Cyberbullying in the Workplace

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has become the most valuable means to communicate within the contemporary workplace. The reliance on technology is increasing as it shapes the success of modern firms. Emails, messenger, cellular phones, and social media use have extended the interconnectedness among employees beyond the traditional 'brick and mortar' business environment. The advent of the internet has created a new communication tool that has, in many ways, positively revolutionized the interconnectedness of societies and business operations around the globe. As of March 2019, there is an estimated four billion, three hundred and eighty-three million internet users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2019). In this technological age, however, there is the blurring of boundaries between personal space and workspace as the internet is a potential threat for cyber abuse, and the proliferation of the workplace stressor of cyberbullying. With the internet and modern communication devices, new forms of harassing behaviours have emerged where the target is subjected to online abusive behaviour even after leaving the workplace. Using technology to communicate may be described as a 'double-edged sword' where the increased reliance and dependence for high tech communication decreases the courteous interactions among persons. The erosive effect on interpersonal exchanges can give rise to workplace cyberbullying: an escalating process in which an employee is subjected to perceived psychological abuse recurring over a period of time where the perpetrator uses some form of technology.

For the past thirty years, organizational researchers have become increasingly interested in the dark side of management and employee behaviours, with extensive research being conducted on offline workplace bullying (henceforth referred to as traditional bullying). The increasing interest in this phenomenon has considerably advanced understanding in a relatively short space of time (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Feeling trapped, frustrated, threatened, verbally abused, ignored, isolated, and mentally hurt are all common descriptors used by workers in explaining their employment situations and can be summated as 'domestic violence at work, where the abuser is on the payroll'. The issue of workplace cyberbullying is gaining increasing attention as workplace bullying is no longer confined to the traditional face-to-face work environment but has evolved with the information and communications technology (ICT) revolution. There is the alteration of the social rules that govern the workplace with the co-occurrence of traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is not restrained by time, tools, or location, as 'work' is no longer a well-defined activity with sharp boundaries. The blurring of boundaries of work, technology, social media, and mobile platforms are modifying the workplace landscape. From a human resources perspective, it is therefore imperative to consider the working context within which cyberbullying occurs.

The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Describe the key elements of cyberbullying.
- Explain the difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying.
- Highlight the main consequences of workplace cyberbullying on the target and on the organization.
- Suggest practical approaches organizations can adopt to prevent and address cyberbullying at work.
- Identify areas for future research on workplace cyberbullying.

BACKGROUND

The workplace has drastically been altered where employees are able to work remotely and connect with colleagues around the world. This interconnectedness is increasing the susceptibility of employees to online abusive interpersonal behaviours referred to as cyber abuse. These behaviours include cyber stalking, cyber bullying, sexual solicitation, and exposure to phonographic material (Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, & MacFadden, 2011). One form of cyber abuse in the workplace is 'cyberbullying' or 'cyber-harassment', by superiors, co-workers, and subordinates. Cyberbullying incorporates the use of a technological form of communication as the means through which a person is harassed, threatened, or abused. Research on cyberbullying and its consequences have focused on school children and adolescents, while the effects on adults in the workplace are now attracting the attention of scholars.

Workplace cyberbullying discussions have been generating research interests among researchers and practitioners for over the past decade, with pioneering studies exploring its conceptualization, prevalence, and consequences. While initial research on cyberbullying emerged among children (Mishna et al., 2011) there is increasing interest of cyberbullying in the workplace setting as it crosses the barrier between work and home. Scandinavian researchers first introduced the concept of 'mobbing' in the workplace by extending the view of children being bullied in the playground at schools to include bullying among organizational employees (Leyman 1990). Traditional bullying is a toxic event which violates the fundamental rights of workers as they are subjected to degrading and dehumanising behaviours at the hands of their perpetrator(s).

Traditional Bullying

Exposure to workplace aggression has been conceptualized by various labels such as incivility, victimization, workplace psychological harassment, social undermining, emotional abuse, mobbing, bullying, and abusive supervision. Workplace bullying is defined as "an escalating process in which one or more employees are subjected to negative psychological and physical abuse recurring over an extended period of time (usually 6 months or more), where the target is reduced to a psychologically inferior state and it creates a hostile work environment to those exposed" (Ramdeo, 2017). This form of psychological violence creates an emotionally corrosive work environment as employees struggle to determine whether bullying will continue and how it will affect their job. Traditional bullying is a form of workplace aggression which focuses on perpetrators and targets within the organization. It is necessary to consider the unique aspects of workplace bullying and workplace cyberbullying for policy development and effective management as concise differentiations would allow targets to identify and determine the nature of the behaviours. Although the literature is sparse on workplace cyberbullying, it can be concluded that engaging in these acts of aggression are motivated primarily by the intent to inflict harm and fear.

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