



# Workplace bullying costly, often unnoticed

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Biff, the bully from the Back to the Future movies, is in every way an iconic symbol of the big, bad bully some teens dealt with in school. For employers, the workplace bully can just as easily be receptionist Sally, and she may very well be costing the company thousands of dollars.

Workplace bullying happens frequently but many HR managers may be in the dark. About one-in-three (35%) of employees admitted they've had an office bully and more than one-quarter of HR managers say they think workplace bullying happens at least somewhat often at their company, according to recent research from the staffing firm OfficeTeam.

"Bullying can cost a company tens of thousands of dollars each year due to absenteeism, presenteeism and lost productivity, stress-related issues, and more," says Bert Alicea, a licensed psychologist and vice president of EAP and work/life services at Health Advocate. "When employees are distracted or upset due to bullying, they are not able to perform at their best, so bullying causes companies to lose potential income while negatively impacting employee morale."

In addition to lost productivity, low employee morale and a toxic company culture, office bullying can lead to higher turnover – increasing money spent on recruiting and training new talent. "And if the bully remains employed with the company while a high-performer departs, there is a high likelihood that the cycle will continue repeating," says Alicea.

According to similar research released earlier this year from the Workplace Bullying Institute, 37 million U.S. workers reported being subjected to "abusive conduct."

Some employers implement separate training for both supervisors and employees. "By making sure that managers can quickly identify potential issues and take steps to respond and intervene early on, it's possible to protect employees and stop the behavior," says Alicea.

Having a solid procedure in place, and adequate upfront training, is imperative to make sure bullying problems are nipped in the bud.

Training for all employees is "essential," Alicea notes. And during training, encourage employees to report incidents as soon as possible so situations can be handled within an appropriate time frame, he adds.

A written complaint form is also essential to document the incident and protect all involved, he says, while advising employers to have, if possible, several neutral people employees can report to. At a minimum, this form should include:

- A place to note the names of those involved.
- The place and time of the incident.
- An explanation of what happened.

Also, he adds, be sure to have an option for anonymous reporting. While harder to investigate and verify, bystander intervention is "critical" he says, as 40% of victims do not report bullying.

## Who is the bully?

According to the WBI study, conducted every three to four years, the vast majority of bullies are men (69%). Male perpetrators seem to prefer targeting women (57%) more than other men (43%).

Female bullies were less “equitable” when choosing their targets for bullying, the study notes. Women bullied other women in 68% of cases.

“For employees, bullying frequently takes place via social media, email and other online communications,” says Alicea. “Because of this, employers are introducing specific training to combat cyber-bullying and raise awareness of appropriate online etiquette.”

Another benefit of providing anti-bullying training is it can also offer some legal protection for organizations if an employee files a lawsuit due bullying, he says.

“Training also ensures that all supervisors and employees fully understand the reporting procedures involved should an incident of bullying take place,” he adds. “This will help employers’ HR departments investigate and resolve issues more efficiently.”