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"Nothing is settled until it is settled right." — Louis D. Brandeis

Obfirmo Ianua

by Robert A. Gardner

It may be the most important Latin phrase you never learned in law school. It won't help you win a case but it could save your life. *Obfirmo ianau* roughly translates as "Lock the door."

[Hypothetical] Assume a violent, angry former client or other seriously disturbed individual feels your firm has grievously wronged them. Assume he (or she) is armed with multiple weapons. Assume he is intent on shooting as many people as possible at your firm. Don't assume this scenario is too far-fetched. [End Hypothetical]

With these assumptions in mind, think about your firm. How hard would it be for an aspiring mass murderer to create mayhem in your office?

Couldn't happen? Consider this:

In 1993 a former client of the Pettit & Martin Law Firm in San Francisco, walked into the firm's 34th floor offices and began shooting. He was armed with three high-powered handguns. Before he died from a self-inflicted gunshot, he killed eight people and wounded six others. Four of the dead were Pettit & Martin employees. The others were there on business. None of the victims had any prior dealings with the shooter. In fact, the only contact Pettit & Martin had ever had with him occurred 12 years prior to the shooting.

In 2006 a disgruntled client shot and killed his Santa Cruz, CA

attorney in the attorney's office for allegedly "screwing up" a workers' compensation case.

In 2007, a retired municipal worker shot three attorneys, a legal secretary and a postal worker in an Alexandria, LA law office during an attack that may have been motivated by a divorce settlement dispute.

In 2009, a prominent Virginia attorney was shot while sitting in his office.

In 2009 a Baton Rouge, LA defense attorney was found stabbed to death in her office.

Good statistics on law office violence are hard to come by, but an informal survey of attorneys handling domestic relations cases done by the American Bar Association in the 1990s found that 60 percent of the respondents had been threatened by an opposing party in a case, and 17 percent had been threatened by their own client.

No matter their motive; regardless of their weaponry; every attacker has one thing in common: they need access to their targets.

That brings us to "Robert's First Basic Principle for Workplace Violence Survival: If they can't get at you, they can't hurt you." And, "Robert's Second Basic Principle for Workplace Violence Survival: They can't get at you [quickly and easily] when the doors are locked."

Locked doors do three very useful things: (1) They stop most unwanted entries. (2) Unwanted entries that can't be stopped are



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slowed down. (3) Either way, they give you precious time to call for help and escape.

Unless your firm does business from a park bench, your office will have at least one main entrance door. Most offices also have one or more secondary doors. Do you keep these secondary doors closed and locked when unattended? Are you sure?

One of the most common security breaches I find during office security audits is "back" doors left unlocked or worse yet, propped open for staff convenience. Convenience usually means smoke breaks and shortcuts to the parking lot. What's convenient for staff is also convenient for intruders. If an employee isn't physically present and controlling a door, it should be locked.

The ideal office design will physically confine visitors, and homicidal ex-clients to the public lobby. This lobby should be isolated from private offices and other work areas by locked doors. Conference rooms

used for depositions and meetings where outsiders will be present should be accessible from both the lobby and private areas through locked doors. This will accommodate most business needs without compromising office security.

Receptionists are likely to be the first staff members to interact with hostile visitors. This makes them the first potential target. It is crucial that they receive training for handling difficult and dangerous people. And, they should have some mechanism available, other than a telephone, to enable them to discretely call for help and alert other staff members when dangerous situations arise. They should also have a way to quickly and safely escape to a secure area if necessary.

You don't have to wait for a visit from a gun-wielding maniac in order to reap the benefits of good office security. When the only entry route is through a secure lobby, more mundane intruders such as petty

thieves, vagrants, and printer ink salesmen are also kept at bay.


There is no one-size-fits-all solution to law office security. What works in the penthouse headquarters of a high profile national firm may not be applicable—or even possible—in a small four-room residential office conversion housing one or two attorneys.

Regardless of office size and location, there is one constant when it comes to security.

You can't go wrong if you remember to *obfirmo ianau*.

Robert A. Gardner, CPP is a "board certified" and Nevada-licensed security consultant. He has training and experience as a private sector security professional and a public sector peace officer. He has also qualified and testified as a security expert in the United States District Court and various Nevada, California, and South Dakota state courts.


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