HR in the Crossfire:
An Exploration into the Role of Human Resources and Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying among Human Resource (HR) professionals and to explore whether such abuse may be related to their role at work. The study was a mixed-method project consisting of a quantitative survey extended to 1,845 members of the Kentucky Society for Human Resource Management (Kentucky SHRM) professional group and 28 follow up interviews typically lasting between 45 to 60 minutes.

Of the 102 Kentucky SHRM professionals completing the study, 31.4% reported that they had been bullied at work. The bullying behaviors included verbal abuse (33.3%), offensive conduct (24.2%), and work interference or sabotage (42.4%). The negative acts occurred frequently, with more than 60% indicating that these bullying behaviors were directed toward them on a daily (24.4%) or weekly (39.4%) basis.

Although the prevalence rate was within the ranges reported by other surveys of employees at-large, an important finding is that a majority of the bullied participants (54.1%) felt that the abuse was in some way related to their role as an HR practitioner. As a result, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 HR professionals to further explore this issue.

Using thematic analysis to analyze the interview texts, the following explanations emerged: HR must often tell managers "no"; the role is not fully appreciated and/or understood; HR is perceived as lacking business knowledge and/or not in sync with the business; HR practitioners sometimes lack professional credentials, education or "organizational fit"; and insecure managers may see competent HR professionals as a threat.

With the benefit of hindsight, participants offered several response strategies that might benefit bullied HR practitioners in the future. These included: take a stand; de-personalize the situation; document the problem; continuously build professional credentials; network with other HR professionals; seek support from mentors, friends, family and/or their company's EAP; and, if all else fails, leave the organization.

This study is the first of its kind in the United States to suggest that the HR role itself may be a contributing factor to bullying behaviors at work, and extends previous studies conducted by this researcher.

Keywords: workplace bullying, prevalence, negative acts, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), HR professional, HR practitioner, Kentucky, United States

Overview

Recent incidence studies about the prevalence of workplace bullying have confirmed that between 27% (Career Builder Bullying Survey, 2011) and 35% (Workplace Bullying Institute U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, 2010) of employees in the United States report that they have been the target of bullying at work. In a joint SHRM and Ethics Resource Center Study (2008), 32% of the HR professionals polled reported having observed misconduct that they believed violated their organization's ethics standards, company policies or the law—of which abusive behavior toward employees was the chief problem reported. Earlier research has also confirmed similar prevalence rates among American employees (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Neuman, 2004).

While there are a growing number of studies of U.S. employees at-large, there are only a few studies known to this researcher that examine bullying and its prevalence among HR professionals. The most recent study found that 36% of the 526 practitioners responding to a LinkedIn poll reported having been bullied in their HR role (Daniel, 2009b). A previous study conducted by this researcher found that 80% of the 20 HR practitioners interviewed for the study had been bullied at work (Daniel, 2009a). Another study sought to understand how HR professionals made sense of bullying situations and their position in them, but only inadvertently addressed issues of prevalence (Cowan, 2009).

The two largest studies into the prevalence of bullying among HR professionals were conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2004 and 2005. The *Personnel Today* and Andrea Adams Trust Bullying Survey of HR Professionals in the United Kingdom (2004) was the first of these studies. The 2005 study was also commissioned by *Personnel Today* and the Andrea Adams Trust, but was designed and conducted by Digital Opinion (Digital Opinion Workplace Bullying-2005 Survey of HR Professionals, 2005). While 31,000 HR professionals were invited to participate in the study, only 1,391 (4.5%) responded to the survey. More than half of the respondents (53%) reported that they had been bullied at work, with 55% indicating that the bully was their immediate manager.

The UK study participants reported that the bullying took a variety of forms, of which unfair criticism, intimidating behavior, and humiliation and/or ridicule were the most commonly cited examples. Bullies also set unreasonable targets, removed responsibilities and assigned unsuitable tasks, while verbal abuse was experienced by nearly 40% of the respondents. HR professionals in the UK apparently would rather leave than stay and attempt to resolve the problem; more than half (56%) said they started looking for a new job after being bullied. Just 9% made a formal complaint, and only 14% reported the problem to the bully's immediate manager.

Many reasons for bullying were given by HR professionals. Of the response options in the 2005 survey, the most commonly chosen reason was personality clash, followed by gender and age and, to a lesser degree, race and part-time status. When asked to identify the factors which impair their organization's ability to deal effectively with bullying, the most commonly cited factors were management's unwillingness to acknowledge that a problem exists, and the prevailing management style.

Prior bullying research has found conflict style (Aquino & Bryon, 2002), self-esteem (Einarsen, 2000), hierarchical status (Aquino, 2000) and negative affectivity (Aquino et al., 1999) to be statistically related to mistreatment at work. In addition, Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (2005)

have suggested that targets of bullying are often individuals who "love their work" and ". . . are identified strongly with what they do." Although these studies have not demonstrated causal mechanisms, they do suggest that additional research about these relationships may be important.

Method
Study Design
The study was a mixed-method project which consisted of a quantitative survey extended to 1,845 members across 13 chapters of the Kentucky Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) professional group. The first section of the survey asked participants to respond to a maximum of five questions about their experience with workplace bullying via an electronic survey available through SurveyMonkey. The second and last section of the survey asked participants to share demographic and employment-related information, as well as the size of their company. The survey was available to participations during July and August of 2011. In addition, 28 semi-structured follow up interviews were conducted by telephone and in person, typically lasting between 45 to 60 minutes.

Sample
The leadership of the Kentucky Society for Human Resource Management distributed a letter describing the study and how to access the survey to all of the chapter Presidents statewide (*n* =13). The local leadership further distributed the invitation to participate to their local chapter members (*n* = 1,845). Of those Kentucky SHRM professionals who received an invitation to participate, 102 responded for a response rate of 5.5%.

Table 1 shows the available comparisons of participants based on gender, race, age, marital status, highest educational level, highest HR certification, years of experience in HR, personal income level, and company size. Of note, nearly 80% of the respondents were female and 85% of the respondents were Caucasian. They were overwhelmingly married (79.3%) and highly educated. In fact, 80% of the participants reported that they held either a bachelors (43.9%) or masters degree (39.8%) and 74% had either their PHR (35.8%) or SPHR (36.8%) certification. They were generally long-term employees, with 20% reporting service of 11-15 years, 30% reporting service for 16-25 years, 12% for 26-35 years, and 2% for 36 years or more. Roughly 40% of the participants earned between $50,000 and $99,000, while nearly 30% of the participants earned $100,000 or more. At opposite ends of the spectrum, 17% reported working for a company with 10,000 employees or more, while 21% worked for a company with less than 100 employees. Most of the participants (54%) worked for companies with between 101 and 2,500 employees.

Data Analysis
Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis which enabled the researcher to identify themes emerging from the interview texts (Owen, 1984). To check and validate the results, six participants were asked to review the preliminary findings and provide comments. Five of the individuals responded to that request, and each of them confirmed that the findings "rang true" to their own understanding and experience with the problem.

Results
Prevalence of Bullying
Of the 102 HR professionals completing the study, 31.4% reported that they had been bullied at work. This finding was consistent with results from a 2009 LinkedIn poll conducted by this researcher in which 36% of the 526 HR professionals from across the U.S. reported that they had been subjected to repeated bullying in their HR role (Daniel, 2009b).

The Workplace Bullying Institute defines bullying as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators that takes one or more of the following forms: (1) Verbal abuse; or (2) Offensive conduct/behaviors (including nonverbal) which are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; or (3) Work interference--sabotage--which prevents work from getting done." Based on this definition, have you ever been subjected to workplace bullying in your role as an HR professional?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Yes (if yes, please answer remaining questions)	31.4%	32
No (if no, please go directly to page 2 and complete the demographic information)	68.6%	70
answered question		102
skipped question		0

Description of Bullying Behaviors
Participants reported experiencing bullying that fell into three major categories: verbal abuse (33.3%), offensive conduct (24.2%), and work interference or sabotage (42.4%).

If yes, what type of bullying did you most frequently experience?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Verbal Abuse	33.3%	11
Offensive Conduct (e.g. threats, humiliation, or intimidation)	24.2%	8
Work Interference or Sabotage	42.4%	14
answered question		33
skipped question		69

This survey data was probed further during the follow up interviews. For those reporting verbal abuse, the most common bullying behaviors experienced by the HR professionals in this study included insults, yelling, screaming, cursing, "in your face" confrontations, and angry tirades. Offensive conduct most commonly included threats, harassment, intimidation, a hostile work environment, as well as blaming and humiliation in front of others. Reports of work interference/sabotage included a flagrant disregard for the recommendations of the HR professional, unjustified and frequent criticism, challenging decisions in a hostile manner, negative and derogatory email notes and/or verbal comments, spread of lies or rumors to discredit the HR professional, or attempts to circumvent the system by isolating them and failing to include the HR practitioner in important decisions and meetings.

The descriptions of the abuse experienced at work were indicative of the intensity and effect of the interactions. The following statements from the study's follow up interviews evidence the level of trauma experienced at both work and at home due to the bullying behaviors:

> *I recently experienced workplace bullying and it was the most difficult time of my life. It affected my work and my home life. I never understood how serious depression was until my job got unbearable. Most of the time, I was consumed with grief, could not sleep, and my every thought was around my job. It caused me to lose control in my life. Everything was spiraling out of control. If it were not for my friends, family, and a whole lot of prayer, I could have taken drastic measures to free myself from the pain.*

> *The guy was like a demon right out of a horror film. I never met anyone who seemed to enjoy hurting as many people as he could . . . on the job. There were times when I would look into his eyes and see evil staring back at me.*

> *I pray for the ones he fired, demoted, and suspended. They think I'm lucky because he didn't do any of those things to me. However, he just kept me around to make my life a living hell.*

> *While I was looking out for the best interests of the organization, there was a high personal cost. [My] self-confidence got hammered and I felt like a failure. The entire environment was very toxic.*

Frequency of Workplace Bullying

The vast majority of the participants (63.8%) indicated that the bullying occurred frequently, with more than 60% reporting that bullying behaviors were directed toward them on a daily (24.4%) or weekly basis (39.4%).

If yes, with what frequency did the bullying at work occur?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Daily	24.2%	8
Weekly	39.4%	13
Monthly	18.2%	6
Rarely	18.2%	6
One-time Event	0.0%	0
	answered question	33
	skipped question	69

Bullying Related to Role as HR Practitioner

Though the prevalence rate for these HR professionals was within the ranges reported by other recent surveys of U.S. employees at-large, an important finding is that a majority of the bullied participants (54.1%) felt that the abuse was in some way related to their role as an HR practitioner.

If yes, do you believe that the bullying was in any way related to your role as an HR professional?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Yes	54.1%	20
No	45.9%	17
answered question		37
skipped question		65

In response to this finding, semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with 28 HR professionals to further explore why these counterproductive workplace behaviors might be directed toward them. In addition, written postings from 526 HR practitioners responding to this researcher's 2009 LinkedIn poll—which asked the question "*Why do you think HR professionals are bullied at work?*"—were also reviewed (Daniel, 2009c).

The suggested reasons for such workplace bullying included the following key themes: HR must often tell managers "no", the organizational role is not fully appreciated and/or understood, perceived as lacking business knowledge and/or not in sync with the business, sometimes lack professional credentials, education or "organizational fit", and insecure managers may see competent HR professionals as a threat. Some representative comments from the interviews for each category follow:

▪ *HR Must Often Tell Managers "No"*

Managers do not want to be told what to do, and they sure don't want to be told "no". HR is often required to counsel and warn about various actions, and managers are used to being able to make decisions and do what they want to do, when they want to do it. If HR intervenes in that cycle, they don't like it and will often take it out on the HR practitioner involved in the situation.

There are many legalities involved in counseling managers and HR must protect both interests (e.g. employees and the company). HR cannot be "yes" men and women. They must be willing to stand their ground when they are right, and challenge management when they are headed off a cliff.

HR must protect the integrity and best interests of the company. Sometimes managers disagree with the recommendations and this is when they will attack the messenger—HR— using HR and staff as a "punching bag"—a place to take out their frustrations.

Ethical issues in handling HR matters makes it necessary for HR practitioners to stand up to managers and not get pushed around.

It's a balancing act—HR has fiduciary responsibilities and must find a balance between those responsibilities and the people problems.

At some point you have to accept decisions you don't agree with and let it go. But some decisions are ethical ones that you have to stand up for. You can't back down.

- ***Organizational Role is Not Fully Appreciated and/or Understood***

  HR folks are like police and firemen; cops get grief when they write you a ticket (e.g. quote FLSA to you) but are your best friend when they pull you or your family out of a burning building (e.g. hire you or a referral of yours). Real HR people know it's a thankless profession, most wonder why they do it, but none would ever do anything else. HR people understand the "hero to zero" concept. And if they don't, they should pick another profession.

  We in HR are sometimes perceived as the "necessary evil" within an organization.

  Managers sometimes do not respond positively because they do not understand or appreciate the role of HR.

  All I hear from HR—most of the time—is what "can't" be done. The truly valuable HR professionals I've known in my career have been the people who approached an issue from what "CAN" be done—the ones who were willing to try to solve a problem rather than the ones reciting a litany or rules and regulations.

  HR departments need to ensure their activities are visible and promoted in order to be appreciated, and need to be able to calculate and to sell the value and ROI of HR activities.

  HR is always seen as a cost center and a support function (which definitely is not the case).

  Sometimes low performers get transferred into the HR department—all too often it serves as a "dumping ground" for poor performers and misfits.

- ***Perceived as Lacking Business Knowledge and/or Not in Sync with the Business***

  HR professionals are often not in tune with the business. To be relevant, HR must be able to understand issues outside of just HR-related topics.

  We have to work with a high management-level vision, bring revenue to the organization, be involved in the finance issues and find solutions for economic-based issues.

  Unless HR is integrated with the overall company strategy and vision, they feel left out and, hence, their contribution is not valued.

  HR must be able to speak two corporate languages—HR and finance. Most do not speak the latter very fluently. We need to learn to speak EBITDA.

  HR people have no sense of urgency to get a position filled. Come 5 p.m., they go home and the manager is stuck with a 15 hour day. They also have no idea of what the position really calls for.

  HR often gets lost in the minutia of administrative matters, and become the "paper pushers" of the organization.

- ***Lack of Professional Credentials, Education *or* "Organizational *Fit*"***

  Unfortunately, a lot of people who hire HR staff think of HR as an administrative function rather than as a profession, so unskilled and unqualified people are often hired into these roles.

  Quite often, HR people have on-the-job training, but not a formal education in the discipline. Conversely, you have people with degrees from all over the spectrum that are not necessarily relevant to HR.

  Need to have strong credentials and education/experience to have credibility with strong-willed managers. PHR/SPHR certification really makes a difference in terms of commanding internal respect.

- ***Insecure Managers May See Competent HR Professionals as a Threat***

  Individuals who feel insecure in themselves or their role may see HR professionals as a threat. If you consider the target of a bully—someone who is typically confident and may pose a risk to a less secure person—then it is not surprising that HR would often be a target.

  Because HR professionals are used to dealing with tough problems, they are often very assertive in their dealings with senior managers [who don't like it]. This can set up a power struggle that creates a conflict between the two different personalities.

  Managers often get HR involved when they need to get themselves out of trouble or need help resolving a problem. They don't like feeling vulnerable in this way, so they sometimes attack HR when they should be grateful for their help.

  The job of an HR professional is to help the company not get sued. Sometimes that does not go over very well and causes managers to over-react.

  It's hard to get some managers to see that HR really can be a partner. This is especially true of those who are threatened by the competence of some really good HR practitioners—who often have direct access to senior management.

These results were compared to an earlier study by this researcher (Daniel, 2009c) in which 544 HR professionals responded to a LinkedIn poll which asked this question: *Why do you think HR professionals are bullied at work?* In response to five forced choices, respondents answered that question as follows:

> 45%- Contribution is not valued
> 7%- Perceived as weak performers
> 3%- Lack of education or "fit"
> 18%- Not aligned with strategy
> 27%- Not bullied more than others

The responses to each study were remarkably similar. "Contribution is not valued" corresponds to this study's category of "organizational role is not fully appreciated and/or understood", while "not aligned with strategy" is consistent with this study's "perceived as lacking business

knowledge and/or not in sync with the business". "Lack of education or "fit" and "perceived as weak performers" were in line with this study's responses of "lack of professional credentials, education and/or "organizational fit".

Advice to Other Bullied HR Practitioners—Current and Future
Participants interviewed for the study were also asked to reflect on their experience and, with the benefit of hindsight, offer suggestions about dealing with the problem that could benefit bullied HR practitioners in the future. The most common themes of their recommendations included: take a stand; de-personalize the situation; document the problem; continuously build your professional credentials; network with other HR professionals; seek support from mentors, friends, family and/or the company's EAP; and, if all else fails, leave the organization. Some representative comments from the interviews for each category follow:

- ***Take a Stand***

  You must assert yourself and refuse to "take it" even if you are fearful about losing your job.

  Don't avoid confrontation about the bullying behavior. It is necessary to raise the issue and try to solve the problem.

  Assert yourself! *Don't stay in a bad situation without standing up for yourself.*

  Never let self-doubt rule you or your actions.

  Don't allow the bully to run you off.

  Be sure you never compromise your morals and values for a job.

  People often treat you like you treat yourself. If you let them run over you, they will inevitably do it.

- ***De-Personalize the Situation***

  Remember that managers often attack *the recommendations HR is making but don't really* mean to attack the HR professional personally.

  Try to remember that most of the time it *isn't about you. It's about your role.*

  It's pretty difficult to be an HR practitioner as many of the conflicts we deal with are truly role-*related. They're not personal.*

  Know that your confidence will be "knocked to hell" after a bullying incident. Take care of yourself. Nobody else will.

  *Professionalism is so important. I think it's how you approach the problem. Be pro*fessional and be factual. Try to eliminate the emotional component.

- ***Document the Problem***

  Keep fastidious notes about the situation. Document everything as you don't know what you might need in the future.

- ***Continuously Build Your Professional Credentials***

  You need a master's level degree (at least) to have credibility with managers.

  Add to your credentials!

  You need to continuously learn and improve your credentials in order to be prepared for what the future might bring, either voluntarily (or not).

- ***Network with Other HR Professionals***

  Join an organization (like SHRM) that understands HR's roles and responsibilities.

  Talk with other HR professionals who can provide you with an outlet to discuss tough HR issues.

  Network like crazy!

- ***Seek Support from Mentors, Friends, Family and/or*** *the company's* **EAP**

  Know that the bully is out to crush your self-confidence. Don't let that happen. Practice self-affirmation. Consider working with a life or job coach/counselor to get all of the bad stuff out and to build back your self-esteem.

  Try not to internalize the situation. Talk it through with others. Seek advice from a mentor to get some objective counsel and perspective. Get support wherever you can.

  Talk to your company's Employee Assistance professional and get objective counsel that can help you look at the big picture and examine your potential alternatives in an unemotional way.

  Use all avenues available to try to resolve the conflict (e.g. ethics hotlines, dispute resolution mechanisms, EAP, etc.).

  Set goals to create new directions in your life.

  Take time for solitude and reflection (whether you are religious or not).

- ***If All Else Fails, Leave the Organization***

  If you find that you are not valued by the organization and have done everything that you can do—then leave. There is no failure in deciding that this particular opportunity is not working for you.

  Explore all of your alternatives. There is no shame in leaving a bad situation if you can't fix it. Sometimes it is better to leave than get pushed around and deal with the blow to your self-confidence.

  Don't stay stuck. Leave if you must—and make it sooner rather than later.

  Sometimes you have to take a risk and go in a different direction, whether it is to report the problem or make a move to go to work someplace else.

Put the situation behind you and don't ever expect to hear an apology.

Sometimes the only sane strategy is to leave.

Possible Study Limitations

While approximately 1,800 HR professionals in Kentucky were invited to participate in the study, only 102 responded for a response rate of 5.6%. As with most studies, more survey participants would have been desirable. Participant selection was targeted to members of Kentucky's SHRM chapters state-wide who may have more access to educational programs. Because of this, they represent a participant pool that is likely to be better educated and informed on emerging HR topics such as workplace bullying. In addition, it is possible that the participant sample was biased by the inclusion of an oversampling of HR professionals who had been bullied (e.g. HR professionals with personal experiences of bullying may have been more willing to take part in the study than those not affected by the problem). As with any research, readers should exercise caution when generalizing results and take individual circumstances and experiences into consideration when making decisions based on this study. It should be noted that the results presented in this report are only truly representative of the sample of HR professionals who actually participated in the survey and follow up interviews.

Discussion

Prevalence of Workplace Bullying among HR Practitioners

Of the 102 HR professionals completing the study, 31.4% reported that they had been bullied at work. This finding was consistent with results from a 2009 LinkedIn poll conducted by this researcher in which 36% of the 526 HR professionals from across the U.S. reported that they had been subjected to repeated bullying in their HR role (Daniel, 2009b). Recent incidence studies have confirmed prevalence rates of between 27% to 35% (Career Builder Bullying Survey, 2011 and Workplace Bullying Institute U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, 2010, respectively). The rates of bullying directed toward HR practitioners are within these ranges, suggesting that HR professionals are not targeted with any greater frequency than other employees.

Comparison to 2005 UK Study of HR Professionals

Nearly one-third of the respondents (31.4%) in this current study reported that they had been bullied, as compared to slightly more than half (53%) of the UK participants. Participants in this study described verbal abuse, offensive conduct, and work interference and/or sabotage as the most common types of abuse, while the UK participants reported that the bullying behaviors most frequently included unfair criticism, intimidating behavior, and humiliation/ridicule. The response rates for the surveys were similar: United States (5.6%) and United Kingdom (4.5%).

HR Practitioners are Strongly Identified with their Work

These results appear to confirm the findings of Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (2005) who suggested that targets of bullying are often individuals who "love their work" and ". . . are identified strongly with what they do." They stated further:

> Employees who are committed to their work are often very loyal. They believe in the goals of the organization. They care about the organization's reputation. They keep quiet, are ambivalent about taking action and may not readily seek assistance, inside or outside the organization. They suffer for a longer period. Rarely do such individuals reveal their personal agony. (p. 82)

Participants in this study seemed to be passionate about their role as an HR professional, and indicated a willingness to endure bullying over an extended period. Representative comments explaining the reason that HR professionals often stay in a situation where bullying occurs follow:

> HR serves as a "serious buffer" for other employees in the organization—between management and employees. We are the "**organizational** shock absorbers".

> If HR professionals won't stand up to a bad manager, who will? But HR pays a heavy price for doing that.

> We put up with a lot because we're in the people business. We take abuse all of the time.

> HR practitioners are often willing to stay in a bad situation to protect other employees, only going forward to take action "when it is not just about me anymore."

Reasons for Bullying Directed toward HR Practitioners

The majority of participants (54.1%) reported that the bullying was in some way related to their role as an HR professional. Themes from the interviews suggested that they are often targets of such workplace abuse because: HR must often tell managers "no", the organizational role is not fully appreciated and/or understood, HR is often perceived as lacking business knowledge and/or not in sync with the business, HR practitioners sometimes lack professional credentials, education or " organizational fit", and insecure managers may see competent HR professionals as a threat. These findings extend the results of each of this researcher's 2009 studies.

One of the reasons suggested by participants for the bullying was that they are often perceived as lacking business knowledge and/or are not in sync with the business. As noted by several participants, administrative staff –who are often not certified HR professionals—often handle the day-to-day transactional work of the department. As a result of this, managers are frequently in contact with these lower-level and often less educated individuals about benefits and pay-related matters which may give rise to this negative perception.

While one of the study's themes suggested that the bullying may occur due to a lack of professional credentials, education or "organizational fit", the demographics of this study do not actually support that view, at least with respect to credentials and education. To the contrary, this study's participants were highly educated; in fact, 80% of the participants reported that they held either a bachelors (43.9%) or masters degree (39.8%), while 3% had earned a doctorate. In addition, nearly three-quarters of the participants (74%) had attained either their PHR (35.8%) or SPHR (36.8%) professional HR certification.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying among HR professionals and to explore whether such abuse may be related to their role at work. While the rate of bullying directed toward HR professionals was consistent with other at-large surveys, a key finding was that a majority of the bullied participants (54.1%) felt that the abuse was in some way related to their role as an HR practitioner. As a result, this study is the first of its kind in the U.S. to suggest that the HR role itself may be a contributing factor to bullying behaviors at work, and extends previous studies conducted by this researcher.

Implications for HR Practitioners

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for practice. The prevailing philosophy used by many organizations (and suggested by many researchers) positions the HR professional as a strategic partner to management—which is, in and of itself, generally a good thing. An inadvertent outcome of this shift in focus often means less regular connection between HR and line managers (Lewis & Rayner, 2003) and a corresponding expectation that line manager should directly handle most people-related issues (Ulrich, 1997). Many managers feel they do not have the knowledge to do what they perceive to be the work of the HR department and resent being required to take on these additional duties. As a result, in many organizations, there has been a rise in tension and conflict between these two groups in recent years.

To positively impact this situation, one strategy is for HR to proactively initiate more contact with line managers and educate them about how to handle the most common people issues and processes. Some time ago, Senge (1990) suggested that HR professionals should become coaches and mentors rather than problem solvers. With coaching and training, line managers will be able to more competently handle these responsibilities on their own which should help to reduce the current tensions that exist. Moreover, there is a possibility that both understanding and trust will be enhanced through this more frequent exchange of expertise, making it a win-win partnership for both parties.

Another strategy is for HR professionals to actively seek to acquire a greater understanding of the business (e.g. key financial drivers, largest customers, process issues, etc.) from line managers during these coaching/training sessions. Knowledge of the business is the top leadership quality noted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2009). In recent years, senior leaders have consistently expressed a desire (and expectation) for HR professionals to understand their company's business, as well as the industry in which they work—how the organization makes its money and how the HR department contributes to the organization's financial goals (Mirza, 2011). An increase in business acumen would improve both the credibility and alignment of the HR practitioner with the organization and is an important step in making sure that HR practitioners are not perceived as underperforming or out of sync with the business.

Recent SHRM articles have suggested that HR should strive to "stop saying no" and instead offer solutions to help solve their company's challenges (Mirza, 2011; Janove, 2011). Jathan Janove recently acknowledged this frequent tension between HR practitioners and managers—a conflict that is often created by HR's role as the organization's "rule enforcer" (Janove, 2011). This role requires HR to counsel more senior managers about issues such as employee discipline, policy interpretation, and the like. During these types of interactions, HR practitioners often must take a position that is contrary to the one desired by the manager in order to help protect the company from litigation and minimize risk.

Though such interactions are not intended to be personal, they can lead to interpersonal conflict and a perception that HR often says "no". To address this tension, Janove suggested that HR professionals should strive to make a shift in role—moving from acting as the "internal police" to valued business partner and "compliance coach". Rather than simply saying "no" or "you can't do that", Janove recommends that practitioners consider providing alternatives to

management with a corresponding assessment of the risk related to each choice. After outlining the possible strategies, the HR practitioner and the manager could then discuss the situation and jointly make an informed decision to act given the facts of the situation and perceived risk. This strategy better aligns HR as part of the team—jointly helping managers to solve problems, rather than as a business outsider who only understands a single aspect of a complex situation.

These tensions suggest a difficult paradox: serving as a strategic partner to management means that HR professionals must balance this role with the competing need to represent the interests of employees and minimize risk (Ulrich, 1997, p. 45-46). This will require HR professionals to expand and improve both their communication, coaching, and conflict resolution skills. Making this shift in role will not be easy, but even incremental changes in this direction are likely to improve the practitioner's effectiveness and credibility with managers. It might also help to reduce the prevalence of practitioner bullying by senior managers.

Future Research

In order to have a clear understanding of the interaction of the role of HR and the phenomenon of workplace bullying, academics must continue to work collaboratively with both HR practitioners and corporate managers. Future research could extend the present study by examining the perspectives of senior managers about the role of HR within their organization. This information would help to provide a more complete picture of how HR practitioners are perceived by senior managers working outside of the discipline, and might provide insights that would allow HR practitioners to make changes to better serve their organizations in the future.

Future research should also explore the perceptions of senior managers about the phenomenon of workplace bullying and how it should be addressed within organizations. Additionally, research should continue to explore the role of individual difference variables among HR practitioners who are bullied (e.g. gender, race, educational level, etc.). In addition, company-level, geographic, and industry differences bear further exploration. Research of this nature will help to insure that we develop a more complete understanding of the problem so that we can develop more targeted initiatives and response strategies to eradicate it from our workplaces.

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About the Researcher
Teresa A. Daniel, JD, PhD serves as Professor & Dean-Human Resource Leadership Programs at Sullivan University, a unique online program for both undergraduate and master's level students interested in becoming HR managers and leaders. In addition, she serves as Chair for the HRL concentration in the PhD in Management program.

SHRM has expressed a sustained interest in her work on the issue of workplace bullying at the national level, publishing her book titled *Stop Bullying at Work: Strategies and Tools for HR & Legal Professionals* in 2009. It was SHRM Book's #7 top-selling book during 2010. SHRM's monthly *HR Magazine* published an article excerpted from the book titled "Tough Boss or Workplace Bully?: How to Understand the Difference" in June 2009. Most recently, the May 2011 issue of *HR Magazine* profiled her research in an article titled "When Bullying Hits Home".

Her work about workplace bullying has also been featured through interviews on TV (e.g. the "Weekends with Whitney" show via an NBC affiliate in Chicago, IL), on the radio (e.g. "The Mary Jones Show", WDRC-AM in Hartford, CT), and in print (e.g. *Miami Herald, Chicago Tribune, The Philadelphia Inquirer, VIV Magazine, American School Board Journal, American Society of Training and Development, Best Practices in HR, The Daily Independent,* BNA's *HR Perspectives,* etc.).

Dr. Daniel is a passionate advocate for ending this form of emotional/psychological abuse in the workplace. If there are questions about this study or a desire to provide ideas for future studies, she can be reached via e-mail at: tdaniel@sullivan.edu.

Table 1

<u>Summary of study respondents</u>

Characteristic	**Participants (%)**
Gender	
Female	80
Male	21
Skipped question	1
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	85
Black or African American	10
Asian	1
Hispanic or Latino	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0
Two or More Races	2
Do Not Know	0
Skipped question	2
Age	
18-25 years	2
26-35 years	21
36-50 years	39
51-60 years	31
61-74 years	8
75 years or older	0
Skipped question	1
Marital Status	
Single	6
Married	80
Divorced	11
Never Married	1
Same Sex Marriage	1
Same Sex Domestic Partner	1
Opposite Sex Domestic Partner	1
Skipped question	1

Highest Educational Level		
High School	7	
Associate's Degree	6	
Bachelor's Degree	43	
Master's Degree	39	
Doctorate	3	
Skipped question	4	

Highest HR Certification		
PHR	34	
SPHR	35	
None	26	
Skipped question	7	

Years of Experience as an HR Professional		
0-2 years	5	
3-5 years	12	
6-10 years	20	
11-15 years	20	
16-25 years	30	
26-35 years	12	
36 years or more	2	
Skipped question	1	

Personal Income Level		
Under $25,000	2	
$26-50,000	18	
$51-60,000	13	
$61-75,000	17	
$76-99,000	19	
$100,000 or more	28	
Skipped question	5	

Company Size		
1-100 employees	21	
101-500 employees	28	
501-1000 employees	13	
1001-2500 employees	13	
2501-5000 employees	6	

5001-7500 employees	2
7501-10,000 employees	0
10,001 or more employees	17
Skipped question	2
N	102