



▶▶ ACCORDING TO DATA FROM WORKPLACEBULLYING.ORG, 30 PERCENT OF AMERICANS ARE BULLIED AT WORK IMPACTING 76.3 MILLION WORKERS, WITH MORE THAN 61 PERCENT OF THE BULLYING TAKING PLACE BY THE SAME GENDER AS THE PERSON BEING BULLIED (43 PERCENT OF REMOTE WORKERS INDICATE THEY FEEL BULLIED).



▲ **DR. DIANA UCHIYAMA, JD, PsyD, CAADC**, is the executive director of the Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program (LAP).

✉ duchiyama@illinoislap.org

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Social Isolation and Bullying in the Workplace

Is your organization belittling its aging workforce?

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED A

sense of isolation, despite being surrounded by people as part of an organization or family system? Recently, I was doing an assessment of an older lawyer experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety. He stated, "I often have a sense that I am no longer valued, or feel connected with the people I work for, and it feels as if they are encouraging me to leave the practice without verbally saying it to me out loud."

When I asked him what he felt was contributing to these feelings of being separated from the group, despite his length of service and hard work, he stated: "They moved my desk to a different location, where I have little to no interaction with the rest of the firm, and they rarely interact with me or engage me to see how I am doing." This is not the first time I have heard of similar microaggressions in the workforce related to undervaluing older judges and lawyers [see "Acts of Microaggression" on page 18].

Signs of bullying in the workplace

With an aging population of baby boomers, including judges and attorneys in the workforce, this appears to be an increasing problem that should be addressed by each firm, agency, and government entity. Workplace bullying is defined as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment by one or more employees of an employer." (See workplacebullying.org.)

Subtle signs and symptoms of bullying in the workforce include the following, but are not limited to:

- isolation and exclusion of the employee;
- ignoring or "forgetting" to include them in decisions, meetings, or activities;

- minimization of their work or making someone feel useless or undervalued;
- creating or encouraging hostility among other colleagues;
- unfair or undue criticism of the person and their work;
- changing an employee's work role or responsibilities without justification;
- blocking advancement or growth in the organization; and
- belittling employees and the value of their work and role in the organization.

The damage bullying and ostracism inflict

Did you know studies show bullying and social isolation in the workplace inflict more damage on the physical and mental well-being of those in the workforce than sexual harassment? It can lead to higher levels of anxiety, stress, depression, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, and health problems such as high blood pressure, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, and ulcers. According to data from workplacebullying.org, 30 percent of Americans are bullied at work impacting 76.3 million workers, with more than 61 percent of the bullying taking place by the same gender as the person being bullied (43 percent of remote workers indicate they feel bullied).

Studies from the University of Ottawa and the University of Manitoba indicate that ostracism in the workforce is more harmful than harassment, including sexual harassment, and often leads to higher levels of health problems, job dissatisfaction, and resignations. People who experience bullying often indicate during their Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program assessment that they feel traumatized,

powerless, and helpless, and that these feelings contribute to lower self-esteem, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, and lower productivity. They often lose motivation for work despite wanting to continue working, and often become involved in a cycle of ruminating about work, losing sleep prior to starting work, spending large amounts of time trying to manage the situation, and ultimately feeling defeated and resigned to leaving their employment despite feeling mentally capable of work-related duties.


According to a U.S. survey in the journal *Organization Science*, people are less likely to be seen as a bad person for ignoring or excluding someone than for openly insulting, yelling at, or threatening a person. Additionally, one is less likely to be caught or reported for ostracizing or isolating someone and can easily claim lack of intent as their defense, including being too busy to respond to emails or phone calls or failing to ask the ostracized person's opinion or input. In many workplace surveys, workers report a greater sense of isolation in the workforce than harassment since most organizations are mandated to provide harassment trainings on an annual basis. As a result of

not identifying and addressing ostracism, bullying, and isolation as problems in the workforce, your workforce becomes less engaged, less motivated, less productive; and experiences higher rates of absenteeism, less commitment, and greater attrition, all of which are cost prohibitive for an employer (perhaps even more so during a very challenging job market).

It is really time to address and tackle social isolation, ostracism, and bullying in the workforce, especially for the aging baby-boomer population who are currently working longer than their peers and may not have the economic capability to retire due to the long-lasting economic downturns of 2008 and the current pandemic. Employers are responsible for educating management that this type of behavior cannot and will not be tolerated. It leads to higher expenses in the long term, as you may be subject to workplace lawsuits, higher rates of worker's compensation claims, higher rates of health care costs, and reduced efficiency and production.

It is incumbent on the workforce to create an environment of collegiality, teamwork, cooperation, and positive

expectations for all employees. Creating mentorship relationships with younger, less-seasoned employees is an ideal step, as it creates opportunities for learning among the younger lawyers and provides a safe refuge for them.

We all crave a sense of belonging—an emotional need to be an accepted member of a group—and we all want to feel valued and prized for our knowledge and expertise. There is no worse feeling in the world than to be rejected by the very environment in which we spend the most time. The psychologist Erik Erikson indicated that one of the final stages of psychosocial development is retrospection, whereby people look back on their lives and accomplishments and develop feelings of contentment and integrity if they believe they have led a happy and productive life. If a person looks back on their life with disappointments, unachieved goals, and regrets, they instead develop a sense of despair. As a legal workforce, we need to change toxic work environments for aging legal professionals, including judges and attorneys, and embrace the very qualities they can uniquely contribute to a dynamic workforce. This is mandatory and not optional for enduring success. 

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