

## **Workplace Mobbing: a proactive response**

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# Workplace Mobbing: a proactive response

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## **Abstract**

This article identifies mobbing in the workplace as a problem within contemporary organisations. Drawing on parallels with workplace bullying, the article develops a discourse of mobbing and suggests some of the costs organisations may be faced with if they fail to address the problem. The article then builds on suggestions including legislative change to suggest solutions for the development of more co-operative workplaces. Such workplaces would deal proactively with the problem in a problem solving, rather than punitive, framework. Considerations of the reasons for an economic argument to address the problem are advanced, as is the development of 'soft' skills within a bounded emotionality and learning organisation framework.

Keywords: Workplace bullying; workplace mobbing; costs of workplace bullying; bounded emotionality; learning organisation.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary organisations within capitalist societies are faced with ever changing pressures, such as the process of globalisation (Frenkel & Kim, 2004), the threat of terrorism (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003), creating competitive advantage (Chew & Horwitz, 2004), the need for continuous change (Fay & Lührmann, 2004) and the pressure to increase employee performance (Worrall, Parkes & Cooper, 2004). Evidence of corporate reaction to the uncertainty produced by these pressures may be seen in the growth of contemporary managerial approaches such as downsizing (McKinley, Zhao & Rust, 2000), calls for improved managerial leadership (Parry & Proctor-Thompson, 2003) and employability orientation (van Dam, 2004). Together these terms indicate a discourse centered on organisational change that is affecting organisations and their people. One outcome within the discourse of organisational change appears to be workplace mobbing.

There are three aims for this paper. The first is to identify workplace mobbing and to begin to develop a discourse of mobbing. The second is to advance an argument relating to the costs of workplace mobbing. The third is to suggest solutions to the problem. By so doing, this paper will contribute to the growing dialogue recognising the debilitating outcomes of workplace mobbing, as well as providing ideas and making positive suggestions for overcoming the problem.

The process used to achieve these aims is as follows. A brief outline of the ways mobbing may be identified in contemporary organisations is undertaken in the first section. The impact of mobbing on staff is also addressed. In the second section of the paper, a series of studies identifying the outcomes of such behaviours, including the effect on the individual and the costs to the organisation, are discussed. Drawing on available evidence identifying the problem of workplace mobbing discussed to this stage, the final section of the paper will suggest a solution to the problem. The solution is centered on the development of skills necessary for more appropriate behaviours in contemporary organisations.

## **Identifying mobbing**

Leymann (1990) appears to be the first to use the term mobbing in research undertaken in Sweden. The term is largely recognised as identifying aggressive actions and psychological assault by work groups against a colleague or colleagues (Cusack, 2000; Di Martino, Hoel & Cooper, 2003; Leymann, 1996). This is particularly the case in European and Scandinavian literature, although the term is similarly used in the United States (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999) and Canada (Westhues, 2004). In general, the mobbing specific literature tends to be focussed on passive aggressive group behaviour that is used as a deliberate strategy to cause harm to another worker and with the intention of having that worker relinquish their employment (Shallcross, 2003). Furthermore, mobbing is represented by degrees, similar to those used to illustrate the severity of burning, that is first, second and third degree mobbing (Davenport et al., 1999).

There is some recognition in the literature of the actions typifying workplace mobbing, and of the consequences of those actions for those who experience mobbing. It is important that such actions and consequences are readily identifiable. In part, this is because it is necessary to ensure common understanding of the problem and to enable understanding of criteria against which such actions may be measured (Yamada, 2000). In this way we may avoid labelling conflict that occurs as part of

normal human interaction at work as mobbing (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Lewis, 2000, 2003). It is necessary to have such measures to avoid spurious and vexatious claims of mobbing by those seeking other goals (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

Shallcross (2003), in an insightful analysis of the literature, suggests 12 criteria by which mobbing may be recognised. They include: systematic collusion; malicious intent to cause harm; behaviour that is frequent and enduring; a power imbalance; passive aggressive behaviour against any worker; women at risk from other women, particularly in female dominated workplaces; those who experience mobbing often being trusting, co-operative, conscientious, and high achievers, loyal to the organization and identify strongly with their work; escalation of a minor conflict; management failing to recognise what is occurring and, when they do, tending to side with the perpetrators; the person experiencing mobbing is deemed to be at fault; the actions result in the person experiencing mobbing leaving the workplace; and the person who experiences mobbing is left severely traumatised, resulting in general health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, or sometimes in suicide (Einarsen & Matthiesen, 2002; Lewis, Coursel & Herting Wahl, 2002).

What is evident is that there is a deliberate intention on the part of the perpetrators to unite against their colleague or colleagues with the deliberate intention of causing harm (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1996; Shallcross, 2003). Mobbing may be identified, therefore, as a malevolent effort to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified allegations that are intended to cause harm, disgrace and embarrassment through the use of general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or psychological terror (Leymann, 1996; Westhues, 2002). While the outcome of mobbing often results in the person who experiences the mobbing leaving the workplace, psychological, physical and financial damage also occur (Davenport, et al., 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003).

### **Developing a discourse of mobbing**

Australia has been slow to recognise the problem of workplace mobbing and thus there is a paucity of research from which to draw. As mobbing often is likened to workplace bullying, for the purposes of this paper, this section mostly draws on the body of literature dealing with workplace bullying to draw parallels to workplace mobbing.

Lewis and Sheehan (2003) assert that the debate about workplace bullying is evidenced in Australian, European, North American, and Scandinavian research in particular. A similar claim may be made for workplace mobbing in the European and Scandinavian literature in particular. In Australia, the debate is contained mostly to the work of Shallcross (2003). Drawing from the argument expressed by McCarthy and Rylance (2001), it may be argued that in recognising the developing nature of the research on workplace mobbing, our understandings of the problem, and our limited understanding of appropriate interventions to address the problem, may be advanced. McCarthy and Rylance suggest that it is the diversity of our knowledge and understandings that aid research and thinking into workplace bullying, an argument that may be extrapolated to include workplace mobbing. Such diversity may be evidenced in a small sample of the workplace bullying and workplace mobbing literature that follows.

By way of explanation, Lewis (2002) suggests that the speed of organisational change and the inappropriate methods used by many managers in coping with change results in instances of workplace bullying. In taking a social constructivist position, Lewis seeks to explore how the moral agents of bullying report the problem. He argues that it is the colleagues of those experiencing workplace bullying who are most actively involved in the social construction process, alerting us to their role in the generation of labelling and meaning for workplace bullying. He concludes, therefore, that while the moral agents are disseminating information about workplace bullying, they are failing to validate the experience of workplace bullying or to fully examine its causes. A similar argument may be made for workplace mobbing.

Salin (2003), using a cross-sectional survey method, reports on a study undertaken among a cohort of professional employees. Her central tenet is that, in some instances, workplace bullying is a form of organisational politics. Drawing from quantitative and qualitative data, she reports that significant correlations were found between organisational politics and the experience of being bullied in the workplace. She argues that such a finding may indicate that workplace bullying is used as a tool for sabotaging the efforts of others in the workplace. She further points to the relationship between workplace bullying, internal competition and stress, concluding that reward systems should not be seen to favour those who use bullying strategies to further their own ends.

A similar argument may be found in the work of Shallcross (2003). Using an episodic interview approach, she interviewed eight women, seven of whom had been forced out of their employment by work colleagues. These colleagues had persistently used passive aggressive behaviours, such as spreading rumours and making false accusations against their target. The outcome for the participants in the study included long-term psychological damage, loss of employment and loss of financial security. She concluded that workplace mobbing is illustrative of a dysfunctional organisational culture where those who are in the dominant group are able to attack those who are seen as different.

The significance of the impact of workplace bullying and workplace mobbing are not well understood from the individual viewpoint. Within the bullying literature, Matthiesen, Aasen, Holst, Wie and Einarsen (2003) offer a new insight by adopting a case study approach. Using the story of one person's experience of being bullied at work as a nurse in a preventative health care institution, the authors use a theoretical model of conflict to explore the significant events and behaviour during the conflict process. More importantly, they offer a story where there is a rare, positive outcome for the person who experiences workplace bullying. They also point to the limitations of their approach and suggest that the voice of the other party to the conflict, the alleged perpetrator, also needs to be heard.

Westhues (2004) and Shallcross (2003) do begin to explain the problem of workplace mobbing from the individual viewpoint. Much, however, remains to be done. This includes understanding gender differences, understanding differences between those in the dominant group and those who experience workplace mobbing, and the identification of discriminatory characteristics of workplace mobbing (Shallcross, 2003).

### **Costs of workplace mobbing**

There appear to be no reliable estimates of the costs of workplace mobbing to the individual, the organisation or society in general. What follows then, is an extrapolation from the workplace bullying literature of the likely costs of workplace mobbing. What needs to be mentioned is that within the workplace bullying literature, there is also a paucity of research into costs. The costs to individuals and organisations are now examined.

#### ***Individuals***

Mobbing has significant consequences for those who experience it directly and also those who witness it. Impacts on individuals include a wide range of health, psychological and financial distressors which in some cases have long-term health consequences. The outcomes from workplace mobbing have been linked to psychological impacts such as psychological damage (Shallcross, 2003) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). Research also suggests that workplace mobbing impacts on individuals' relationships outside of work (Davenport, et al., 1999). Both Australian and international research, however, into the impact of workplace mobbing upon families and significant others is scarce, incomplete and lacking in any strong empirical perspective.

#### ***Organisations***

Some of the costs of behaviours associated with workplace bullying have been identified. In the United Kingdom, Hoel, Sparks and Cooper (2001) estimated that workplace bullying absenteeism contributed an extra 18 million lost working days annually. By contrast, Rayner, Hoel and Cooper (2002) argues that costs are rarely estimated reliably but rather are lost in the daily activities of those who are required to deal with the problem. As such, the true costs remain unaccounted for. In the Scandinavian countries, the need for intervention by personnel officers, personnel consultants, managers of various grades, occupational health staff, and external consultants in an endeavour to overcome the problem have been conservatively estimated at 30,000 to 100,000 US dollars (Leymann, 1990). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research quantifying the impact workplace mobbing has on organisations. Such a model would need to account for the hidden costs such as client and industry perceptions, investor confidence, and loss of knowledge capital. Generally, only the obvious organisational impacts are considered such as absenteeism, turnover and productivity (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003).

Sheehan, McCarthy, Barker, and Henderson (2001) have developed a cost model that can estimate the financial burden of workplace bullying in organisations. Due to a lack of prevalence rates in Australia, however, it has been necessary for them to use international figures to estimate the cost to Australian organisations. Faley, Knapp, Kustis, and Dubois (1999) have developed a costing model for sexual harassment, which takes into account reduced productivity, legal, medical, counselling, separation, replacement, transfer, and absenteeism costs, as well as costs related directly to the incident. Such comprehensive methods of estimating costs do not appear to have been developed for workplace mobbing. A similar model to those of Sheehan et al. (2001) and Farley et al. (1999) clearly is needed. The paucity of Australian research of the impact of workplace mobbing on individuals and organisations undoubtedly restricts the development of sound policy and interventions.

Despite the paucity of research into workplace mobbing in Australia, it is clear that employment relationships conducted in a manner that enables workplace mobbing to occur seriously damages the health of the employee. Additionally, such a relationship has obvious economic, legal, and public relations consequences for the employing organisation. Relationships conducted in the manner suggested above destroy or seriously damage the relationship of trust and confidence that ought to exist. It is argued that employment relationships ought to be conducted in a way that treats all workers with respect and dignity. Furthermore, respecting the dignity of an employee, and treating employees accordingly is seen as an employer obligation (Davenport, et al., 1999).

The aforementioned literature alerts us to a dark side of organisational life. The darkness includes the impact of abusive behaviour on employees, and the economic costs to the individual and the organisation. Clearly organisations need to be aware of mobbing in the workplace, and they need to be able to identify, account for, cost, and resolve conflicts when they first occur.

### **Solutions to the problem**

A number of strategies and remedies for dealing with workplace mobbing are identified in the literature. One suggested remedy is legislative change (Shallcross, 2003) enabling legal redress (Davenport, et al., 1999). Legislators, however, have been slow to heed the call. Furthermore, it could be argued that Sex Discrimination legislation, or Health and Safety legislation prevalent in countries such as Australia ought to be sufficient to ensure mobbing behaviours do not occur. The evidence proffered earlier in this paper suggests otherwise.

Legislative change has some limitations. First, legislative change may be needed to encourage behavioural change but it does not always guarantee attitudinal change. Second, it suggests a punitive approach to addressing the problem of workplace mobbing. Such an approach tends to further a hostile environment where conflict is not dealt with constructively. Third, it diverts the problem away from those who are probably best placed for dealing with the problem and into the hands of human resource staff, or others, who may not be equipped to deal with the problem from other than a strictly policy driven framework. Rather, the organisation as a whole needs to be aware of the problem of workplace mobbing so that it may act in an educative and preventative, rather than reactive, way (Westhues, 2004).

Organisations need to confront the perpetrators within a problem solving rather than punitive framework to address the problem. The persons identified as mobbers ought to be confronted about their behaviour. Second, those people ought to be offered an opportunity to deal with their behaviour within a framework of skill development. The suggestion assumes that those people confronted will have the cognitive ability to understand the nature of the problem, and the desire to address the problem for the benefit of all. Advising that person of the likely economic and legal risks to the organisation, or the likely negative outcomes for themselves should their behaviour continue, may be avenues to appeal to their better judgement.

The economic argument for dealing with workplace mobbing is yet to be developed. Drawing from what we know of costs related to workplace bullying, it may be argued

that cost estimates are not limited to the business sector. Individual victims, their families, and co-workers experience social, psychological, and economic consequences as a direct result of workplace mobbing. These impacts and effects ought to be fully explored to determine the hidden impacts of workplace mobbing on the wider community. Such effects include poor decision-making on issues with wide-ranging effects, vulnerability to corrupt practices, poor customer service and the implications, for example, of public sector client needs not being considered or effectively addressed (Sheehan et al., 2001). In this context, investing in prevention and impact-reduction strategies makes very good business sense.

The individual development argument also needs to be advanced. In so doing, I am reminded of Westhues' (2004) argument that "liberation lies in transforming the status quo" (p. 292). The aim of such a strategy is to improve the lot of society, rather than to seek or enact revenge. Westhues (2004) suggests that it is the responsibility of scholars to provide guidance for "how things might become: rather than to pontificate on "how things are" (p. 292). Thus the development of "soft" people skills (Karpin, 1995) is now suggested as a strategy for solving the problem of workplace mobbing. The skills identified as most likely to help deal with the problem of mobbing behaviours include communication, conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, leadership, negotiation, stress management, and team-building (following McCarthy, Sheehan & Kearns, 1995). To these skills I would add the development of personal mastery (Senge, 1992) and emotional intelligence skills (Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1996; Salovey and Mayer, 1990) as a way of developing self-restraint and compassion. These skills ought to be developed within a bounded emotionality framework and within the concept of the organisation as a learning organisation (following Sheehan & Jordan, 2003).

Finally, I suggest that we need to challenge the dilemmas posed by the pressures evident with contemporary organisations. By so doing we may eliminate the affects caused by mobbing behaviours as outlined in the research mentioned in this paper. In this way, we may maintain organisations in which economic benefits are achieved through care and compassion for each other, as much as for the owner, banker or shareholder. Individuals, organisations, and the community as a whole will reap the benefits of meeting such a challenge.

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