

Unmasking the face of workplace cyber-bullying

HR can step up to shut down newer forms of harassment

By Lisa Barrow

With the growing availability and use of newer technologies, workplace cyber-bullying is on the rise.

And it comes in many forms, whether it's an employee who is constantly monitored or interrupted by his boss with early morning and late night emails or texts demanding immediate responses, or a worker who finds derogatory, anonymous comments on her Facebook page that question her abilities at work.

Co-workers may resort to cyber-bullying to harass or discredit a colleague who is a candidate for promotion or special acknowledgement. Managers may rely on electronic forms of contact to control, motivate and intimidate staff.

Cyber-bullying is similar to traditional workplace bullying in that it is repetitive, abusive behaviour that devalues and harms others. While traditional workplace bullying occurs during face-to-face encounters, workplace cyber-bullying often occurs privately via aggressive emails or text messages.

The incessant use of technology to harass and intimidate an employee or colleague can easily move on to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These public forums provide the cyber-bully with a larger audience for sharing anonymous, negative comments and information about the targeted person.

When malicious comments appear, either via a text message, email or in a more public forum, it can have far-reaching and long-lasting ramifications on an individual's mental health — victims can experience anxiety, depression and stress.

Bullied employees often feel dehumanized and isolated, causing some of them to consider quitting their jobs or even suicide in an effort to end the frustration, pain and embarrassment.

HR professionals can play a significant, proactive role in preventing this type of bullying — which is not only good for employee mental health but can also help avoid litigation and liability.

How to address cyber-bullying

- Revise harassment and bullying policies to in-

RESEARCH

Policies don't cover cyber-bullying

One-quarter of employees in 10 countries are not protected from cyber-bullying, as workplaces do not cover this within existing policies, according to a 2013 survey by AVG Technologies based on responses from 4,000 people in Canada, the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic.

Only 37 per cent of adults know of a comprehensive policy that covers cyber-bullying in the workplace. This is highest in Australia (57 per cent) and the U.K. (51 per cent) and lowest in France (20 per cent) and Germany (23 per cent).

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF SURVEY:

- One in 10 respondents discovered secret discussions about them online that were initiated by colleagues using social media, and 11 per cent have had embarrassing photos or videos taken at a work event and uploaded onto social media sites. This is as high as 19 per cent in Spain and 14 per cent in the U.K.
- Four out of five (82 per cent) of adults surveyed believe sending unpleasant or defamatory remarks to or about a colleague using digital communications constitutes cyber-bullying (93 per cent in the U.K. and New Zealand).
- Other forms of cyber-bullying include posting negative comments on a social media site about a colleague's appearance at a work event (79 per cent) and criticizing a colleague

clude cyber-bullying.

- Create a procedure for reporting, investigating and addressing cyber-bullying.
- Incorporate cyber-bullying into mandatory training around harassment and bullying.
- Take a zero-tolerance stance.
- Provide support to bullied employees through employee assistance programs (EAPs).
- Respond to allegations of cyber-bullying in a timely manner.
- Commit to creating a respectful workplace environment.
- Raise awareness about workplace cyber-bul-

lying her back through email, instant messaging, social media or SMS (69 per cent).

- Nearly one in 10 (nine per cent) have had a manager use information against them or a colleague which has been found on a social media site. This is highest in the U.S. (13 per cent) and the Czech Republic (12 per cent).
- Cyber-bullying can easily spill over into heated debates in the workplace, with more than 51 per cent of respondents admitting they would confront colleagues in person if they felt they were the victim of cyber-bullying. This is as high as 65 per cent in Germany, 56 per cent in France and 54 per cent in the Czech Republic. One in 10 (11 per cent) would retaliate by cyber-bullying through digital communication.

There is a need for greater education around social media and increased attention and care toward social media etiquette at work from both employees and employers, says Tony Anscombe, AVG's senior security evangelist.

"We're not just talking about employees remaining responsible for what they post online on social networks and ensuring it is not bringing themselves or their company into disrepute or harming their colleagues — employers can trip themselves up just as easily when managing the company's own social media presence. Until everyone is clear about exactly what is and isn't acceptable online behaviour, trying to enforce policies will just fail, leaving the door open to cyber-bullying and invasion of privacy."

lying through newsletters, blogs and anti-bullying events.

- Regularly monitor emails, text messages and social media for cyber-bullying incidents.
- Require employees to sign an anti-bullying agreement.

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