists in their own words (table 2).

*Table 2: (Q2) Verbatims of Experiences*

<b>Physical Violence</b>
Wrestling
I have witnessed pushing and shouting on several occasions.
Throwing objects at walls in reaction to stupidity!
Pushing, shoving, throwing things, keying someone's car including my own, showing up at work to kill me - happened in Toronto in 1983. Harassing phone calls.
There was only one, but it was an extreme situation of a former employee on drugs attacking a co-worker.
I have personally had a Queen's Counsel throw a book at me during a deposition taken during an Examination for Discovery, and corporate lawyer of a US\$300M company also throw a binder at me during an acquisition negotiation. Although I have experienced most other types listed in the previous question, these, in my opinion, are the most memorable given the quality of the persons committing the act.
When I was a young manager, I was attacked by a worker. Fortunately, I was capable of defending myself and rendered him unconscious. A VP threw a water bottle over a manager's head and it lodged in the wall. The VP was strongly warned. Other inappropriate actions lead to his ultimate termination.
Pushing by one employee of another employee - both at about the same level of seniority/responsibility.
Physical fights between plant employees and occasionally supervisors and hourly employee where the employee has been the attacker.
Physical threats by tenants. Physical assault between co-workers.



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Witnessed physical attack on merciless manager.
Slamming fists, aggressive voices.
Someone once threw a can of Coke (full) at me.
<b>Verbal Abuse, Threats, and Non-Physical Violence</b>
Have experienced angry clients yell and threaten. Also, have witnessed staff in the office yelling at each other.
Have only ever seen people physically removed from the office after being terminated and refusing to leave.
Throwing things, shouting, intimidation
(1) Woman staff person screaming at her co-workers because she was frustrated with her manager... who was not even in the building at the time (2) People on strike, damaged company property (3) While in a 'labour dispute' managers cars had been vandalized (4) A supervisor 'grabbed' a worker who was not doing as asked. Supervisor was fired for cause. Interestingly he got unemployment insurance even though we said he was fired for assaulting a worker! (5) More subtle forms of verbal aggression ... i.e. just kidding type of comments after making them.
Yelling for extended periods of time. Throwing stuff and walking away.
Union president screaming at people.
A staff member tossed coffee cups in the garbage with the excuse the person responsible for washing/drying did not wash the cups. Two staff members were involved in a very loud argument/shouting match.
Slamming phone receivers, cursing at inanimate objects like computers when they don't work.
Argument assault perpetrated by hostile business neighbour over parking spaces.
Angry outbursts, disrespecting other employees, backstabbing gossip. etc.
Owner intimidate managers with threats
Verbal abuse of staff serving the public.
Yelling and swearing. Slamming down a phone. Slamming a door. Throwing things.



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Working in a large manufacturing environment I have witnessed several acts of violence - these I can deal with. It is the many acts that I do not hear about that I worry about. Acts include threatening, the odd punch up, lots of swearing, racial slurs, etc.
One employee was talking about sexually abusing children and several other employees threatened him to stop or they would deal with his rantings. The police were called and the employee was removed from our premises. A boss throwing a stapler through the wall. Mostly raised voices over differences of opinion. Nothing really outrageous.
Manipulation: VP (male) would not sign documents unless EA (female) got him a coke while he looked over the documents. This was NOT a case where there was a friendly rapport previously established. Multiple similar cases with same people.
Emotional aggression - purposeful backstabbing and spreading of mis-information. Power-tripping at the expense of one or two others. Shunning. Wrongful accusation of sexual harassment.
Employee making very important business financial decision with supplier without my authorization or knowledge. When confronted with this issue, employee started to yell and scream very loudly while expressing motions of aggressive behaviour threatening to cause physical harm.
Dissatisfied client blocked office door and threatened assault. Situation was diffused, client left, police were called, but no action taken.
Supervisor yelling/screaming at employee in full view of office staff. No opportunity for private exchange of views.
Profane language being addressed to a co-worker.
Screaming, playing country music, bullying, being grabbed from behind, false accusations.
<b>Violent Destruction of Property</b>
A partner of mine got so frustrated at computer he threw it into a door.
I have seen someone throw a cordless telephone across the room. Also, I have witnessed prolonged yelling, but have not been the recipient of that anger.
Disgruntled employee broke a baseball bat on my desk
Individuals throwing computers. Individuals threatening to shoot another employee.



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Destruction of files when leaving.
Destruction of a computer on one occasion.
Doors slamming, walking away and throwing parts towards me but at the floor.
Throwing of objects and destruction of workplace items, loud and continued screaming. Mostly connected with strikes and labour disruptions.
Destroying company tools, threatening, verbal abuse, physical abuse, causing problems with RCA and MOL for vengeance.

### 3.0 Many Factors Lead to Violence, But Not Position in the Organization

Most respondents believe that alcohol and drugs, lack of strong management and poor staff morale play a role in workplace violence. Drugs, management and morale are the factors that receive the highest mean scores in a scaled battery-type question, as shown in table 3.. In response to an open-ended question on contributing factors, 41% of respondents mention personal stress, as shown in table 4.

*Table 3: (Q3) So far as you can tell, how much do each of the following contribute to acts of workplace violence. Please use a 7 point scale where 7 means strongly contributes and 1, the opposite.*

RANDOMIZE

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Consumption of alcohol or drugs	4.9	24	16	20	9	7	9	7	7
Lack of strong management or authority	4.7	15	23	21	11	9	8	8	6
Poor staff morale	4.7	14	21	20	17	9	6	6	6
Poor corporate performance	3.5	6	9	16	19	14	17	15	6



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*Table 4: (Q4) Please describe any other factors that lead to violence in the workplace.*

	%
Personal stress	41
Work related stress	25
Poor management	17
Mental illness	10
Substance abuse	7

A person's position within the organization does not have much of a bearing on acts of violence. To the extent that position may be a factor, abuse happens more often from a frustrated subordinate than a frustrated superordinate, as shown in table 5.

*Table 5: (Q5) So far as you can tell, are people who commit acts of workplace violence or aggression...[RANDOMIZE]*

	Feb 2007	Nov 2004
Position has no bearing	45	45
Most often a frustrated subordinate	28	32
Most often the boss or in a position of authority	12	8
Don't know/ Refused	15	16

Business leaders note their concern that many organizations do not address this type of misconduct effectively, as illustrated in table 6. Similarly, many organizations with which respondents are associated, a large minority, do not appear to have some kinds of rules governing workplace violence, as shown in table 7.



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*Table 6: (Q6) So far as you know and using a 7 point scale where 7 means definitely reprimanded appropriately and 1, not reprimanded at all, to what extent are people who commit acts of aggression reprimanded appropriately?*

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Feb 2007	4.4	14	14	13	16	8	12	7	16
Nov 2004	4.5	16	9	20	18	10	7	5	14

*Table 7: (Q7) Using a 7 point scale where 7 means very widely understood and 1, non-existent, to what extent does your organization have rules about workplace violence and aggression?*

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Feb 2007	4.7	30	18	10	6	6	9	15	7
Nov 2004	4.6	27	17	14	8	6	9	15	4

## 5.0 Methodology

The COMPAS web-survey of CEOs and leaders of small, medium, and large corporations was conducted February 21 - 23, 2007. Respondents constitute an essentially hand-picked panel with a higher numerical representation of small and medium-sized firms.

Because of the small population of CEOs and business leaders from which the sample was drawn, the study can be considered more accurate than comparably sized general public studies. In studies of the general public, surveys 132 are deemed accurate to within approximate 8.6 percentage points 19 times out of 20. The principal and co-investigator on this study are Conrad Winn, Ph.D. and Tamara Gottlieb.

