



RESEARCH BRIEF

Unwelcoming Workplaces: Bullying and Harassment of Employees with Disabilities

There is growing awareness that bullying has moved beyond the schoolyard to regularly impact people at work. This is especially true for members of historically marginalized groups. The study and understanding of workplace bullying in the U.S. is relatively new in comparison to that in other countries, and has only recently expanded to consider the experiences of individuals with disabilities. This research brief summarizes findings of a recent study examining work/life considerations of individuals with disabilities, many of whom referred their experiences of being harassed at work as “bullying.”

What are Workplace Bullying and Harassment?

Harassment: Harassment is a form of employment discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Age Discrimination Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is defined as: unwelcome conduct based on membership in a protected category — race, color, sex, national origin, age, or disability. Conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to a reasonable person or enduring offensive conduct is a condition of maintaining employment.

Bullying: There is no formal, agreed upon definition of workplace bullying. One definition is: repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (targets) by one or more perpetrators. It includes abusive conduct that is: threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, as well as work interference — sabotage — which prevents work from getting done, and verbal abuse.¹

When an individual is bullied because they have a disability, the bullying may meet the legal definition of harassment, enabling the person to file a discrimination charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

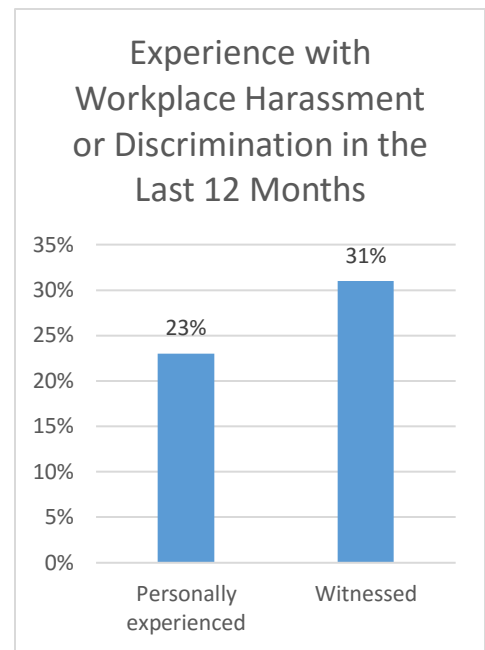
¹ Workplace Bullying Institute



Experiences of Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination

During the spring of 2014, as part of a study entitled “Getting and Keeping People with Disabilities in the Workforce: Negotiating Work, Life, and Disability,” researchers at Cornell University’s Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability fielded a survey to individuals with disabilities to gain insights about a wide range of workplace issues and experiences. Respondents were asked whether they had experienced or witnessed workplace harassment or discrimination during the last 12 months, and, if so, to describe those experiences. Twenty-three percent of respondents reported that they had been subjected to harassment or discrimination in the last 12 months, and 31% had witnessed others being subjected to such treatment. In the open-ended comments, respondents described a wide range of experiences, and although the survey did not refer to bullying, many used the term “bullying” to characterize these interactions.

Respondents described a variety of types of workplace bullying, harassment or discrimination experiences – both related and unrelated to disability. They described being excluded in the workplace – both from essential work-related interactions and from social experiences, being treated as “less than” employees without disabilities with regard to compensation and opportunities for professional development and career advancement, being treated as unwelcome or unwanted by both coworkers and supervisors, and having information about their disability shared or acted on inappropriately.



In Respondents’ Own Words

“I have been treated as if my very presence at work was a detriment to the organization. I have been publicly treated as if I could not do the job even though I have proven my ability with reasonable accommodations. “

“I am underutilized and left out of projects and meetings and left to do menial work. I feel excluded.”

“He slanders me to other Team members. Supervisors minimize it because he is such a hard and efficient worker and they don't see the verbal and emotional abuse.”

Impact on Employment

Respondents who reported experiencing or witnessing harassment or discrimination during the last 12 months also reported a poorer quality of work life (a measure of satisfaction with work and how well it meets one’s personal needs), more work/life conflict (a measure of the degree to which work and non-work activities interfere with one another), and they were more likely to report that they intended to seek employment elsewhere during the next year. Respondents with harassment and discrimination



experiences also reported generally poorer quality workplace experiences – poorer quality relationships with their supervisor and a less inclusive workplace environment in general.

Conclusion

A 2014 survey conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute indicated that 7% of workers experience bullying in a given year; and the analysis of survey results includes other forms of diversity such as gender and race, but not disability. This brief presented research which suggests that workplace experiences with harassment, discrimination, and bullying may be more common among individuals with disabilities and take a wide range of forms. Such experiences can have an impact on both the work and non-work lives of individuals with disabilities and may lead them to leave particular positions or employers in an effort to find a more welcoming environment.

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References

Namie, G. (2014). *2014 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey*. Retrieved from <http://workplacebullying.org/multi/pdf/WBI-2014-US-Survey.pdf>