

## **CASE: Can the TSA Secure Top-Flight Performance?**

If you've flown in the United States recently, you've passed through security checkpoints staffed by the Transportation Security Administration, a federal agency created in November 2001 to protect all modes of transportation. TSA agents are best known for scanning baggage and screening persons headed for gates in the nation's airports. Most travelers appreciate the concern for safety following the 2001 terrorist attacks, but many also grumble about times they have encountered a TSA employee who was unpleasant or seemed capricious in enforcing rules.

For its part, TSA management has been challenged to maintain a workforce that is knowledgeable, well qualified, ethical, and vigilant about identifying risky persons and behavior. Occasional news reports have identified lapses such as items stolen from luggage (perhaps when TSA agents are inspecting checked bags) and claims that security screeners have cheated on tests of their ability to spot smuggled weapons.

In a recent year, TSA received an average of 1,443 claims for lost, stolen, or damaged items, affecting a small share of the 65 million passengers who travel each month. Geoff Rabinowitz, a business traveler whose laptop computer disappeared from one of his bags, worries that theft by TSA or airline employees could signal a huge security risk: "If they can get away with taking something out of bags, what can they put in bags without getting caught?" Lauren Suhre lost jewelry and sees theft as a sign of poor management: "I can't imagine working for them." TSA responds to such complaints by noting that it has a zero-tolerance policy for employees caught stealing and investigates charges aggressively.

Cheating on security tests is another problem that raises ethics questions. One report said agents at airports in San Francisco and Jackson, Mississippi, allegedly were tipped off about undercover tests to be conducted. According to the allegations, TSA employees described to screeners the undercover agents, the type of weapons they would attempt to smuggle through checkpoints, and the way the weapons would be hidden.

What is the TSA doing to improve the professionalism of its employees? Many of the efforts involve human resource management. One practice involves the design of jobs. TSA wants employees to see themselves not just as "screeners" who sit in airports but as part of a larger law enforcement effort. So that job title was eliminated and replaced with the term *security officers*, and career paths were developed. The agency also improved its training in job tasks such as interpreting X rays and searching property. It added performance-based pay to its compensation plan, so high-performing employees are rewarded in a practical way. Such changes have helped reduce employee turnover substantially. A survey also found greater job satisfaction among TSA workers.

These improvements are no small achievement, considering that government agencies have tended to lag behind many businesses in creating a focus on high performance. In a government agency, which is not ruled by sales and profits, it can be difficult to develop measurable performance outcomes—measuring what individuals and groups actually

achieve, rather than merely tracking their day-to-day activities. As a result, employees may not always see how their individual efforts can help the agency achieve broader goals. Without this vision, they have less incentive to excel.

TSA, part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has tried to become an exception, a performance-oriented government agency. Marta Perez, chief human capital officer of DHS, says TSA defined its overall objective as “to deploy layers of security to protect the traveling public and the nation’s transportation system.” To achieve that objective, the agency set specific goals for individual airports, including goals to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of airport screening, as well as safety targets. For example, one goal is that the wait time for 80 percent of the passengers going through airport security should be 10 minutes or less. Individuals at each airport have specific goals aimed at achieving the airport’s overall goals. According to Perez, the goals help employees and managers talk about what is expected and how they will be evaluated.

SOURCES: Mark Schoeff Jr., “TSA Sees Results from Revamped People Practices,” *Workforce Management*, December 11, 2006, p. 20; Bill Trahan, “Realizing a Performance Culture in Federal Agencies,” *Public Manager*, Fall 2007, pp. 45–50; Tom Belden, “Reports of Thefts from Luggage at PHL,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 27, 2007, downloaded from General Reference Center Gold, <http://find.galegroup.com>; and Thomas Frank, “Investigation Looks at Airport-Screener Testing,” *USA Today*, October 5, 2007, <http://find.galegroup.com>.

## Questions

1. Which, if any, of the HR practices described in this case do you think can contribute to greater efficiency and effectiveness of TSA employees? What other practices would you recommend?
2. Which, if any, of the HR practices described in this case do you think can contribute to ethical behavior by TSA employees? What other practices would you recommend?

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