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RE-ESTABLISHING THE PREVALENCE OF EMAIL BULLYING

Abstract:

Purpose: the purpose of this study is to re-evaluate the prevalence of email bullying as a result of a paucity of research on the topic in recent years. As workplace bullying continues to be a topical subject, and electronic communications continue to dominate workplace interactions, the importance of bullying requires highlighting.

Results: Bullying and uncivil behaviour by email continue to be a concern to workers and the occurrences of email bullying have not changed significantly over a 20 year period. Managers continue to be more likely to report having been bullied by email and to have received inappropriate or uncivil communications. There does not appear to be a relationship between the sender considering the needs of the recipient and the rates of email bullying.

Conclusions: Email bullying continues to be a concern with rates varying between 4% and 19.1% depending on employment role. Aggressiveness in email is also a significant concern with rates between 24.6% and 56.5% depending on employment role. There are no discernible reasons as to why managers are more likely report being bullied by email, but this study supports the conclusions of others on this topic and therefore it warrants further investigation.

Keywords:

Email, bullying, communication

1   Introduction

Bullying is defined by the Equality Act (2010) as "behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated or offended" and includes acts such as the spreading of malicious rumours, unfair treatment, undermining someone or the denial of training and promotion opportunities. Bullying has been clearly identified as significant concern in the workplace with detrimental effects on both the target and witnesses as well as having a negative effective on job satisfaction and productivity (Johnson 2009, Nielsen and Einarsen 2012, Berry et al 2012, Reknes et al 2014, Laschinger and Fida 2014, Wright and Khatri 2015). Rather than necessarily manifesting as outright bullying behaviour that might be associated with children and teenagers, Dzurec and Bromley (2012) consider that amongst adults, bullying behaviours tend to be more subtle such as eye rolling and emotional dismissal. Studies have shown a varying degree of incidence of workplace bullying. Fox and Stallworth (2005) suggested that up to 95% of employees will have had exposure to bullying behaviours over the past 5 years. In contrast Leymann (1990) identified that around 25% of the Swedish workforace has experience bullying or mobbing at some point during their career.

Electronic communication methods provide an additional channel for bullying in the workplace. Cyberbullying, the aggressive act carried out using electronic forms of contact (Smith et al 2008), is generally focused on interactions between children and teenagers (Forssell 2016). However, there is evidence to suggest that cyberbullying extends into work life and studies have shown prevalence of between 3.5% and 16% (Einarsen and skogstad 1996) up to 51% (Bilgel et al 2006). One method of perpetrating cyberbullying within the workplace is email. A number of studies (Yell 2003, Curran and Casey 2006, Hewitt 2006, 2007 Seshadri and Cartenson 2007 and Cunnigham and Greene 2002) highlight issues regarding email use ranging from concerns over load, inappropriate use, wastage and bullying. Some of these studies suggest that email bullying may simply be a result of poor education related to the use of the system. However, Carr (1998) showed that email is used maliciously by workers to politick, bully and place undue pressure on workers. Utley (1997) found that over half of users surveyed had received abusing emails, 54% of which were from managers.

Researchers such as Glendinning (2001), St Amant (2001) Fieldman and Lahlou (2004), Baruch (2005) and Lim and Teo (2009), explored the issue of bullying via email and the impact that it has on worker's productivity, work satisfaction and general performance. The issue of email bullying was brought to public attention by the jobsite reed.co.uk who conducted a survey of 3400 users about email bullying (Richardson 2003). This poll identified that managers were more likely to be targeted by bullying emails butt did not explain why this should be the case.

Fieldman and Lahlou (2004) investigated the links between e-mail bullying and blood pressure demonstrating that an e-mail designed as a reprimand can be perceived as an aggressive and bullying communication simply by the way it is worded. Some of this pressure can be attributed to senders lacking an understanding of the etiquette involved in e-mail. For example the use of capital letters indicates shouting. In addition the way the e-mail is addressed.

The issue of deliberate misuse of e-mail for the purpose of bullying others was addressed by Glendinning (2001) who found that e-mail bullying had such an effect on workplace dynamics that it altered the organisational effectiveness to such a degree as to damage strategic advantage. St

Amant (2001) discovered that the recorded nature of e-mail has little effect on the use of the medium to bully workers. With many email policies explicitly stating that message exchanges are stored and may be accessed in the event of disciplinary it is unclear why individuals would expose themselves to such actions knowingly. This calls into question the level of understanding about email management and control.

It is extremely difficult to ascertain the extent of bullying via e-mail. Studies have proven inconclusive in this area and generally conclusions have tended towards a lack of understanding on behalf of the sender and a distorted perception on the behalf of the recipient (Fieldman and Lahlou 2004). This suggests that there is potential for further exploring the extent of email bullying within modern organisations. Baruch (2005) concluded that e-mail will exist as another conduit for the carriage of abusive or bullying behaviour. The link between this and the perceived effectiveness of the e-mail medium was also made. As with any means of communication, it is open to those who wish to abuse it. This was identified very early on in email development by Kiesler *et al* (1984) who discussed that the social anonymity of e-mail communication may lead to those who would otherwise not commit this sort of behaviour bullying their peers.

Crucially, despite a number of studies into the potential effects of email having been carried out up to the mid 2000's there are very few studies that look at the impact of email bullying in the modern workplace (Forsell 2016). The lack of research is in spite of the continued growth of email as the predominant method of workplace communication (Silverstone 2018). After a large gap in investigation, this paper seeks to establish the prevalence of email bullying, and other associated behaviours, in the modern workplace and how important these issues are to users with a view to reigniting awareness of this topic. Establishing current levels of email bullying is essential in identifying ways of enhancing best practice. The measures identified as bullying type behaviours such as inappropriate content, incivility and direct bullying will be used as measures within this study. This paper will seek to understand how the levels of email bullying and incivility have changed in recent years and whether consideration of the recipient impacts on levels of email bullying.

2   Method

Sample

A survey was distributed to those employed in the Welsh Further Education sector during a two month period. A single sector was selected to reduce the number of cultural variable that would have been introduced in a study containing a range of sectors and organisations. The organisation o the sector used enabled analysis across a range of organisations, within the same sector, that shared a similar organisational structure which facilitated analysis. The survey was accompanied by an explanation of the study purpose, a request for responses and confirmation of anonymity. The target population consisted of the entire workforce stratified into Senior Management, Middle Management, Business Support and Academic roles which reflects the contract structure within the target sector. The distribution was to approximately 8000 individuals and was facilitated via email, the intranets in each institution and by paper where necessary. A bilingual version was made available to accommodate legal and cultural requirements. The survey was distributed within each institution via a specific contact. Reminders were sent on a weekly basis during the research period.

Instruments

The survey was a large scale investigation into sector wide use of email. Specific questions recorded responses related to inappropriate, bullying and uncivil email behaviour. A mix of closed and open questions were used to gauge the extent of the issue and to capture qualitative opinions on the topic. 1198 responses were received to the survey of which 1010 were completed and used for analysis, a response rate of 12%, against a target of 10%, which is adequate (Bryman 2008).

Measures

As the survey was part of a larger study into email use there are specific questions that related to the topic discussed in this paper. The items included are limited in number but are specifically relatd to establishing the prevalence of email bullying. The questions used to gather data and long answer feedback on the topic are shown in table 1 below. Responses to each of the questions were filtered by employment type to enable analysis based upon previous research that explored bullying behaviours of management and non-management grade staff.

Table 1: Summary of questions

	Question	Response type
1	What do you believe are the main drawbacks to using email?	Open responses, coded.
2	In general, do you consider the impact on the recipient before sending emails?	Closed response. Open responses follow up, coded.
3	Without naming specific individuals, please identify if you have ever received emails from colleagues or managers in your institution that you would consider to be: (various options) – Additional open ended question detail	Closed response, multiple response option. Open responses follow up, coded.

3   Results

Question 1

A total of 94.5% of all respondents provided a response to this question. There were a number of responses that coded into categories that are relevant to the issue of email bullying. A quarter (25%) of all respondents believed that a lack of human interaction is a drawback of email use. A lack of human interaction links to issues associated with misinterpretation, identified by 6.7% of respondents, which, in turn, may influence the potential for perception of bullying, incivility or aggression as identified by Baruch (2005). Senior managers were more likely to identify this as a drawback (34.8%). The potential for damaging messages which create misunderstandings was identified by 18.1% of the respondents. Again, Senior Managers were more likely to identify this as an issue (26.1%). Silverstone (2014a) explored this issue and suggested it may be related to the desire to maintain an effective working relationship which demonstrates an awareness of the issues associated with poor email use. A failure to response to emails was identified by 5.9% of

respondents. Whilst not a directly bullying behaviour, Lim and Teo (2009) categorised this behaviour as email incivility and identified that between 40% and 80% of respondents reported that line managers failed to respond to emails. Whilst the instance is lower in the case of this study, this may be due to it not being the most significant drawback identified by users. Crucially, Lim and Teo (2009) identified this behaviour in line managers, in this study it was non-managers who were more likely to identify this as a drawback to email use.

Question 2

The purpose of this question was to see whether having due consideration of the recipient would reduce the potential for behaviours associated with email bullying and uncivil behaviour. 85.2% of respondent believed that they considered the impact of their email on the recipient, 14.8% did not. This suggests that senders attempt to consider the needs of others before sending emails. This lends further weight to the findings of Silverstone (2014a) in relation to the maintenance of healthy working relationships. Analysing the findings in relation to the workforce strata there are no significant differences observed (x=3.926, p=0.270).

Respondents were asked to qualify their answer via an open ended response, these were categorised for further analysis. 35.7% of all respondents provided comments related to the concern over the appearances of the email sent and the way in which it may be interpreted by the recipient. The issue of perception is important as the open responses tended towards the sender ensuring that they were not seen to look bad, rather than actively attempting to help the recipient. The next most common response types were those related to the time management of either themselves, or the recipient, at 15.6%. Again, this does suggest some consideration of the needs of recipients but is less related to perceptions. The difference between the strata was, again, insignificant (x=27.341, p=0.160) It is clear that participants reported considering the needs of the recipients but how this manifested itself was not entirely clear.

Question 3

Particpants were asked to identify whether they had received emails that exhibited certain behaviours. Some of these have previously been identified as direct email bullying behaviours, whilst others, such as inappropriate or offensive content, have been included to stretch the definition beyond the previously established boundaries. The responses to this question are shown in Table 2 and clearly demonstrate that email bullying, despite moves by organisations to address workplace bullying, still exists and is at previously recorded levels.

Table 2: Instances of email bullying filtered by employment type

Response	Senior Management	Middle Management	Business Support	Academics	Overall Average
Inappropriate content	30.4%	29.6%	12.5%	13.7%	16.6%
Aggressive tone	56.5%	53.7%	24.6%	29.1%	32.9%
Bullying	10.9%	19.1%	4.0%	13.1%	11.1%
Offensive content	13%	16%	6.5%	10.6%	10.3%

The results demonstrate comparable results to previous studies specifically focused on email bullying, however, the establishing of the rates of email bullying has not been a specific focus of many studies. Baruch (2005) identified that around 9.2% of employees had experienced bullying via email. Richardson (2003) identified slightly higher rates of email bullying at around 16.7% of respondents receiving bullying emails. There are no other direct comparisons available, as noted by Forsell (2016) as the broader area of cyberbullying, which includes email bullying, has taken prominence. Lim and Teo (2009) considered rates of email incivility which could be considered as distinct from email bullying. The distinction can be drawn where bullying is considered to be a deliberate act whereas incivility could be as a result of a passive act. However, what is clear is that the issues around inappropriate and offensive content have not been researched previously. The results in this study show that 32.9% of respondents had received email that they perceived to contain an aggressive tone. Aggressive tone may better align with the work conducted by Lim and Teo (2009) in terms of being uncivil as opposed to direct bullying but it still represents a worrying trend. Finally, inappropriate content, at 16.6%, and offensive content at 10.3% were reported by respondents.

41 examples of inappropriate content were provided for discussion. A number of the example discussed the circulation of inappropriate jokes and the use of email to performance manage others in a backhanded way. Lim and Teo (2009) suggested that the circulation of jokes should be considered uncivil behaviour. 113 examples of either bullying or aggressive behaviours were reported. Specific examples of bullying behaviour were reported, along with a significant number of responses that reported aggressive tones in email. A lack of social niceties were repeated reported in the open ended responses. This practice leads to a perception of aggression, or even bullying, type behaviours. Only 2 examples of offensive emails were reported. The analysis of the open ended questions support the identification of the behaviours in the multiple choice questions and demonstrate that respondents are able to correctly classify the behaviours when compared to established definitions.

4   Discussion

The results have demonstrated that the prevalence of email bullying has remained relatively constant regardless of the increased awareness surrounding the issue of workplace bullying, as highlighted by Samnani and Singh (2012). The most telling outcome of the analysis is the difference between management and non-management staff in the study. Management staff were more likely to identify the drawbacks to email that can be associated with bullying or uncivil behaviour and were more likely to identify their negative impacts on all staff. Management grade staff were also more likely to report that they had been directly bullied by email, especially those in middle management roles (19.1%). Senior managers were less likely to report being bullied by email than academics but the overall picture is one of managers being more likely to identify having been bullied by email. This is in keeping with the findings of previous authors where managers were more likely to report being bullied in this way (Richardson 2003, Forsell 2016). It is not at all clear why this should be the case and previous studies have failed to identify the cause. There is value in undertaking further study into why management grade staff are more likely to report being bullied by email.

The inclusion of the question related to whether senders consider the needs of recipients yielded interesting results. The inclusion of the question was intended to ascertain whether users thought about the needs of others when sending emails and the responses were monitored specifically in relation to indicators that avoiding behaviours that may be indicative of bullying or uncivil behaviour was an aim. A significant proportion of respondents reported that they did think of the needs of the recipient when sending emails but the open ended responses indicated that the consideration of others was largely self-serving in that the aim was to avoid misinterpretation, rather than to actually reduce the potential negative impact on the recipient.

5   Conclusions

The instance of email bullying has not reduced significantly in the period considered by this study (1996 – 2019), this is despite the use of email increasing significantly during a similar period as observed by Silverstone (2014b). The study has also revealed that managers are still mostly likely to report being bullied by email, however, the reasons for this are not clear and warrant further investigation. The study confirms previous work and adds to the existing body of knowledge by providing an up to date census on the prevalence of email bullying. The confirmation that managers are more likely to report being bullied by email is important as it demonstrates the value of further investigation in this area. The inclusion of behaviours not previously considered to be direct bullying adds an additional dimension to this area of research. Finally, the inclusion of the consideration of others measure alongside bullying rates demonstrates that, whilst users feel that they consider the needs of the recipient, this does not appear to have a noticeable impact on bullying rates. However, this would need further investigation to confirm a connection between the two.

6   Limitations

There are limitations that may impact upon the generalisability of the results. The study focused on a specific sector and so the application of the findings on other sectors may not yield consistent results. The results are based on self-reported experiences from surveys which does introduce limitations on the results, however, the use of other more rigorous methods would have severely limited the sample size and ability to gather results on the topic so the limitation can be viewed as acceptable.

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