

Catching the Copper Culprit

Pipeco* is a plumbing supply wholesaler. Two consecutive audits uncovered thefts of copper line sets from Pipeco's warehouse. Outsiders had no access to the warehouse. Company officials suspected the stolen line sets were sold to salvagers who were offering record amounts for scrap copper.

Pipeco reported the theft to local police who conceded it was probably an inside job, but did not investigate. The police said there was "no evidence" to indicate the identity of the thief.

Milton Stone, Pipeco's president, was searching the internet for help and came upon www.TheftStopper.com. He ordered thirteen Specific Loss Questionnaires™ – one for each Pipeco warehouse employee who had access to the stolen copper.

The website claimed that its theft questionnaires would reveal those employees who were "reasonable suspects" and qualified to take private polygraph examinations, according to the Employee Polygraph Protection Act (EPPA). The questionnaires would also rank the reasonable suspects from most probable to least probable to have stolen the missing copper. Pipeco could then legally request the most reasonable suspect to take a polygraph examination regarding the missing copper. If the most reasonable suspect passed his polygraph test, the second most suspect would be asked to take a polygraph examination, and so on, until the copper thief was revealed.

Pipeco's human resources manager received the Specific Loss Questionnaire via e-mail, made copies, and administered them to all thirteen suspects. When they were completed, she mailed them back for analysis. Soon, Mr. Stone received the results.

Three of the thirteen employees were identified as "reasonable suspects," qualifying them for private polygraph examinations. Jared, a delivery driver, was identified by far as the most likely culprit.

An investigator interviewed Jared at Pipeco's main office. Jared doggedly denied stealing the missing copper. However, he did agree to his employer's request to take a polygraph examination regarding the copper thefts and signed the necessary paperwork to do so.

*Fictitious names are used throughout.

Shortly before Jared was scheduled to appear for his polygraph test, the polygraph examiner received a phone call from Mr. Stone. Jared had just walked into his boss's office and confessed to stealing all the missing copper. Jared said he stole the copper and sold it to pay off his drug dealer who was threatening to break his kneecaps. Mr. Stone was stunned. Why, he wondered, did Jared confess?

Here's why: Jared knew he was facing a dilemma. If he refused the polygraph test he would be fired. If he took the test he knew he would flunk it. He decided to confess hoping that Pipeco would let him resign and obtain another job elsewhere. Jared offered to make restitution for the stolen copper and the cost of the theft questionnaire investigation. Mr. Stone got Jared to write out and sign a confession for stealing the copper.

The Specific Loss Questionnaires coincidentally uncovered another problem. Jared and two forklift operators had been smoking marijuana during work hours while operating company vehicles. If any of the three had caused an accident with injuries, Pipeco could have been liable for big-dollar damages. When Mr. Stone learned this, he shuddered. Then he looked skyward and said, "Thank you!"

After that, he turned Jared over to the police.