

## The hidden menace: Bullying at work. By Annie Hayes

Stick and stones may break my bones but words can also hurt me. Sporting a black eye is not the only sign that a bully has been on the prowl; for the one in four workers who are bullied, verbal abuse is the more common complaint and for those on the receiving end working life can become a complete misery. Annie Hayes reports on the costs and issues.



### Turning a blind eye costs

"I can take a joke, but things in my office have got out of hand. One person gets the worst of it - emails making fun of him are sent round at least once a week and he won't ask for sugar in his tea any more as it is almost always salt. The final straw came last week. He came back from a few days' sick leave to find the contents of his desk packed in a box. On top was a "sorry you're leaving" card signed by most of the department. Apparently that was 'hilarious'."

This was a letter published in GuardianJobs earlier this year. For some workers this is the upsetting reality of life at work.

Matt Witheridge, operations manager for the Andrea Adams Trust (the world's first charity dedicated to tackling workplace bullying) says that this type of bullying is typical.

"Physical bullying is very rare – it does occur in some industries where there is manual labour for example, such as construction. More common though is the verbal type – snide comments happen behind the scenes and becomes a form of Chinese water torture."

According to the Trades Union Congress more than 2 million people are bullied at work every day. Some 18.9 million working days are lost to industry every year through bullying, and it costs individual companies between eight and 10 per cent of their annual profits on top of the threat of costly litigation which is enough to put any employer on red alert.

Last year saw the groundbreaking case of city worker Helen Green who was awarded a whopping £800,000 from former employer Deutsche Bank Group Services on grounds of bullying.

It's not just huge payouts such as these that are hitting businesses hard but also the loss in productivity and absence. And according to research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) employees who are bullied are more likely to be depressed and anxious, to be less satisfied at work, to under-perform and want to quit.

Commenting Mike Emmott, CIPD Employee Relations Adviser, says: "Bullying and harassment is a serious problem in many workplaces and employers need to take the issue more seriously. It can damage individuals' confidence, morale, motivation and sometimes their health, causing them to be less productive and effective at work. It can also trigger absenteeism, make retention rates go down and both the employer's reputation and bottom line can take a hit."

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**Matt Witheridge, Operations Manager, The Andrea Adams Trust.**

It is also a growing problem. Research released last November to coincide with National Ban Bullying at Work Day showed that 15 per cent of union safety representatives said bullying was a major problem in their workplace. That compares with 12 per cent two years ago and 10 per cent in 2002.

### Exposing the pest

For Green the bullying came in a very public form. She said colleagues stonewalled her, blew raspberries and told her: 'You stink'. For others it can take a quieter but no less damaging form – in email taunts, whispered name calling and threatening looks. For many businesses, deciding what is and isn't bullying is part of the problem.

The Royal Mail Group, an organisation that know a thing or two about bullying, illustrate this point well. Their website says the following:

*Have a look at the workplace behaviours below and decide which of them might amount to bullying and harassment.*

- *Shouting?*
- *Swearing?*
- *Giving someone too much or too little work?*
- *Being over critical?*
- *Jokes or banter?*
- *Not giving feedback?*
- *Ignoring someone?*
- *Suggestive remarks or innuendoes?*
- *Staring, leering, whistling or suggestive gesturing?*
- *Display of offensive objects or posters, such as pin-ups?*

- *Touching or brushing against someone?*
- *Asking someone out for a date?*
- *Talking about someone?*
- *Changing work priorities?*
- *Not offering proper managerial support?*
- *Public or private ridicule?*
- *Comments about dress or physical appearance?*
- *Standing very close to someone?*
- *Asking personal questions?*
- *Sending joke emails?*

The problem, say Royal Mail, is that all of the above are examples of behaviour that may amount to bullying and harassment but at the same time, some of these behaviours might, in the right circumstances, be perfectly acceptable. The conclusion they have reached is that bullying and harassment can be defined as:

Inappropriate and unwanted behaviour that could reasonably be perceived by the recipient or any other person as affecting their dignity.

Despite growing awareness of the problem and what it is, the issue still exists. According to CIPD research, 83 per cent of organisations – 90 per cent in the public sector -have anti-bullying policies but still this doesn't seem to be quashing the problem. So who is getting it right and what can businesses learn from them?

### **Zero tolerance**

Witheridge says that policy and procedure only work where they are tailored to the organisation's culture but changing custom and practice is incredibly difficult.

"The key is getting commitment. It has to be led by the chief executive. Lip-service is not enough."

David Vaughan, Royal Mail's head of diversity and inclusion, explains how they tackled the issue, which resulted in the number of bullying and harassment cases dropping by nearly 20 per cent within the last year:

"The initiatives we have introduced include: setting up a free confidential helpline staffed round the clock by professional, independent counsellors who can give advice and support to any of its people who are concerned about bullying and harassment; improving our complaint procedure if people want to take further action; training everyone in the organisation in diversity awareness; and establishing 'Dignity and Respect at Work' groups that provide a forum for people to raise issues.

"To support the awareness training Royal Mail issued a guide establishing diversity champions across the business to promote inclusion," he adds.

The NHS, says Witheridge, has also turned things around. "There is a military hierarchy within the NHS from surgeons down to the cleaners which lends itself to the abuse of large amounts of power. They have addressed this and last year they were one of the main sponsors of Ban Bullying at Work day."

According to Witheridge, they have rolled out training in different sites, provided access to advisers and painstakingly written a grievance procedure with meaning.

They've also benefited from some quick-wins. "Posters are displayed on the backs of toilet doors, which is often the place bullied employees go to cry."

Sally Humpage, CIPD diversity and employee relations adviser, remarks that bullying is not something that will go away but with awareness growing there are now better ways of dealing with it: "Employers need to encourage victims to report it, they must make sure policies are followed and provide a positive working environment. The dispute resolution legislation that was brought in a few years ago has at least created some debate on the issue even if it hasn't solved it, and dealing with complaints quickly is often the key. When things escalate, it's often the result of a lack of management training or fear. Employers have to monitor the situation by looking at grievance rates and staff surveys to see where they are."

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Diversity and Employee  
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Organisations can turn their culture around. The Royal Mail is a gleaming example of how behaviours can be addressed and improved. Bullying and harassment is not a problem that will disappear. As Humpage says: "The nature of the world we live and work in lends itself to the problem – its competitive, tough, has long hours and there can be great rewards but with that there is stress and pressure and that often breeds unfortunate types of behaviour. The key is dealing with it appropriately and making sure it doesn't fester."

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