

Increase in calls to Whistle Blowers

While South African crime surveys indicate a general decrease in the use of external hot lines, the average number of calls received by Whistle Blowers clients has increased over the last 18 months.



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Dale Horne, operations director of Whistle Blowers, said that the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) Global Economic Crime Survey, which is published every two years shows just how crucial it is to provide both employers and employees with a trustworthy and effective means of identifying and reporting commercial crime.

The 2014 survey indicated that economic crime remained a serious challenge to business leaders, government officials and private individuals in South Africa with 69% experiencing some form of economic crime in the last 24 months. It also showed one of the most disturbing increases in this sort of crime in South Africa since 2009.

Horne understands how the survey got the finding that whistleblowing may be under threat in South Africa, with a suggested steady decline in the effectiveness of whistleblowing systems and internal tipoff systems. The survey also indicated that there was a definite indication that senior management was committing more fraud and that employees were possibly less willing to blow the whistle if the fraudster was more senior than they were.

Need external provider protection

He said that, in his own organisation's experience, it did not seem that there was an increase in the number of senior managers committing crimes. However, where senior management was involved, the value of crimes appeared to be higher. He would not be surprised if this was the situation at companies that did not implement this program correctly. The majority of its clients would respond differently.

"This is where education and training comes in. Employees are naturally be afraid to report the boss but this fear will no longer be there if they are comfortable that the external service provider will protect their identity and they can get trustworthy assistance." A potential whistle blower will take the brave step of making the call a lot easier if he or she knew and trusted the process prior to making the call.

Verification of services

In addition to a 13 year track record of protecting whistle blowers and making sure that customers received accurate information so that reports could be resolved speedily and cost effectively, Whistle Blowers was also recently verified as an ethical and well run operation by the Ethics Institute of South Africa. This stamp of approval further underscored the critical trust relationship that was at the core of its ongoing success and efficacy.

"We promote internal reporting where an employee feels comfortable reporting an alleged crime no matter how serious it is. Employees need to have the peace of mind and trust in us that should they wish to remain anonymous, their identity will be protected at all costs. They need to know that all reports will be dealt with professionally and that we are there for them should they feel uncomfortable or fear intimidation or reprisal."

Again, despite crime surveys identifying which crimes were most often reported, he said that the organisation received a large number of calls varying from minor incidents to large scale fraud and corruption with no particular crime more prevalent.

There is no particular category of individual or employee most likely to report a crime. "In our experience, a whistle blower is an employee who is honest and doesn't agree with irregularities that are taking place in his or her company. A whistle blower can also be a third party who is affected by the irregularities, such as a contractor or even a family member of an employee. The third category of whistle blower is the grudge caller - a syndicate member that has been short-changed, a disgruntled employee, supplier or contractor. Often this type of call exposes serious irregularities - however caution is always taken when receiving this information and information is always thoroughly investigated."

Changes in process

Over the years, there had been a number of changes in the whole whistleblowing process. "Years back, the line was used to gather intelligence and identify people who were stealing. It was very much a blue-collar focus. Our first implementation trainers were an Umkhonto Sizwe cadre and an ex-security branch police officer and the focus was on building trust and educating employees about how the line worked. We spent a great deal of time convincing the trade unions that this was not a spying game by management, but rather a mechanism whereby the honest employee was given a voice to protect his or her job while remaining anonymous. Whistleblowing is now totally different due to the evolution of corporate governance and strict adherence to ethics policies at all levels within companies."

High usage in SA

He added that this was directly related to another finding of the PWC survey - that 82% of South African respondents (globally: 62%) indicated that their organisations had implemented a formal whistle-blowing system. Only 6% of South African respondents (globally: 26%) indicated that their organisation's whistle blowing mechanism had not been utilised in the 24 months preceding the survey. Half of respondents rated their organisation's reporting mechanism as being either 'effective' or 'very effective'.

He exhorted the survey's call for whistleblowing mechanisms to be continually improved and said that the positive aspects of whistle blowing at both company and employee level needed to be better publicised. "Whistleblowing is not only about negative feedback. It is also about positive feedback. Whistle blowers are saving companies large amounts of money daily and are exposing not only fraud and corruption but operational weaknesses as well as protecting their companies' brands," he concluded.