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A different "American way of life"

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A Littleton woman on trial for embezzling \$1.2 million told the court she thought her employer wanted her to have the money.



Alliance Commercial Partners, a Lakewood-based commercial real-estate firm, authorized Patricia Ragusa, 45, to transfer money over the Internet to leasing agents, appraisers, attorneys, banks, vendors and - apparently - herself.

From 2001 to 2004, Ragusa moved Alliance's money into her personal bank accounts as well as accounts in the names of her boyfriend and children. Her employer must have wanted its money distributed this way, she claimed.

"It's a typical defense," said Kevin Knierim, who left his job at the Federal Bureau of Investigation last month to form his own firm, Independent Inquiries, in downtown Denver. "It doesn't work in court, but that doesn't mean people won't say it."

I first wrote about Ragusa when she was indicted in 2004. She was convicted on 102 counts of theft and computer crime in November - and received a 15-year prison sentence Tuesday. Perhaps because she had been given so much access to so much money, she really did begin to think of this money as hers.

Alliance allowed her to transfer huge sums of money from her home computer. And Ragusa began to spend the money on vacations and expensive cars.

"Embezzlement is the American way of life," said Anthony Accetta, a Denver fraud investigator. "Where there is loose money flying around, people are going to figure out a way to steal it, from (Enron's) Jeffrey Skilling on down."

Bartenders, waiters, cashiers, clerks, bank tellers, civil servants, union leaders, church bookkeepers - anyone with access to the pot may try to find a way to pinch it, investigators say.

Longtime fraud investigator Joe Dickerson of the Dickerson Group in Lakewood makes his living trying to recover assets people have stolen from companies. He divides people into three categories: those who would never steal, no matter what, who make up about 20 percent of the population; those who steal whenever they think they can get away with it, also about 20 percent; and those who are honest as long as the system dictates honesty, about 60 percent.

Dickerson once investigated an oil-drilling company that allowed employees to borrow tools. Over time, employees learned that nobody ever checked if the tools were returned. Over more time, when there were few tools left to steal, employees started ordering them through the requisitions department.

"They were special-ordering whatever they wanted and stealing it," he said.

Investigators suspect many embezzlement schemes go undetected and that most go unreported even after they are detected. Victims are either embarrassed or they don't want their investors, partners or customers to know about their loose financial controls. "They just don't report it, and move on," Knierim said.

In Philadelphia, a tax accountant is on trial for allegedly embezzling \$10 million between 1996 and 2004 from Kimber, a Yonkers, N.Y., firearms company. Denis I. Shusterman, 44, is said to have used at least half of the money to produce three B-grade horror movies.

Shusterman's defense is like Ragusa's, or even that of Dennis Kozlowski, the former CEO convicted of looting Tyco International. Shusterman's attorney Elliot Cohen argues that Shusterman legitimately earned the money from Kimber.

Shusterman might not have been nabbed if it weren't for the attention on his mother. Betty Shusterman, 74, is serving a four-year prison sentence after embezzling \$1.3 million from her employer, Temple Sinai in suburban Philadelphia.

Employers can't be too trusting.

Alliance hired Ragusa as its first employee in 1997 without a background check. Unfortunately, Ragusa was a multistate offender with a rap sheet that included felony theft, unlawfully carrying a weapon and heroin possession, according to a Lakewood police report.

So there she was, a felon, at home, on the computer, moving Alliance's money around. It's no wonder she began to think it was hers. Dickerson put it this way:

"You don't drop a steak in that dog bowl and expect the dog not to eat it."

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Respond to him at denverpostbloghouse.com/lewis, 303-820-1967 or alewis@denverpost.com.