

# Chapter 1

## The Meaning, Prevalence, and Outcomes of Cyberbullying in the Workplace

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The increased reliance on information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the workplace, while producing many positive outcomes, may also expose workers to cyberbullying. To date, much of the extant research on cyberbullying has focused on middle and high school youth; however, cyberbullying is not limited to a particular age demographic or setting. Unlike face-to-face workplace bullying, workplace cyberbullying may be brought into the workplace or carried home from the workplace. The current chapter defines cyberbullying, including how it differs from related constructs such as cyber incivility and cyber aggression. The chapter then reports prevalence rates of workplace cyberbullying, followed by a discussion of antecedents and consequences of cyberbullying exposure. Prevention and intervention goals in the workplace are also discussed as employers are now being tasked with tackling this issue in the workplace.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past two decades, research on cyberbullying has increased rapidly as technology has pervaded virtually every aspect of life. Early research on the topic concentrated primarily on the prevalence of cyberbullying among middle school youth (e.g., Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wang, Yogeewaran, Andrews, Hawi, & Sibley, 2019), as this appeared to be the population in which it was most likely to occur. More recently, however, it has become apparent that cyberbullying is not limited to a specific demographic; nor is cyberbullying restricted to a specific setting, such as the school environment. Rather, cyberbully-

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ing can occur at any time, in any location, and via any of a number of different technologies. Relevant to the current chapter is the fact that cyberbullying occurs in the workplace.

Technology is important in the modern workplace in part because it is ubiquitous. The use of the Internet and e-mail, for example, are critical for the smooth functioning of most organizations. Clearly, technology brings many benefits to organizations, including increased productivity, telecommunication opportunities, and the facilitation of cross-national collaborative work teams. However, this same technology also provides a means by which employees can cyberbully one another. Whereas 20 years ago, workers might have felt excluded from face-to-face conversations at the copier or the water fountain, now they may be blocked from electronic communications, which excludes them from important work-related communications. They may have their work criticized via e-mail or on company websites by customers, fellow employees, or supervisors, leading to public humiliation, decreased worker productivity and job satisfaction, and higher worker turnover (Cisco, 2019).

Researchers have noted the limited research that has been devoted to the topic of workplace cyberbullying. The majority of studies examining cyberbullying in adults focus on college student samples as opposed to adults in the workplace (e.g., Farley, Coyne, Axtell, & Sprigg, 2016; Jenaro, Flores, & Frias, 2018; Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & de Witte, 2017). Coyne and Farley (2019) recently referred to the state of the literature in this area as “at an embryonic stage” (p. 80). In an effort to provide an overview of this literature and to stimulate future research in the area, the current chapter presents information reflecting what we know about the conceptualization of workplace cyberbullying, its prevalence, antecedents, and consequences, as well as ideas for prevention and intervention. Included is a discussion of how workplace cyberbullying is similar to and different from related constructs such as workplace bullying, cyber incivility, and cyber aggression.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING CYBERBULLYING**

Cyberbullying is defined by Peter Smith and his colleagues (Smith et al., 2008) as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (p. 376; see also Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019; Smith, 2015). Conceptualized in this way, the parallels of cyberbullying to traditional bullying are readily apparent, as Olweus (1993; 2013) has defined traditional bullying as a repetitive act of aggression that is intended to cause harm or distress, and that occurs among individuals whose relationship reflects a power imbalance. A meta-analysis of cyberbullying found moderate relationships between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Specifically, a correlation of .45 was observed between the frequency of perpetrating traditional bullying and perpetrating cyberbullying; similarly, a correlation of .40 was obtained between traditional bullying victimization and cyberbullying victimization (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014).

However, the extent to which traditional bullying and cyberbullying overlap in the workplace is, as yet, an understudied phenomenon (see, however, Kowalski, Toth, & Morgan, 2018). Additionally, researchers have debated the extent to which workplace bullying and workplace cyberbullying are characterized by all of the features of bullying inherent in the original Olweus definition of bullying. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2003, p. 15) define workplace bullying as:

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