


# BULLYING AND INCIVILITY AT WORK

An evidence review

**Practice summary and  
recommendations**  
March 2022



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 160,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.



- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9

## Practice summary and recommendations

# Bullying and incivility at work: an evidence review

## Contents

Introduction	2
What is workplace incivility?	2
Why is it important?	3
Employee-level influences on incivility	3
Leadership influences on incivility	5
Organisational-level influences	6
Interventions	6
Conclusions	8
Notes	9

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Jake Young and Jonny Gifford of the CIPD, based on a rapid evidence assessment originally funded by the ACT Health Directorate and written by Eric Barends, Denise Rousseau and Emilia Wietrak of the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA) and Alessandra Capezio of Australian National University.

Many thanks to Rachel Suff and Holly Ivins for their contributions to the writing of the report.

## Publication information

Please cite this report as: Young, J. and Gifford, J. (2022) *Bullying and incivility at work: an evidence review*. Practice summary and recommendations. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

This report and the accompanying scientific summaries are available on the [CIPD website](#).



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

## 1 Introduction

Interpersonal conflict and uncivil behaviour, such as bullying and harassment, are remarkably common in the workplace. Sometimes they lead to legal action (the UK as a whole sees over 100,000 employment tribunals a year<sup>1</sup>), but there is a far wider pool of workers who experience some sort of ‘trouble at work’.<sup>2</sup> At a broad level, a [2019 CIPD survey](#) found that just over a third of UK workers experienced either a significant incident of conflict or an ongoing difficult relationship over the previous year. More specifically, it found that 15% of employees had experienced bullying, 4% sexual harassment, and 8% other forms of harassment in the last three years.

The persistence of such serious incidents highlights that what the research terms ‘workplace incivility’ is a major HR issue. Conflict and uncivil behaviour continually ‘bubbles up’ from a point at which it may not be generally visible. Ideally it is resolved informally and not swept under the carpet – not only to avoid it festering or escalating, but also because even low-level conflict can be harmful in itself. It is vital that employers are equipped to understand where such behaviour stems from and how to prevent it. After all, good relationships are what good businesses are built upon. We are social creatures, and social support and cohesion are a [key dimension of job quality](#).

This report focuses on the beginning of the road – investigating the key drivers of bullying and incivility, to help employers shut it down at its root and maintain healthy relationships among staff. It also considers what interventions are the most promising solutions for preventing or reducing incivility. Practical guidance on tackling bullying is available in our [guide](#).

### An evidence-based approach

We live in an age of information overload, in which it is easy to be swayed by the latest fads or received wisdom. Effective decision-making can be difficult – it requires us to critically question our assumptions, not be biased by anecdote and avoid cherry-picking the evidence that confirms our world view. [Evidence-based practice](#) gives well-established approaches to help with this. Hard proof is elusive, but we can identify the best available evidence, including the most promising options to achieve our desired outcomes. Employers and HR professionals need to take note of this if they are to identify best bets for action.

This evidence review summarises the best available scientific research on the causes of workplace incivility and what works in addressing it. It is based on a rapid evidence assessment (REA), a shortened form of the systematic review. To read about our methodology, technical information and the studies on which this report is based, see the accompanying [scientific summary](#).

## 2 What is workplace incivility?

‘Workplace incivility’ covers a range of behaviours that vary in intensity, persistence and frequency. It can include rude and discourteous behaviour, undermining people, bullying, aggression, harassment, emotional abuse, abusive supervision, social exclusion or interpersonal conflict. Some of these terms are clearly established constructs with key distinguishing features; others are used interchangeably and there is a great deal of overlap between them. Below are the most widely used research constructs:



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

- **Workplace incivility:** low-intensity deviant acts, such as rude and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviour towards a member of the team, group or organisation, with ambiguous intent to harm. Often used to encompass the following terms.
- **Social undermining:** behaviour intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and a favourable reputation.
- **Bullying:** often repeated negative acts, such as verbal or physical abuse, offensive remarks and social exclusion, on the part of co-workers, supervisors or subordinates.
- **Harassment:** defined by the UK Equality Act 2010 as including *'unwanted conduct'* that violates *'an individual's dignity or [creates] an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment'*.
- **Abusive supervision:** sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviour, excluding physical contact.
- **Interpersonal conflict:** a workplace stressor involving disputes between employees.

*'Inappropriate behaviour'* is another term that is frequently used by people professionals when discussing conflict and bullying; however, this term is less distinct than the above constructs.

This evidence review focuses on the influences or causes of workplace incivility and how best to prevent or reduce it. We do not look specifically at mediation and other forms of conflict resolution, but this is an important area in its own right. More information is available in the CIPD [mediation factsheet](#).

### 3 Why is it important?

Workplace incivility has an indisputable negative impact on employees, teams and organisations. It is related to many attitudinal, behavioural and health-related outcomes, notably higher levels of anxiety, depression and burnout, reduced self-esteem, job satisfaction and performance, and increased absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover. Incivility from supervisors is found to be particularly impactful on attitudes and behaviour.

In addition, as well as affecting the individuals on the receiving end, workplace incivility affects the wider team. There is a spillover effect when employees observe the mistreatment of others. People tend to replicate abusive behaviour from their supervisors or colleagues, especially when they have experienced incivility themselves. Moreover, abusive supervision can lead to employee deviance, whereby employees behave in ways that violate workplace norms and threaten the wellbeing of the organisation and its members.

### 4 Employee-level influences on incivility

What are the main factors that lead to or reduce uncivil behaviour in teams and organisations? First and foremost, it is a question of employee behaviour. Research points to several key factors that can give rise to or help prevent workplace incivility.

#### Job demands and stress

Employees who suffer from high job demands, job stress and role overload are more likely to experience negative affective states, which in turn makes them more likely to behave in aggressive, bullying or otherwise uncivil ways. For example, one study found that those reporting higher levels of job demands were four times more likely to bully than those with low job demands.<sup>4</sup>



### **Role clarity and work autonomy**

Job characteristics also play a major part in workplace incivility. Role ambiguity (feeling uncertain about which actions to take to fulfil one's role) and role conflict (incompatible expectations and demands in a role) strongly influence workplace harassment and bullying. In fact, role ambiguity and role conflict together predict more than a fifth of cases of workplace harassment.<sup>5</sup>

Work constraints are another aspect of our jobs linked to workplace incivility. For example, a lack of resources that prevents employees from performing effectively in their job leads to frustration and potentially aggression. There is some evidence that such constraints may have an even stronger effect on incivility at work than ambiguity or role conflict.

It should be noted that people are less likely to behave in uncivil or abusive ways at work if they have a degree of autonomy in their role. Employers would do well to provide their staff with flexibility and autonomy in how, when and where people work to provide them with a sense of freedom and self-management in their roles.

### **Personality types and demographic characteristics**

We find limited research on how personality traits influence workplace incivility, but there is some evidence to suggest that 'trait anger', or a predisposition to respond to situations with hostility, is linked to workplace aggression. This is understandable, as people with short tempers will be more easily provoked into rash and unkind behaviour.

Demographic characteristics, such as age, ethnicity and educational level, have little impact on workplace incivility, although there is some evidence of gender being a possible driver. Women have been found to be more likely than men to experience bullying behaviours. One potential reason for this is differences in what men and women believe constitutes bullying: it seems men may be more likely to perceive potentially bullying behaviour as part and parcel of management, while women may be more likely to interpret them as threatening. Elsewhere, it has been suggested that women who do not conform to traditional roles (for example, who behave in ways that some consider masculine) are more likely to suffer from bullying and harassment at work.

### **Recommendations for practice**

Managers and HR professionals can reduce bullying and workplace incivility by focusing on employees and their working lives in several key ways:

- Be aware of the stressors faced by your staff. Those who are overloaded in their role are likely to experience more negative emotions, and subsequently display aggression and bullying.
- Prioritise designing jobs in ways that ensure staff are clear about which actions to take to fulfil their role, and that the demands of their job are not so great that they cannot meet expectations.
- Ensure staff feel a level of self-management and control over their working life by providing them with autonomy to decide how, when and where they work.
- Think about who in your workplace is reporting unprofessional and abusive behaviour at work. For example, if it is mostly female employees who are raising issues, steps need to be taken to consider if there are inequality issues to address, and what can be done to prevent inappropriate attitudes or poor conduct at work.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

## 5 Leadership influences on incivility

Managers and leaders have a crucial role in helping their staff understand and agree upon what needs to be done, how it can be done effectively and facilitating them to accomplish shared objectives. How they choose to do this is influenced not only by their style of leadership, but by their people management skills and their interactions at higher organisational levels. All these factors can play a part in either increasing or reducing workplace incivility.

### Fair leadership

Leadership style concerns not only the style of a single leader, manager or supervisor, but also the general norms of how leaders are expected to behave within an organisation. Research finds that leaders perceived as authoritarian, unethical or laissez-faire are more likely to behave abusively. On the other hand, those perceived as constructive, ethical and fair are less likely to do so and in fact are likely to inhibit workplace incivility.

### People management skills

While some managers have excellent task skills and competencies and are understandably promoted because of these, people management skills are more important for those in leadership positions to prevent incivility at work. Indeed, evidence suggests that a lack of effective management skills is a significant factor contributing to workplace bullying, authoritarian management and failure to address workplace incivility when it occurs.

### Managerial stressors

As mentioned earlier, workplace incivility can spill over and trickle down the organisation. This is true for supervisors and leaders, whose affective state is likely to be negatively influenced by poor experiences with higher management and perceptions of unfair treatment. This in turn leads to them being more likely to mistreat their staff. Evidence finds these stressors contribute to a feeling of being overloaded in their role, which is a key source of leaders' negative emotions. On the other hand, leaders who have to deal with relatively few of the above stressors are much more likely to feel in control and are subsequently much less likely to behave in abusive or uncivil ways.

### Recommendations for practice

Leaders, and HR professionals involved in selecting and developing them, play a major role in reducing bullying and workplace incivility. In particular:

- Prioritise values and attitudes when recruiting or promoting people managers. Especially look for constructive and ethical behaviour.
- Understand the stressors of your managers and highlight the importance of healthy, fair relationships throughout the organisation to lessen the risk of them feeling overworked in their role.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

## 6 Organisational-level influences

### Organisational fairness

It is unsurprising that perceived unfairness is found to be the strongest organisational driver of workplace incivility. Procedural justice is especially influential – for example, if an employee is punished for failing to meet what is perceived as an unreasonable demand, this is likely to be experienced as bullying or an abuse of power. The employee may consequently retaliate by behaving aggressively against their supervisor or colleagues, which can upset the norms of the organisation as a whole. It is also the case for distributive justice: employees who perceive outcomes as unfair are likely to blame the source of the decision and, again, may become aggressive towards their organisation or supervisor, for example by taking sick leave.

#### What's fair?

What do we mean by fairness? There are a number of theories and definitions of the nature of fairness, but the dominant lens in organisational psychology is that of 'organisational justice'. This can refer to:

- procedural justice: how fair the processes or approaches used to make decisions are, for example because they are seen as open to input (positive influence) or subject to bias (negative)
- distributive justice: how fair the outcomes of a decision or allocated resources are
- interactional or social justice: how fairly people are treated when procedures are implemented.

For a more in-depth appraisal of approaches to fairness in organisational life, see our report, [\*The Changing Contours of Fairness\*](#).

### Recommendations for practice

Organisation-wide factors, such as shared expectations and agreed social norms, are an important influence on the likelihood of bullying and workplace incivility:

- Develop your understanding of the components and dynamics of fairness. Insights into this area come from psychology and other research insights, but also from collecting organisational data and personal accounts from your workforce.
- Build a relevant, contextualised approach to how colleagues throughout the organisation should be treated fairly and communicate these insights widely.

## 7 Interventions

The body of research into the effectiveness of interventions aimed to reduce workplace incivility is thinner, compared with the extensive research into factors that influence incivility. Nevertheless, we do find some evidence that points to several approaches to tackling workplace incivility that have seen some success and should be considered. One systematic review makes a distinction between three categories of interventions.<sup>6</sup>





1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

### **Building capability to manage conflict**

First, employers can build capability and skills to reduce or manage bullying and incivility among staff. This typically involves training and educational workshops to improve conflict management skills among staff. The most widely researched intervention, known as *cognitive rehearsal*, involves staff engaging in role-playing exercises whereby they are educated about bullying and allowed to learn and practise responses to such behaviour through co-operative group work in a safe environment. This helps them build confidence in managing workplace conflict. Providing employees with this sort of experiential learning and enabling them to run through possible future scenarios is particularly effective once they have been taught about workplace incivility and its effects and trained how to communicate assertively when conflict arises.

### **Support and resources to respond to incivility**

Second, employers can provide employees with the practical support and resources to reduce or manage bullying and incivility. For example, zero tolerance of bullying and harassment programmes have been found not only to improve knowledge of how to report bullying issues, but to encourage staff to use support mechanisms available to them.

### **Reducing the impacts of incivility**

Third, employers can mitigate the fallout of incivility and help people to cope if they face any negative outcomes of bullying. Cognitive behavioural therapy programmes have been found to be effective in reducing the number of complaints made by staff due to health issues, low mood and physical symptoms of stress.

### **Success criteria for effective interventions**

In addition to providing evidence on what interventions are likely to work, research gives us insights into how they should be implemented – that is, what characteristics make these interventions effective. Key things to prioritise are:

- Employees should be involved in the design and implementation of the intervention. Using their experiences helps give them a sense of agency and ownership, rather than being passive recipients of the programme.
- Multi-component interventions appear to be more effective than isolated single-pronged interventions, especially if they work at different ‘levels’. For example, programmes will be more effective if they not only develop individuals’ interpersonal skills, but also target organisational processes to report and deal with incivility, and include visible commitment from senior management to tackling it, rather than doing just one of these things.
- Use consistency in the development, implementation and evaluation of an intervention to address workplace incivility.

These approaches to workplace incivility interventions reflect a growing body of research in this area. However, as noted above, there is less robust research exploring how to address workplace incivility when compared with that discussing its factors of influence. We therefore recommend that where HR professionals do develop interventions targeting workplace incivility, they do not do so at the cost of ignoring the crucial factors of influence that are the root causes, or that make it less likely in the first place.



### Recommendations for practice

- Prioritise prevention over cure, focusing on addressing the root causes of workplace incivility. Interventions to address or cope with workplace incivility are unlikely to be sufficient in their own right and are not an excuse to neglect the underlying issues.
- Nevertheless, ensure staff feel confident and prepared to approach workplace incivility should it occur by providing them with the capability and resources needed to do so.
- To help make interventions effective, involve employees in their design and implementation.
- Keep interventions wide-ranging, so that they target both individual development and organisational processes.

## 8 Conclusions

In this review, we focused specifically on addressing the key influencers of workplace incivility. While not explored here, the CIPD has a number of reports looking at other aspects of workplace relationships, notably [managing conflict in the workplace](#), [dealing with conflict at work](#) and our [introduction to line manager competencies](#).

Uncivil behaviour and bullying at work can lead to a host of unwanted outcomes for individuals, teams and organisations as a whole. While there is some research on how to address such behaviour as it manifests, there is clearly a great deal more success in focusing on the key drivers of workplace incivility.

These factors of influence relate to employees, leaders and the organisation as a whole, and may therefore co-exist or interact. But they clearly point to a need to focus on getting the climate right at work. This means that it is imperative to build healthy, resilient, supportive and supported teams who feel able to effectively perform at work in ways that suit them, without being overloaded with work or held back by a lack of clarity in their roles. In this sense, organisations can begin to prevent workplace incivility at its core, rather than tackling its symptoms.

We must not only prioritise the wellbeing and autonomy of individual employees to enable them to thrive at work, but consider how their jobs are designed and how managers are trained to develop teams that support each other, rather than engaging in poor behaviour. Doing this will promote a healthy work climate, which is key to preventing workplace incivility in the future.



## 9 Notes

- <sup>1</sup> UK Employment tribunal statistics.
- <sup>2</sup> Fevre, R., Lewis, D., Robinson, A. and Jones, T. (2012) *Trouble at work*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- <sup>3</sup> Gifford, J., Gould, M., Latreille, P. and Urwin, P. (2016) 'Workplace conflict: who, where, when, and why?' In: Saundry, R., Latreille, P. and Ashman, I. (eds), *Reframing resolution: innovation and change in the management of workplace conflict*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp57-77.
- <sup>4</sup> Salin, D. (2015) Risk factors of workplace bullying for men and women: the role of the psychosocial and physical work environment. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. Vol 56, No 1. pp69-77.
- <sup>5</sup> Bowling, N.A. and Beehr, T.A. (2006) Workplace harassment from the victim's perspective: a theoretical model and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol 91, No 5. p998.
- <sup>6</sup> Escartin, J. (2016) Insights into workplace bullying: psychosocial drivers and effective interventions. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*. Vol 9.



# CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development  
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom  
**T** +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201  
**E** [cipd@cipd.co.uk](mailto:cipd@cipd.co.uk) **W** [cipd.co.uk](http://cipd.co.uk)

Incorporated by Royal Charter  
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)  
and Scotland (SC045154)

Issued: March 2022 Reference: 8220 © CIPD 2022