

Casino employees learn the workplace is hard to cheat

Despite security, penalties, some try

Some employees of Detroit's three casinos think they can beat the system that's in place to protect their workplace against cheats and thieves.

Juanita Marzette Smith of Oak Park, who worked in one of Greektown Casino's count rooms, was fired after she picked up USD 480 in cash from her table with a tissue she had just used to blow her nose, stuffing the cash in her pocket.

Cynthia Wright of Detroit, whose job at MGM Grand Detroit was to issue Players Club Point cards, duplicated the cards of two patrons, planning to steal USD 9,050 in winnings.

Abdul Kadir Khukan of Hamtramck, who worked at MotorCity Casino, tried to add a USD 25 chip to a winning blackjack hand while playing at Greektown.

All were caught – some on tape. All were fired, and all were charged with crimes.

Despite multiple security and surveillance systems at casinos and the threat of harsh punishment and loss of jobs, a few employees in this cash-rich industry still try to beat the odds.

While loath to discuss individual cases, Michigan Attorney General spokesman Rusty Hills said that between 15 and 20 Detroit casino workers a year are suspended, see their licenses revoked or are fined for violations that include not following casino rules, stealing cash and executing elaborate theft schemes.

Casino management and state regulators understand their

exposure to deceit, not just by patrons, but by any of the casinos' approximately 6,300 employees – who know the systems in place to protect their workplace and might try to exploit weaknesses.

Detroit's three casinos made USD 1.3 billion in revenues combined last year and handle an average of USD 1.2 million each during a 24-hour period.

„Where there's money, there's temptation," said Damian Kassab, chairman of the Michigan Gaming Control Board, which oversees Detroit's three casinos. „We have to guard against that."

Swift penalties

Justice is swift for workers caught cheating the system.

Former Greektown Casino floor supervisor Tywan Bobby O'Neal of Detroit created phony paperwork to award USD 1,000 in chips to a friend and then tried to discard the evidence.

O'Neal was questioned just minutes after the paperwork that paid his friend USD 1,000 was not found. Police immediately spotted him getting rid of the paperwork on a surveillance video.

O'Neal fled the scene and never returned to work, dodging police at every attempt to contact him, records show.

Months later, O'Neal was apprehended by U.S. Customs while attempting to cross the Ambassador Bridge into Canada. He pleaded guilty to felony embezzlement and was sentenced to 1 year of probation, restitution and fees.

Khukan, who was caught adding a chip to a winning bet, was immediately questioned after the incident and escorted out of Greektown. The following day when he showed up to his job at MotorCity, he was questioned and arrested.

Regulators do not wait for cases to be finalized in court

before they purge employees caught cheating, said Gaming Control Board Deputy Director of Enforcement John Page.

Some of those caught cheating come to monthly Gaming Control Board meetings asking the board to allow them to keep their licenses, though the board cannot reinstate anyone convicted of crimes outlined in their licenses.

Khukan, the MotorCity Casino employee, attended the April meeting saying he was sorry, that he had a family and he needed his job.

Board members typically just listen, unable to reinstate employees caught cheating or who have committed fraud.

Controls are extensive and range from background checks to around-the-clock surveillance, random spot checks of casino equipment – such as machines, cards and dice – to guard against tampering.

Employees undergo extensive criminal background checks and must qualify for a license that must be renewed annually.

Committing a crime, particularly involving money, immediately disqualifies employees from keeping their license, and their jobs. Crimes of other natures can disqualify them, too. Assaulting someone also can cost an employee a license.

Money problems, such as a bankruptcy or even excessive debt can keep a potential employee from obtaining a license.

,Thousands of cameras'

Surveillance cameras – 1,500 of them – watch and record activities at Detroit's three casinos 24-7. On top of the casino's own surveillance, casino staff and security is monitored by the State Police, which has separate surveillance rooms at each casino.

Page is always surprised that people still try.

„There are hundreds of thousands of cameras,“ Page said. „It seems stupid, but maybe they think someone might not be looking right now.“

Kathryn Overstreet, a maintenance worker at Greektown, couldn't resist a purse full of cash at work, reached in and pocketed USD 300.

O'Neal, the Greektown floor supervisor who authorized a USD 1,000 payout to his friend, admitted to having attempted the scheme before.

„When asked how many times he and the patron had done this, O'Neal stated once,“ a State Police report read. „When I told him I could prove a second incident, O'Neal then stated, ‚Only them two, that's all.‘ „

Overstreet, the Greektown maintenance worker who pocketed USD 300 of a coworker's tip money, initially denied the crime but when faced with a polygraph test, confessed.

Cases don't have to take place in a casino for an employee to be fired. Christina Crosby of Detroit came before the gaming board in April after she was arrested on charges of trying to deposit a phony USD 25,000 check and withdraw USD 10,000.

„If you're convicted of a crime that involves moral turpitude or fraudulent activity, it doesn't matter where it is,“ Kassab said. „You don't have the right or the privilege if you're going to steal someplace else.“

Dwindling chances

Casinos say opportunities to commit fraud have lessened through the decades as more games become computerized and winnings are kept on cards, reducing the handling of cash.

„There's good penetration, but people still want to feel those chips and roll their fingers through them; those are never going to go away,“ Kassab said.

MGM Grand Detroit spokeswoman Yvette Monet said MGM Detroit, one of the company's newest properties, has state-of-the-art surveillance that can catalog endless footage.

And because so much information is tracked on computers, opportunities for theft are smaller.

„Before, someone would be walking to a cage with a gigantic bucket of coins,“ she said. „That doesn't happen anymore.“

Kassab says with so many eyes, it's amazing people still cheat.

„Sometimes it's an employee in conspiracy with a casino patron; they think they're going to be smarter than the system,“ he said. „Well, no, they're not.“