

Chapter 27

Civility Values and Cyberbullying Prevention in the Digital Workspace: How to Foster an Ethical Climate of Respect

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ABSTRACT

In the digital workspace, new forms of (negative) interactions have emerged. Workplace cyberbullying can be pervasive, fast, and intrude the private sphere. These aspects make organizational surveillance and prevention challenging. In this conceptual chapter, the authors argue that for establishing an ethical digital workspace, civility values and ethical principles of individual responsibility and mutual respect are crucial. For prevention of workplace cyberbullying, formal systems like technological detection systems or policies are insufficient. Rather, organizations need to foster informal “social control.” The social norms in small workgroups and the leader’s role-modeling behavior should guide the digital behavior of employees at and beyond work, and eventually create a climate of respect. This should also help to increase bystanders’ moral awareness of allegedly minor uncivil incidents. Examples of different formal and informal preventive measures are discussed. The chapter ends with a brief discussion and outlook on future legal and technological advancements.

INTRODUCTION

What is particularly challenging for employers – assuming they are good ones trying to create a culture where [cyberbullying] is not acceptable – is that there is every chance they won’t know about it, so

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their ability to police it is quite limited” adapted from: Anna Byford, senior employment lawyer, (The Guardian, 2017)

Advances in technology have profoundly catalyzed the digitalization and automatization of work in numerous industries. In Western countries, around 90% of the population uses the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2020) and thus has access to a wide variety of communication tools for professional and private purposes. The digital workspace has changed the way we work (together), how we maintain our social relationships at work, and even how we engage in negative behavior. In this respect, workplace cyberbullying has been defined as “*negative behavior in the workplace that occurs via technology*” (Coyne et al., 2017; cf. Madden & Loh, 2018). An email chain with derogatory content, which can be read over and over again, illustrates the lasting nature of cyberbullying through digital means. Likewise, new ways to socially exclude peers, e.g. from chat groups on private smartphone devices, make the prevention and “surveillance” of digital negative workplace behaviors challenging. Moreover, placing or liking negative posts about a co-worker on social media platforms can quickly spread beyond organizational boundaries and control, and intrude upon and harm a person’s private life.

Given the developments and challenges outlined above, the question arises for both researchers and practitioners whether and how organizations can ensure a civil and ethical workspace. How – if at all – can organizations prevent unethical behavior and workplace cyberbullying, which (sometimes) takes place in an “uncontrollable” digital space?

Proceeding beyond these questions, we argue that our understanding of what constitutes civil behavior might have shifted in the digital workspace and through interactions with digital tools. By discussing fictitious scenarios, we conceptualize the distinct and subtle features of incivility and bullying in a digital workspace in the first section of this book chapter. We propose that employees’ digital (bullying) behavior at work and beyond cannot be solely prevented and monitored with traditional formal control systems such as policies or surveillance technologies. It is also the informal “social control” of behaviors and interactions among workgroup members that needs to be fostered. This can be achieved through the internalization of civility values and ethical principles such as individual *responsibility* and mutual *respect*. In the second part of this book chapter, we show that formal and informal prevention mechanisms are intertwined and need to be considered together for building a cyberbullying-free workspace. This fosters an ethical climate and supports organizations and leaders in communicating, reporting, and sanctioning misdoing in their ranks. We further highlight the particular role of bystanders for informal control. Since cyberbullying is highly context-specific, we refrain from an exhaustive list of prevention tools, but provide examples of how to design and implement formal and informal prevention mechanisms. Before we conclude the book chapter, we provide a brief discussion and outlook on future developments and (legal) challenges for a civil digital workspace.

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