

SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

Jeremy Praud explains why tightened staff screening is vital to protect UK supply chains

The Coronavirus pandemic has put the food industry under huge pressure to keep the shelves stocked during this global emergency, and the experience has brought home the tacit importance of the food supply chain. This should bring into sharp relief another ongoing threat to food supply chains – the risk of a deliberate terrorist attack.

Shortages and implications due to the reaction to the pandemic have been felt not just in the UK but across the world. The very short resupply time to keep the UK population fed is now evident to the whole population. It should highlight the concern felt for a long time by the leading UK intelligence providers that it is only a matter of time before a major attack is launched using the country's food supply chain by a terrorist group or a lone wolf pursuing a radicalised agenda. Unlike COVID-19, which has impacted the whole world, a premeditated contamination attack through the food supply chain has the potential to be limited to one country, but with similarly catastrophic economic damage.

Current business security in the UK tends to be reactive and therefore behind the curve, leaving significant risks unaddressed. Technology has made the security of physical buildings and systems relatively robust, but few people are looking at the changing face of risk that comes from malevolent insiders with their own agenda.

With the nation's attention diverted by Coronavirus, the guard might be down against other threats to business security especially following the announcement that thousands of new employees will be taken on by supermarkets and the pharmaceutical sector to keep items on the shelves during the pandemic. In April, screening requirements were loosened to ensure rapid recruitment of new employees into the food sector was possible. As an emergency measure that makes some sense, but it does not take long for those with a terrorist agenda to think of how to exploit an opportunity, and tightening up employee screening to protect operations from a potential enemy within has never been more important – especially new employees that are taken on and then become part of a stretched workforce.

What better scenario for a potential terrorist than to strike at the heart of the UK's supply chains during a recovery period from a national emergency? Because of its widespread delivery capabilities, the FMCG sector needs robust safeguards in place for all stakeholders

including employment screening measures to protect against rogue employees, pressure groups and/or ideologically motivated individuals.

Companies in the sector need to now implement and maintain a comprehensive range of employee background checks, checks that go far beyond DBS (criminal records) and Right to Work. This forms a fundamental part of companies' Threat and Vulnerability mitigation (TACCP and VACCP compliance) using a simple traffic light system – red: do not proceed, amber: proceed with caution and green: no negative issues identified, proceed.

It was necessary to fast track the thousands of new workers being taken on by the food and pharmaceutical sectors to cope with the increased demand for their products due to the Coronavirus outbreak, with the minimum of fuss, but this necessary short-term relief must be followed up with future background checks to give lasting protection to the supply chain.

EMPLOYEE SECURITY SOLUTIONS INSTILL CONFIDENCE IN THE LIKELY INTENTIONS OF RECRUITS

Standard DBS checks can only access 8 percent of an employee's background information, compared with checks such as FMCG Security's intelligence-led INSIGHT service, which evaluates 78 percent of data, the most important being verification of identity using highly advanced facial recognition technology. There are only three food security specialists in the world outside Government intelligence agencies, to offer this level of employee background checking service. The question is: would you choose to make informed decisions based on understanding only 8 percent of the potential problem, or would you prefer to have access to 78 percent of the data?

Workers are a company's most important asset, but that person walking through the door every day could also be one of the biggest risks if not appropriately vetted, and that applies to process operators and engineers as much or indeed even more than for finance directors and payroll staff.

The Government is enacting legislation to compel this work for key industries starting with the entertainment sector for large events, mainly in



Background security checks of staff in the food supply chain need to be more robust

response to the Manchester Arena bombing, but the food industry will be part of a second wave. Instead of waiting for imposed legal deadlines, those in the food industry who act now will avoid a more costly requirement later on, nevermind the peace of mind of protecting brands, public and country from the potentially devastating effects of a terrorist incident.

Increasingly stringent privacy and data security legislation has made employment screening compliance a challenge. The burden is on the employer to conduct risk-based screening to ensure a secure and compliant work environment by verifying movements, backgrounds and the right to work. Should someone get through the net, then management would be responsible if the available checks had not been carried out and product recall insurance may not cover costs if the attack is seen as an act of terrorism.

There have already been documented attempts to disrupt the UK's food supply chain, the most notorious being the case of Munir Mohammed and Rowaida El-Hassan, the couple convicted in 2018 of preparing for terrorism in a plot that could have attacked Derby or poisoned supermarket food.

Mohammed slipped under the radar by obtaining false EU documents which helped him secure work at Kerry Foods in Burton, a major manufacturer of ready meals where he cooked sauces for meals going to Tesco and Morrisons. Whereas the standard vetting tests were passed, INSIGHT vetting would have revealed he was using falsified ID, and also that he was a risk to the food supply chain. Kerry subsequently lost the Tesco contract, so closed the plant with the loss of 900 jobs.

REMOVING THE OPPORTUNITY

UK manufacturers can access the information they truly need to protect both their brands and the public in a way affordable for FMCG manufacturing. Safeguarding your workforce can lead to increased confidence across employees. Businesses, particularly those offering maximum opportunity to a lone wolf terrorist, need to understand the psychology of that type of individual in their sector. They must understand the motivation and the outcomes in play to close down the opportunity. The food industry can be viewed as a vast unprotected delivery system

for a terrorist working inside with complete access. Food industry security tends to be focused on microbiological and health and safety, not crime and terrorism. However, radicalisation means that ordinary people can become terrorists and mass murderers. The food industry employs thousands of ordinary people in positions where terrorist actions could have staggering effects. The key is to know your people.

IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE AN ATTACK IS LAUNCHED AGAINST THE UK'S FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Embedding counter measures and instilling formidable layers of security is a small price to pay against premeditated contamination to damage the UK economy, among other serious consequences. It is estimated that it cost the Russians less than £2,000 to mount a mainland attack on the UK, but the Skripal incident resulted in a £20-million clean-up bill, town centres closed, hospitals quarantined, transport and businesses affected, three people seriously ill and one fatality.

Now every terrorist in the world knows how to attack the UK for virtually no money. Nerve agents similar to Novichok are widely available. Other less exotic poisons more so. All that is needed is a delivery system and the food industry and water supplies provide an ideal route to potential havoc. How many food businesses can point to the critical control points they have implemented to control these vulnerabilities?

Just think of the consequences for an already weakened nation that an attack on the food or water supplies would have during the Coronavirus

outbreak. To reduce this risk, employee security solutions are designed specifically to instill confidence in the status, background and likely intentions of existing employees or new recruits.

Some food manufacturers are already taking steps to beef up their security checks on staff. One convenience food manufacturer has already joined forces with FMCG Security to explore more stringent security measures that can help protect the UK food supply chain from a potential catastrophe. The food company, whose multiple food brands appear on many supermarket shelves, has successfully completed a pilot scheme and is looking at how robust safeguards can be implemented on a long-term basis by screening employees across its manufacturing sites.

A HOLISTIC VIEW

The specialist's Technical Director found that having a fully holistic view, which evaluates 78 percent of data – the most important being verification of identity using highly advanced facial recognition technology – does bring peace of mind.

Employers within the FMCG sector currently tend to rely on verification of identity simply by looking at employees' passport details and DBS checks, but documented attempts to disrupt the UK's food supply chain have shown that this is simply not sufficient any more.

Having a partner with a very strong background in intelligence and people assessment will give companies a real sense of reassurance for the future. Embedding new screening procedures enables access to the information that is really needed to protect brands and the public from malicious attacks with what should really be an industry-standard level of defence. Employee safeguarding solutions conducted by agents at the forefront of counter terrorism can be designed specifically for the food and drinks supply chains – after all, it's better to be safe than sorry ●

Jeremy Praud, FMCG Academy Chairman, has 20+ years' experience of working with manufacturers to improve productivity. Instrumental to the growth of LI Europe. He has a long track record of delivering successful improvement; above expectations both in terms of bottom-line results, and sustained change.

Background checks need to go beyond just DBS and Right to Work

