

Workplace Becomes New Schoolyard for Bullies

By Anita Bruzzese, Gannett

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Bert Alicea
Health Advocate, Inc.

Many adults shake their heads in dismay over bullying that targets children and teenagers online and in school; they even push for lawmakers and schools to do more to stop the harassment.

But many are afraid to admit another dirty little secret: Bullying is just as big a problem for the adults in the workplace.

Up to 70 percent of working adults say they've been bullied at some point in their working lives, and 53 percent to 71 percent of the bullies are in management positions, Civility Partners LLC says.

The prevalence of bully bosses is why many don't report they've been bullied, says Bert Alicea, a licensed psychologist and vice president of employee-assistance programs and work/life services at Health Advocate, Inc.

“A lot of people would rather leave than stir the pot and fear retaliation,” he says. “But even if they want to leave, with the bad

job market there's nowhere for them to go.”

The problem of workplace bullying is not new, nor is it illegal.

If bullying leads to illegal workplace acts, such as discrimination or harassment, then the courts can act. Legislation called the Healthy Workplace Bill would make bullying illegal and has been introduced in more than 20 states since 2003.

Even without the bill, Alicea says many companies are beginning to take steps to reign in workplace bullying because of its bottom-line consequences: Bullying can cost a company \$83,000 a year from absenteeism and stress-related issues.

Companies often ask Alicea to provide harassment awareness or sensitivity training as a way to make supervisors and employees more aware of bullying behavior and the steps needed to protect workers. But businesses may have another incentive to offer such training.

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In some court cases, companies that have provided anti-bullying training are not always held solely responsible if an employee's lawsuit alleging harassment or discrimination is successful, Alicea says. Instead, individual supervisors may be held personally liable for some financial damages awarded to an employee if a company can show the supervisor received anti-bullying training.

Still, despite more interest from companies in anti-bullying measures, Alicea says he remains concerned.

"If the bully is in a power position or someone like a rainmaker in the organization who brings in \$5 million a year, then no one really wants to rattle that cage," he says.

Another worry for Alicea — a growing use of online bullying.

"Cyber-bullying is more prevalent in the workplace. People

become friends with their supervisors on Facebook, for example, and they become more emotionally connected. It begins to blur the objectivity of those involved. I just think it opens up a whole can of worms," he says.

Workers also can feel bullied via other online communications, such as email, he says.

"I think there's a real need for email etiquette to be taught in workplaces today," he says. "Sending an email, written in bold with 15 exclamation points sends a message in a degrading way."

If an employee feels bullied at work, Alicea says that person should:

- **Contact the company's employee assistance program.**

While acknowledging that some employees may fear word getting back to the bully, "you have to be able to take that risk because you're tired

of feeling the way you're feeling," he says. "You need to be able to talk to an objective third party who knows how to deal with these kinds of issues."

- **Tell human resources.** While you don't have to provide the name of the bully, it's important to have a record so if you experience retaliation, you have proof that it took place after your complaint.

- **Ask for dignity and respect.** You don't have to launch into a litany of complaints but simply state you want fair treatment. This often prompts companies to bring in outside help to educate and train supervisors and employees.