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THE COMPETENCE OF FRONTLINE SECURITY PROFESSIONALS AND WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THEIR WORK

RESEARCH PROJECT 2020-2021

INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR PROTECTION OFFICERS | PERPETUITY RESEARCH

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FOREWORD

In recent years, the Board of Directors of the International Foundation for Protection Officers (IFPO), recognized the need to clearly define the ever-changing role of the protection officer. With this goal in mind, the Board commissioned a ground-breaking research study to identify and outline the roles and responsibilities of security officers in the 21st century.

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Sincerely,

Sandi J. Davies
Executive Director
International Foundation for Protection Officers
9/21/2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Perpetuity Research & Consultancy International (PRCI) Ltd

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The research was undertaken to better understand the perspectives and experiences of frontline security personnel with the aim of highlighting key considerations for enhancing their capabilities. It explored the range of tasks that they undertake, the perceived difficulty of those tasks and of the competence of their colleagues, and the effectiveness of training. It also looked at other key issues impacting on frontline security personnel, namely licensing, the use of force (including carrying weapons), and involvement with non-security tasks.

The findings are based on 10,625 responses to a survey of security officers/guards, from nine countries: Canada, Ecuador, India, Ireland, Nigeria, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the USA; supplemented by online one-to-one interviews with 42 security professionals.

Insights from the survey.

General perceptions

General perceptions of working in security were fairly positive, although with around a third of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the aspects explored, there may be a level of apathy towards the role.

Nonetheless:

- 59% indicated it provides an opportunity to serve the public;
- 55% indicated the work is interesting;
- 53% saw it as a career.

However only 38% felt that it pays well.

Frequency of tasks

The survey explored six 'typical' tasks of the work of security officers/guards and found that carrying out access control is the most common (54% did this often); followed by undertaking physical patrols (48% did this often), customer service (44% did this often), monitoring and managing alarms and emergencies (39% did this often), enforcing rules (39% did this often) and finally basic investigations (32% did this often).

The frequency with which tasks were undertaken was impacted by a number of characteristics such as:

- sector (there appears to be a link between the nature of the work and priorities in different sectors and the frequency of different security tasks);
- how the respondent was employed (contracted respondents undertook all six tasks more often than in-house and self-employed);
- gender (male respondents undertook all six tasks more often than females);
- general education level (those who had not completed their general education conducted all six tasks less often than those who had);
- age (some tasks were more often carried out by older respondents).

Difficulty of tasks

The relative ease/difficulty of each of those six tasks was also explored. Respondents rarely perceived them to be 'difficult'. The majority perceived each task as either 'easy' or 'average'. Customer service was the task most commonly perceived to be 'easy' (50%); followed by physical patrols/surveillance (49%), access control (45%), monitoring and managing alarms and emergencies (43%), basic investigations (42%) and enforcing rules (37%). There were no clear trends between the characteristics of respondents and their perception of how easy/difficult tasks are.

Competence

Respondents were asked how competent their colleagues were in a number of activities that feature in security work. Overall, a fairly low proportion of respondents perceived their colleagues to be 'low' in competence which is positive – between 6% and 13% of respondents rated their colleagues as 'low' in competence in each activity.

Respondents more commonly rated their colleagues as 'high' in competence than 'medium' although at most 53% of respondents rated colleagues as 'high' in competence in any given activity – suggesting that ample room remains for improvement in how well activities are completed.

The activities most commonly perceived to be carried out with 'high' competence were customer service (53%), and emergency response (51%).

Those least commonly perceived to be carried out with 'high' competence were working with civil and criminal codes, statutes, bylaws, codes etc. (39%), conducting an investigation (41%) and both report writing (42%) and written communication skills (42%).

Although there were some specific variations across a number of characteristics, the only clear overall trend in respect of perception of competence and the characteristics of respondents, was that across all of the tasks explored, those who receive on-going training within their current role more commonly viewed their colleagues to be high in competence than those that do not receive any on-going training. This would suggest that on-going training is an important factor in performing competently.

Training

The training received was rarely perceived to be ineffective; between 5% and 9% of respondents rated their training as such in each activity. That said, at most 55% of respondents rated the training as 'high (effective)' suggesting once again that there is scope for improvements.

Training was most commonly rated as 'high (effective)' in the same area as those perceived to be carried out with high competence by colleagues; namely - customer service (55%), situational awareness (52%) and emergency response (52%).

Similarly, those where the training was least commonly rated as 'high (effective)' were the same as those least commonly perceived to be carried out with high competence by colleagues - civil and criminal codes, statutes, bylaws, codes etc. (41%), conducting an investigation (42%), and report writing (45%).

Perceptions of training were fairly consistent regardless of the respondents' characteristics but with some notable variations. The only clear trend (as with competence) across all of the activities

explored was that respondents that (generally) receive on-going training within their role were more likely to view the training they had had for those activities to be high/effective, than those that do not receive on-going training. Again, this suggests that receiving on-going training is an important factor in how effective their training is perceived to be.

85% of respondents indicated that they do receive on-going training, although it should be noted that a very wide definition was used (including both formal and informal types).

Respondents currently needing a license for their security work were much more likely to indicate they receive on-going training than those who do not. Contracted respondents were less likely to receive on-going training than in-house and self-employed respondents.

Site-specific training

10% of respondents indicated that they had received no site-specific training after being assigned to their current site. Employment type impacted on the likelihood of receiving site-specific training (contracted respondents were less likely to receive it than in-house and self-employed respondents), as did the presence of on-going training (those that do not receive on-going training are much less likely to have received site-specific training than those that do receive on-going training).

Non-security tasks

27% of respondents undertake non-security tasks often and 44% occasionally; non-security tasks are more commonly a feature of the work of:

- respondents who did not complete their education (than those achieving high/secondary school education or higher);
- respondents needing a license than those who do not;
- female respondents (a little more than male respondents).

Licensing

82% of respondents indicated that they need a license to carry out their current work as a security officer/guard.

60% 'agreed' that licensing increases the trust of law enforcement/police for security personnel to do our jobs.

55% 'agreed' that the process gives security officers/guards a better understanding of their Duties

25% 'agreed' that licensing is a waste of time

Female respondents were a little more skeptical about the value of licensing than males, as were self-employed respondents.

Use of force

31% never use force; 25% use force about once per year; and 23% use force about once a month, although much less in the UK.

Cash-in-transit/armored car guards were the most likely to have used force, followed by door supervisor/bouncers and undercover store detective/loss prevention. In terms of sector, it was most common in the executive protection sector.

Meanwhile those that (generally) receive on-going training were much more likely to use force than those who do not receive on-going training. Contracted respondents were much less likely to use force than in-house and self-employed respondents.

Older respondents and those that had been working in security the longest were less likely to use force than younger respondents.

18% stated that the competence of their colleagues in using force was 'low'.

Female respondents were a little less likely to perceive colleagues as high/competent in the use of force than male respondents. Cash-in transit/armored car guards were the most likely to perceive their colleagues to be competent in the use of force. That they use force more may necessitate a high level of competence. The training received in the use of force was most often (38%) perceived to be adequate ('medium'). A third (33%) perceived it to be effective ('high'). One in ten respondents (10%) thought it was not effective ('low'). Again cash-in-transit/armored guards were much more likely to perceive the training in the use of force to be effective than other roles, again reflecting their likelihood of using greater levels of force – necessitating a higher standard of training.

Carrying a weapon

Respondents were asked whether they ever carried a weapon and 35% said did not. Of those that did, the weapon carried most commonly, by a third of respondents (33%), was an electrical energy device. Nearly as many carried a striking weapon (29%), and more than a fifth (22%) carried a chemical irritant. Less than a fifth (17%) carried a firearm.

The vast majority of those that carried a weapon thought they had received adequate training in how and when to use it (90%). Respondents holding a license were much more likely to indicate they had received adequate training to use their weapon(s) than those without a license. Further, respondents that (generally) receive on-going training were much more likely to indicate they had received adequate training to use their weapon(s) than those who do not receive on-going training.

Differences by country

The survey benefited from responses from participants in nine different countries around the globe. The comparatively low level of responses from some countries (South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Ecuador) meant that not all could be considered in additional analysis to identify whether the country the respondent was based in affected their perspectives. Nonetheless, issues that were evident included:

- Respondents from Nigeria appeared to hold a stronger sense of the value of their work, in the respect that they were the most likely to agree they saw it as a career, and also that it offers the opportunity to serve the public. For some security activities (but not all) they (alongside Canada respondents) rated the training they had received as 'high/effective' at a proportion above the average. The practice of undertaking 'non-security' tasks was least common among respondents from Nigeria. They were the most likely to agree that licensing increases the trust of law enforcement/police, and (along with UK respondents) more likely than average to disagree that licensing is a waste of time.
- UK respondents held comparatively negative attitudes – they were least likely to see security as a career and the least satisfied with the pay. UK and also Ireland respondents were less likely than average to indicate they receive on-going training. UK respondents were also the least likely to indicate they receive site-specific training after being assigned to their current site. The use of force was considerably less common among the UK respondents than the average. Interestingly though, across all the six key tasks explored they more commonly

indicated these were 'core' (something they did 'often'). They were more likely to perceive undertaking physical patrols and customer service to be 'easy'.

- USA respondents were a little more likely than those from other countries to perceive four (of the six) tasks - access control, basic investigations, enforcing rules and monitoring and managing alarms and emergencies – to be easy.
- For some of the activities explored in the survey (but not all), respondents from Ireland and India were more doubtful about the competence of their colleagues and about the effectiveness of training received for specific activities. Respondents from India and Ireland were also more doubtful about whether licensing gives security offices/guards a better understanding of their duties.
- As alluded to above, respondents from Canada typically (but not for all activities) rated (alongside Nigeria respondents) the training they had received as 'high/effective' at a proportion above the average.

Insights from the one-to-one interviews

Factors that made the job difficult

There were a number of factors that the research participants indicated made the job difficult:

- The absence of procedures, or ones lacking in detail, or where the information changed so often that it was difficult to keep up;
- Clients and/or (senior) management undermining them by not following procedures fully or partially;
- The low morale of frontline workers caused by systemic factors, such as low pay and poor working conditions, and low levels of interest on and appreciation of their work;
- The competing demands and/or contradictory expectations regarding their work from different stakeholders;
- Poor employment and management practices, sometimes creating dangerous working conditions other times ignoring or undermining their contribution;
- The lack of support from law enforcement;

- Shortcomings in technology (in terms of what is available and how it is used) which undermined their ability to carry out their role, and/or a lack of training in how to use technologies effectively;
- The legal uncertainty and the training limitations sometimes made it difficult to use force;
- Some respondents referred to sexist attitudes and behavior that remain among some working within security, which create a more adverse working environment.

Factors that make the role easier

The research participants typically indicated that addressing the issues noted above that made the role difficult, were things that make the role easier. A striking factor in rendering tasks easier was effective management, ultimately of all the changes that can improve the lot of the frontline worker the key determinant of their likely success is how good managers are (at all levels).

Perspectives on training

Respondents clearly saw merit in the training provided, that it was relevant and delivered effectively.

Where it was not it was because:

- Organizations did not take training seriously in terms of recognizing its significance and investing in it appropriately;
- What was offered was deemed unspecific and/or not related to their work;
- The trainers had limited skills sets and/or the course designers lacked awareness and understanding of the audience;
- The shortcomings of what was offered necessitated people seeking training outside of work (sometimes at their own expense).

Personal capabilities required for effective frontline work

There was a heavy emphasis placed on the value of the personal capabilities of the individuals and the relative merit of employers encouraging and developing these capabilities within their security personnel. Specifically: communication skills; social skills; showing self-awareness and being empathetic; to take care of themselves; to show initiative and be professionally curious; to be flexible; being prepared to learn as change occurred.

Conclusion

Frontline security workers are key, and often considered to be 'essential' workers. The number of them across countries, industries and organizations is testament to their importance. So too the fact that in most domains their work is licensed, albeit according to our sample this often appears to miss the mark in terms of improving performance. Indeed, what we learn is that there is so much more we can do to improve the contribution of security officers/guards and the work they do and crucially the perception of it. Good management, effective training, appropriate awareness of key competencies are all key. It is not that workers are unhappy, mostly they are not, it is more that there is scope for things being better. This will afford benefits for workers, their employers of course, but also, crucially, the general public.



