

Chapter 2

Workplace Cyberbullying: A Nuanced Definition, Significant Consequences, and Collective Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Technology has changed the modern work environment. In contemporary workplaces, employees can communicate from anywhere in the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week through email, corporate social media, text messages, blogs, etc. In general, this increased communication access supports productivity, but in some circumstances, the increased employee to employee access presents troubling outcomes. One such troubling outcome is the rise of cyberbullying and harassment in the workplace. In fact, research indicates that the number of individuals experiencing cyberbullying in the workplace is on the rise. With increased virtual incivilities, organizations must create strategies to protect the employees and organizational efficiencies. With these goals in mind, the following chapter will examine the importance of creating a clear organizational definition of cyberbullying, the organizational consequences of allowing cyberbullying to continue and solutions organizations can implement to create a positive work environment that is free from cyberbullying.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has changed the modern work environment (Schess, 2013). In contemporary workplaces, employees can communicate from anywhere in the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week through email, corporate social media, text messages, blogs, etc. In general, this increased communication supports productivity, but in some circumstances, the increased employee-to-employee access presents troubling outcomes (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). One such troubling outcome is the rise of cyberbullying in the workplace.

Workplace bullying began to gain attention in the early 1990s when Scandinavian and German researchers started investigating the phenomenon. Early leading researchers included Heinz Leymann

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(1990) and his research on “Mobbing and Psychological Terrors at Work,” and Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) and their work on “Bullying at Work Epidemiological Findings in Public and Private Organizations.” Now with decades of research, the prevalence rates of workplace bullying can be examined and victims rates have been steadily increasing 8.9% (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), 13.6% (Zabrodska & Kveton, 2012), 28% (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Albert, 2007), 35% (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010) and 60% (Nagele-Piazza, 2018). Are escalating events due to increased hostilities or variations in individual definitions of bullying? What behaviors constitute the title of bullying? More specifically, what is the definition of workplace bullying?

A definition of workplace bullying is complicated as the same aggressive behaviors can be labeled differently with numerous descriptive terms like incivility, emotional abuse, ostracism, harassment, and abuses of power (Emamzadeh, 2018). Therefore, one foundation step towards reducing damaging workplace behavior is defining workplace bullying such that employees and employers alike begin to recognize the same behaviors as destructive. Not only is it important to define but it is important to categorize unique types of bullying behaviors so that event specific solutions can be developed and applied. For example, cyberbullying may need a different form of employer intervention than harassment. This chapter will focus on cyberbullying, recognizing these behaviors as unique from other forms of bullying and requiring event specific awareness and understanding for the development of effective workplace solutions.

While cyberbullying in youth settings has gained national attention, research is showing that cyberbullying is not just a youth issue, adults in professional settings are exposed to cyberbullying too (Wright, 2016). In the United States, 40 percent of adults report experiencing cyberbullying and 75 percent of adults report observing cyberbullying (Duggan, 2014). Additionally, cyberbullying appears to occur throughout the adult lifespan (Sevcikova & Smahel, 2009). With more attention, specific to cyberbullying in the workplace, experts disagree on how to classify cyberbullying. Some feel cyberbullying is just a virtual form of traditional bullying (Campbell, 2005) and others believe cyberbullying is a unique form of incivility (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyberbullying does fit the general characteristics of bullying in that it involves unwanted, aggressive behavior with a perceived power imbalance, however, cyberbullying has additional unique characteristics such that cyberbullying is boundary-less, attacks can occur when someone is in their own home, which has traditionally been a place where people are protected from bullying and some forms of cyberbullying, like attacks on Twitter or social media can be viewed by thousands if not millions of people intensifying the effect (Shariff, 2005). These unique boundary-less features have led some researchers to argue that cyberbullying has an increased psychological effect, even more so than traditional bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). It can be concluded that, cyberbullying is prevalent among adults, it is damaging and cyberbullying must be recognized as a unique form of incivility separate from traditional bullying (Coyne, Farley, Axtell, Sprigg, Best, & Kwok, 2017; Privitera & Campbell, 2009).

Organizational leadership should begin developing their awareness of cyberbullying in the workplace by reflection on available communication technologies. There are pros and cons with each communication tool, certainly better access is a pro, but one con is that each technology based communication tool potentially allows for workplace aggressions like cyberbullying (Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & De Witte, 2017). Contemporary organizations that want to facilitate a healthy work environment for their employees must develop organizational leaders who can not only define and identify cyberbullying, but that are aware of the individual and organizational consequences due to cyberbullying. The following chapter will provide an in-depth description of the nuanced definition of cyberbullying, detailed

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