Bosses and their E-Manners

While hailed for its efficiency in facilitating interactions in an increasingly wired workplace, electronic mail messages (emails) also have a dark side. Pearson and Porath\(^4\) noted that the complexity of fast-paced, high tech interactions facilitated by emails fuel incivility as people “believe that they don’t have time to be ‘nice’ and that impersonal modes of contact do not require the courtesies associated with face-to-face interactions. Consistent with Lim and Chin,\(^3\) we define cyber incivility as communicative behavior that are exhibited in the context of email interactions and that violate workplace norms for mutual respect. Although the intent to harm may be ambiguous, the spillover effect of an uncivil interpersonal workplace encounter on others as well as the organization should not be underestimated. Because of its lack of social and contextual cues, negative online interactions are likely to generate a stronger adverse effect on victims compared to traditional face-to-face or telephone encounters as individuals lack the opportunity to seek immediate clarification or obtain dynamic feedback.\(^3,5\)

We examine the pervasiveness of cyber incivility at the workplace in Singapore, the impact of respondents’ gender on the types of cyber incivility experienced and the effect of cyber incivility on respondents’ work attitudes. Data were collected using questionnaire surveys. Prior to administration, a pre-test was conducted to elicit feedback regarding the clarity of the instructions and items in the survey instrument. A short briefing was conducted at the various organizations which took part in the study. Respondents were requested to return the completed surveys in a sealed envelope that was provided. Data were obtained from 192 respondents working in companies in the banking and finance industry. Majority of respondents were Chinese (92%) while the rest comprised Malays and Indians. About 50% had earned a bachelor’s degree, 30% had obtained at least a diploma from the polytechnics and 20% had a secondary school education or its equivalent. Respondents have an average work experience of eight years. The average age was 30 years, 63% of the respondents were women. Singapore provides an appropriate context for examining cyber incivility as there is widespread Internet and email access both at home and at work.

Gender Matters

Results reveal that 91% of respondents indicate they experience cyber incivility from their supervisors at the workplace. Respondents with male supervisors reported they experienced more active forms of cyber incivility, that is, uncivil email behaviors that are directly and openly targeted at victims (for example, making sarcastic remarks, demeaning, saying something hurtful through email messages). On the other hand, respondents with female supervisors reported that they experienced passive forms of cyber incivility, that is, uncivil behaviors that are displayed in an indirect manner and which indicate a lack of respect (for example, not replying to emails at all, using emails for time-sensitive messages such as canceling or scheduling a meeting on short notice). These results are presented in Figure 1.

This result parallels findings in research on gender differences in aggression and conflict management. Research in this area have provided compelling evidence that men are more prone to aggression and tend to
direct their displeasure toward their targets directly and openly. On the other hand, women tend to be less confrontational and prefer to avoid direct conflict with others. While these findings are based on research focusing on interpersonal relationships, we believe these gender differences also occur in online interactions such as email behaviors as suggested by our results.

Further, our findings also show that respondents’ who have same-sex supervisors were more likely to experience active incivility from their supervisors. About 42% of male employees indicated their male bosses engaged in active cyber incivility toward them. In contrast, 24% of female employees reported their male bosses engaged in active cyber incivility against them. This finding is instructive in that it suggests that male supervisors are less inhibited in their email communication with male employees and are more likely to aggress toward other men. Because of sex role stereotypes inherent in the paternalistic culture in Singapore, male supervisors may be less demanding on female employees and refrain from engaging in active cyber incivility compared to male employees.

Interestingly, female respondents with female supervisors (13%) were more likely to report their supervisors engage in active cyber incivility toward them compared to male employees with female supervisors (10%). While not statistically significant, this difference is interesting in that it is consistent with finding of past research on bullying which suggest that women tend to bully other women. One possible reason that may account for this pattern of behavior is the “queen bee syndrome” that suggests women in managerial positions tend to treat women in subordinate positions less favorably may be at play here.

**Cyber Incivility and Satisfaction with Supervisors**

Some 65% of respondents experiencing cyber incivility reported they would be unwilling to have their supervisors continue as head of their group/department if they had a choice. And 61% were dissatisfied with their supervisor’s performance as a leader and 60% opposed instead of supported their supervisor. These findings suggest that cyber incivility negatively affect employees’ perceptions of their leaders.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which uncivil emails from their supervisors influenced their attitudes toward their job. The majority (63%) of respondents admitted that they frequently thought of quitting their jobs, 44% stated they will probably look for a new job in the next year while 38% disclosed they will actively look for a new job in the next year. These findings suggest that cyber incivility negatively affects employees’ work attitudes, and quit intentions.

Of the respondents, 62% admitted that they did not care about the fate of their organization, and 61% told their friends that their current place of work is not a great organization to work for. These results are consistent with previous research in the U.S. that found that incivility which occurs in face-to-face interactions at the workplace has adverse effect on work attitudes and effort, productivity and performance.

As our data are cross-sectional in nature, causal inferences cannot be established. Thus, as suggested by a reviewer, it is plausible that employees who are dissatisfied with their bosses are more likely to perceive higher levels of cyber incivility. This possibility remains an interesting research question that certainly warrants further investigation in future research.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Our results offer several practical implications for CIOs and managers. First, our findings that passive email behaviors such as not replying to email messages can be perceived to be uncivil, have practical relevance, in that it suggests that managers need to be mindful of their netiquette when communicating with their subordinates via email messages. Due to the lack of contextual and social cues, there is little opportunity for email users to seek immediate clarification and feedback. Thus, managers and email users need to be careful with the tone of their messages at all times. This is to minimize potential misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Second, there is a pressing need for organizations to establish explicit policies and expectations for electronic communications at the workplace. Only 40% of respondents reported that their organizations have policies regarding the use of emails. And 32% were not even aware if their employing organizations had such email policies,
while the remaining 25% do not have email policies. In contrast, a survey conducted by the American Management Association showed that about 75% of companies surveyed have put written email policies in place. Thus, Singapore seems to lag behind the U.S. in terms of email usage policy.

These findings suggest that policies regarding use of email messages to prevent inappropriate use, prohibit inappropriate language and conduct are much needed at the workplace. However, companies should be mindful that even the most thorough and well-drafted policies are ineffective if not widely and repeatedly communicated. Thus, seminars, training and retraining sessions to ensure employees’ awareness and comprehension of these policies are crucial.

Third, organizations may want to consider creating a platform where employees can discuss any difficulties they may face when communicating via email. By providing employees with opportunities to contribute and air their views concerning appropriate email usage, there will be greater knowledge and consensus regarding netiquette and acceptable behaviors for electronic communications, thereby reducing the occurrences and incidences of cyber incivility at the workplace.

Fourth, while the email is effective for disseminating information, some situations such as project management updates, performance appraisals, dispute settlements may require a more sensitive and high touch approach. Thus, while going high-tech, managers and CIOs do want to be sure to remain “high-touch.”

In conclusion, our findings suggest that cyber incivility is not a trivial issue, in an era where the workplace is becoming more diverse, global and wired. Insights gleaned from our study provide useful guidance for CIOs and managers in designing effective organizational programs and policies to reduce the incidence of cyber incivility at the workplace.

References


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