# From Workplace Bullying to Cyberbullying: The Enigma of E-Harassment in Modern Organizations

**Article** in Organization Development Journal · September 2012

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# From Workplace Bullying to Cyberbullying: The Enigma of E-Harassment in Modern Organizations

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## Abstract

Research on the topic of employee harassment, in the form of workplace bullying, has proliferated over the past decade. However, there is limited research on the incidence and impact of cyberbullying, a related type of cyberabuse, in the work environment. Thus, it would be of interest to examine the conceptual and pragmatic similarities and differences between these two types of harassment and discuss the implications for organizations. To that end, the current paper a) reviews the major findings of key studies on workplace bullying, b) presents a bibliometric analysis of the topic of cyberstalking in adult populations, and c) integrates the recent literature on E-Harassment in the workplace. These findings indicate that administrators and organizational leaders may not appreciate the full extent and impact that cyberabuse may have on their employees. Moreover, the onerous impact on productivity and potential legal liability of 'bullying' behaviors, specifically E-Harassment, should be a major concern for managers and top executives in the modern organization. Finally, this article frames the handling of cyberabuse cases within the organizational framework of crisis management (Lalonde, 2007) and psychosocial safety climate proposed by Bond et al. (2010). Strategic initiatives for OD and I/O consultants are noted.

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## Introduction

Harassment in the workplace has been at the forefront of major concerns of company executives, managers, as well as employees for several decades (Einarsen, 2011). This form of workplace abuse has

also garnered the attention of legal professionals and research scholars (Kottage, 1992; Myer & Casile, 2010; Spears et al., 2009). While there are several types of harassment (e.g., sexual, bodily harm, demotion, whistleblowing) that are attributed to boundary violations of superiors, workplace bullying has the added feature that it is frequently instigated by fellow employees. Since this type of harassment in the work environment appears to be more prevalent and opaque, it has attracted considerable research attention both in the U.S. and globally (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009).

In the contemporary hi-tech work environment, there is considerable evidence that 'cyberbullying' has morphed into the preferred mode or style of harassment amongst employees (Borstorff et al., 2007). While cyberbullying can be viewed as an annoyance or workplace irritant, more ominous and pernicious type of abuse can take the form of cyberstalking.

The aim of the current study is to a) present key bibliographic sources on the topic of workplace bullying, b) discuss the issue and effects of cyber-stalking in adult populations, and c) provide a framework to understand the contemporary enigma of cyberbullying in the workplace.

## Workplace Bullying

Since both cyberbullying and cyberstalking are within the purview of cyber-abuse, perhaps the current discussion can be better understood within the context of workplace bullying. According to recent reviews of the literature (Tehrani, 2012; Tuckey et al., 2009), workplace bullying represents a constellation of offensive behaviors and attitudes,

occurring repeatedly over time, with the intent to intimidate, harass, threaten, or adversely impact an employee. Moreover, workplace bullying has been linked to psychological and emotional duress, physical distress, decreased productivity, burnout, and poor organizational commitment and cohesion (Altman, 2012; Dhar, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2008; Glaso & Notelaers, 2012). Under the pale of 'bullying' incidents, its onerous impact can affect fellow employees as well. From a business perspective, bullying intentions or behaviors are difficult to understand as there are formidable organizational sanctions to such pernicious conduct in the workplace, such as legal risks to the perpetrator and damage to corporate reputation (Earnshaw & Cooper, 1996). Prevalence rates, in the U.S., have been reported as high as 50% of workforce employees (see Wheeler et al., 2010). To provide an overview of major findings on workplace bullying, Table 1 presents key studies from the recent literature.

## Cyberbullying/Stalking

Cyberbullying has emerged as a new form of stalking behavior (Deirmenjian, 1999; Meloy, 2007), despite the fact that nosological issues that differentiate cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking continue to be debated in the literature (Durkin & Patterson, 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Cyberbullying is largely viewed as inappropriate, unwanted social exchange behaviors initiated by a perpetrator via online or wireless communication technology and devices. The proliferation of Smart phones and social networking has exacerbated the incidence of cyberstalking, and related cyberabuse behaviors, over the past 5 years.

Table 1. Major Findings on Workplace Bullying

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Appelbaum et al. (2012)

To date, limited solutions and interventions on workplace bullying have been identified. Study reports that transformational and ethical leadership practices have shown promise in abating offensive behaviors.

Bentley et al. (2012)

In line with prior estimates, about 10% of travel industry employees experienced bullying at work. Organizational response focused on improved interpersonal communications which fostered work relations and leadership roles.

Power et al. (2011)

Cross-cultural differences in 'bullying' in the workplace across 14 countries in 6 continents were investigated. Cultures with a high 'performance' orientation were more acceptable of work-related bullying behavior. Asian countries were more tolerant of offensive types of employee behavior, whereas Anglo and Latin countries were less tolerant.

Meloni  & Austin (2011)

Authors implemented a zero-tolerance bullying and harassment program in a hospital setting. After 3 years, employee satisfaction survey results had significantly improved.

Wheeler et al. (2010)

The study views 'bullying' from a personal resources perspective, i.e., bullies actively create resource gain cycles to their benefit. Organizational strategies to combat workplace bullying include the elimination of motives that fuel bullying types of behavior.

Bond et al. (2010)

The authors view workplace bullying as chronic stressors that elicit "organizational crisis" which create significant disruption to constructive business processes and work flow. Results showed that pycho-social organizational climate was related to the occurrence of workplace bullying and the authors suggest guidelines to support employee well-being, safety, and health.

Saam (2010)

The author, based on a review of the literature, acknowledges a dearth of intervention strategies in organizations' response to workplace bullying. This prompted a survey of business consultants' use of strategies to combat 'bullying' behaviors; conflict moderation, mediation, and organization development were the major approaches considered to be effective by respondents.

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*Continues*

Table 1. Major Findings on Workplace Bullying (continued)

Rhodes et al. (2010)

The authors examined the issue of organizational ethical responsibilities in responding to incidents of bullying, particularly maintaining and asserting constant vigilance. The authors suggest that organizations would be well- served to actively critique company practices that may inadvertently institutionalize or normalize workplace bullying.

Martin & Lavan (2010)

This study examined 45 litigated cases in the U.S. and found that 20% of bullying incidents involved physical violence. Surprisingly, only about one-third of the involved firms had an official policy banning workplace bullying.

Pate & Beaumont (2010)

Utilizing a case study, the authors found that although employees appreciate management practices that address workplace bullying, the level of trust of senior management remained rather low. The need for systematic research on measuring the degree of success of organizational policy toward workplace bullying is urgently needed.

Tuckey et al. (2009)

In a sample of Australian police officers, the study examined the role of psycho-social environmental factors on workplace bullying. High job demands and low levels of social support exacerbated bullying. Perpetrators were characterized as 'high-ranked' employees which supports a power-inequity paradigm.

Salin (2008)

Within the context of HRM, the authors studied measures used in 'harm' policies. Results indicated that such policies targeted the role of managers and immediate supervisors. Moreover, organizations stressed the downside of negative publicity, with regard to reputation or brand, generated by 'bullying' incidents.

Heames & Harvey (2006)

The authors applied transactional coping theory to the study of workplace bullying across 3 levels (individual, group, organization). Managerial policy needs to address all 3 levels in tandem in order to be effective.

Djurkovic et al. (2004)

These researchers examined the psychological impact that workplace bullying has on the intention of 'target' employees to leave (job attrition) and their overall well-being. Findings show that bullying leads to both physical health complaints and negative affect.

Rayner & Cooper (1997)

During the 1990s, workplace bullying was a largely ignored subject in organizational life. The authors concluded that bullying is the key factor identified in employment litigation connected to stress-at-work. Cross-disciplinary research efforts (academic and practice) are strongly encouraged.

Much of the literature in this area focuses on college students (e.g., Kraft & Wang, 2010; Lucks, 2004; Paludi, 2008). Recent research shows that, in terms of profile, cyberstalkers tend to be well educated, struggle with Internet addiction, and are over the age of 16. Incidence statistics indicate that cyberstalking is quite prevalent, with victimization rates ranging from 4%-40% across college-age populations (Reyns et al., 2012).

Since this current literature is emerging and nascent in character, it would be informative to gauge the extent of research on cyberabuse from a bibliographic perspective. To that end, the current study reports on a cross-disciplinary citation analysis of scholarly research on the topic of cyberabuse.

## Method

Previous studies have illustrated the benefits of research designs that involve trend analysis approaches on select topics in the scholarly literature (Garfield, 1979). The current procedure aims to obtain an overview of the scope and research emphasis on the issue of cyberabuse by conducting  reference citation analyses across several major scholarly databases (Piotrowski, Perdue, & Armstrong, 2005). To that end, a multi-file search strategy (see Piotrowski & Perdue, 1986) was performed.

Recent studies in the social sciences field show that this qualitative research methodology has both practical and investigatory value (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002). The examination of trends in the literature has served as a useful and informative exercise in addressing the shifts in attention on a host of topics of interest to both practitioners and researchers in a specific field (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Table 2 shows the research output, based on the number of 'hits' for keywords related to bullying, across several key databases in the social sciences and business. For comparison purposes, the Table presents the research citation output for other cyberabuse terms. It appears that the majority of the literature on cyberabuse is found in behavioral or social sciences databases.

Research to date indicates that this area of cyberabuse is mired in controversial issues. For example, reporting of abuse, with concomitant abuse estimates, has validity concerns due largely to under-reporting of incidence of interpersonal transgressions (e.g., Reyns & Englebrecht, 2010). Moreover, what constitutes cyberstalking behavior varies widely across the general adult population. In a survey of students at the University of New Hampshire, Finn (2004) found that only half of the students that acknowledged being cyberstalked actually reported the incident to authorities.

## Cyber-Abuse in the Workplace

The ubiquitous nature of computer-mediated technologies have proven to be of great benefit in the productivity of modern business enterprises; yet the nefarious aspects of hi-tech communications has not escaped the workplace. For example, researchers have investigated management's concern associated with non-work Internet use. In a survey of middle-managers' perceptions of online behavior, Grossenbacher-Fabsits (2011) reported that a sizeable minority considered checking the news or weather as acceptable workplace conduct. Lin et al. (2012) studied social media usage and work values in Taiwan; demographic and personal characteristics of office workers were significant predictors. Moreover, in recent years, employers have implemented administrative oversight of

Table 2. Number of Scholarly References on Bullying Behaviors in the Workplace across Major Databases

| Database file | Workplace Bullying | Mobbing | Cyberbullying | E-harassment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PROQUEST Complete | 1229 | 533 | 51 | 24 |
| ABI-INFORM | 394 | 302 | 94 | 10 |
| Business Source Complete | 297 | 268 | 39 | 1 |
| PsycINFO | 283 | 92 | 191 | 1 |
| Expanded Academic Index | 151 | 108 | 188 | 1 |
| Sociology Abstracts | 60 | 32 | 41 | 0 |
| Communication & Mass Media | 10 | 6 | 18 | 0 |

employee computer files and E-mail which have caused concerns with regard to privacy issues, performance monitoring, and the ethics of employer surveillance (Dillon & Thomas, 2006). Of course, the abuse of technology by company employees is not new. In a 1999 survey sanctioned by the American Management Association, Greengard (2000) found that 50% of Internet use at work was not business related. Today, with the proliferation of web-sites, ease-of-access, and the medium of social networking, E-harassment has evolved into one of the most prevalent types of harassment in the workplace (Borstorff, Graham, & Marker, 2007). Moreover, despite the safeguard of company anti-harassment policies, many workers feel vulnerable to cyberabuse from fellow employees. Unfortunately, much of this concern is in regard to the threat of obsessive relational intrusion (see Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002), that can be considered cyberstalking (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarity, 2009). Indeed, many sexual harassment lawsuits in the workplace are based primarily on

evidence of allegedly inappropriate, sexual-oriented e-mails or Internet usage (Towns & Johnson, 2003). Undoubtedly, in order to limit such claims, management will need to strengthen and periodically update company harassment policy. Enforcement of such initiatives will need to be a priority in order to protect employees and safeguard the reputation of the company.

*Implications for OD*
Cyberabuse in the workplace is particularly challenging to organizational life due to the opaque, and at times anonymous, nature of this form of workplace violence. Perhaps, for this reason, any form of E-harassment would best be viewed through the lens of a) threat assessment, b) crisis management, and c) employee safety. Myer and Casile (2010), in this forum, stressed the importance of a Threat Assessment Team in dealing with incidence of workplace threats to employees. To be effective, such a team needs to be endowed with authority and responsibility towards all

involved parties, and must represent all company departments. The team's utmost directive is the maintenance of a 'safe' work setting. In support of such a strategy, Bond et al. (2010) proposed the major objective, in workplace bullying situations, as that of preserving the psychosocial safety climate for all employees. This policy assists leaders in developing a participative management style that fosters 'prevention' of the development of workplace abuse incidents. Lalonde (2007), in this forum, discussed the application of a crisis management perspective within the framework of an OD model. In this context, crisis planning is supplemented with definitive organizational contingencies. Thus, based on these interventional factors, the following OD coping strategies to deal with cybercyberabuse are proposed:

a)  Company policy must confirm, in the strongest terms, that any form of online or cyber-bullying will be classified within the domain of workplace bullying. Thus, electronic offensive behavior will be designated under strict, 'zero' tolerance standards. These policies will be made highly visible to both current and new employees, including middle and upper-management personnel;

b)  Standards on workplace friendships and romantic relationships need to be explicit, with avenues for professional counseling when interpersonal conflicts arise;

c)  Counseling options for employees who may have difficulties with anger issues should be available;

d)  Company policy, including privacy issues, on the procedures in handling complaints by 'targets' need to be unambiguous;

e)  Managers need to remain vigilant on any signs of intimidation, threat, emotional outbursts, or suspicious messaging regarding potential abusers, and aware of signs and

characteristics of 'targeted' employees;

f)  All complaints must be handled confidentially, and interventions such as mediation or counseling may need to be consulted with legal advice;

g)  Upper-management and top management need to be cognizant of the legal liabilities to the company while preserving the rights of all employees involved;

h)  Maintaining safety in a positive work environment should be a top priority; and

i)  Threat assessment, as a component of company policy, must focus on prevention and stay abreast of technological developments in communication devices that can harbor potential avenues for cyberabuse.

These recommendations would support organizational capacities to cope with changes in social mores while concomitantly remaining vigilant to potential challenges and threats inherent by modern online/wireless communications in the ever-emerging cyber world.

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