

Presented to the Interdisciplinary Studies Program:



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON  
APPLIED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Applied Information Management  
and the Graduate School of the  
University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of  
Master of Science

# Computer-Mediated Communication in the Workplace: Problems and Solutions

CAPSTONE REPORT

**Charles C. Gilman II**  
**Compliance & Enforcement**  
**Washington State Department of Ecology**

University of Oregon  
Applied Information  
Management  
Program

**May 2015**

Academic Extension  
1277 University of Oregon  
Eugene, OR 97403-1277  
(800) 824-2714



Approved by

---

Dr. Kara McFall  
Lecturer, AIM Program



Computer-Mediated Communication in the Workplace:

Challenges and Strategies

Charles C. Gilman II

Washington State Department of Ecology



**Abstract**

As workplace computer-mediated communication (CMC) rises, negative behaviors associated with toxic disinhibition effect (TDE) occur (Suler, 20014). Behaviors include bullying and flaming, which affect workplace productivity, and can lead to claims of hostile work environments. Laws shifting in favor of victims require managers and Human Resource staff to face these challenges. Potential solutions include policies designed to prevent the behaviors and CMC technologies such as videoconferencing and webcams to increase social presence and decrease dehumanization.

*Keywords: computer-mediated communication, toxic disinhibition effect, workplace bullying, flaming, workplace productivity, videoconferencing, webcams, social presence, dehumanization*



## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Table of Contents .....	5
List of Tables and Figures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Introduction.....	7
Problem.....	7
Purpose.....	9
Research Question .....	9
Audience .....	9
Search Report.....	10
Annotated Bibliography.....	15
Conclusion .....	42
TDE Behaviors.....	42
Consequences of TDE.....	43
Potential Solutions .....	44
References.....	47



## Introduction

### Problem

Email use in the workplace is ever increasing. Osterman Research (2014), a marketing research organization, conducted surveys that “found that email is the dominant communications and collaboration tool in most organizations and that it serves as the primary method for transporting files...” (p. 1). Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed, and Taha (2011) also observe that many organizations are using virtual teams in response to a more dynamic economic environment and that “virtual teams work across boundaries of time and space by utilizing modern computer-driven technologies”, including email (p. 2). With so many people using the Internet as a computer-mediated form of communication, and with use rates continuing to climb closer to 100%, research suggests that emerging communication tools such as email and Instant Messaging (IM) are actually changing how we “view” those with whom we interact by dehumanizing them. Joinson and Piwek (2013) suggest that through this dehumanization, these technologies “may simultaneously introduce entirely new outcomes by triggering responses to computers and tools as social actors” because users interact with the technology rather than with other users (p. 7).

According to the research and advisory company Gartner (2014), organizations continue to invest in information and communication technology (ICT) in an effort to increase communication and performance (p. 1). Zhang and Venkatesh (2013) found that “[w]hen organizations understand how ICTs affect job performance, they are likely to develop better strategies related to ICT investment and utilization” (p. 22). One aspect of ICT utilization involves their use as a mode of computer-mediated communication designed to allow

geographically separated employees to coordinate and perform as a virtual team (Ale Ebrahim et al., 2011, p. 2).

As computer-mediated communication grows in popularity, so do the challenges associated with utilizing the less personal forms and the potential for a phenomenon known as the toxic disinhibition effect. Dr. John Suler (2004) produced a seminal article where he coined the term *toxic disinhibition effect* (TDE), which suggests some people, communicating via electronic media, “self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person” (Suler, 2004, p. 1). Common negative behaviors that occur as a result of TDE are “rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats” (Suler, 2004, p. 321). Suler (2004) identifies “six factors that interact with each other in creating this online disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority” (p. 1). In a more recent study, DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010) observe that, in “a virtual environment...it’s more common for people to misinterpret what someone has said or come to the wrong conclusions...” (2010, p. 63). According to Dzurec, Kennison, and Albatineh (2014), employees who are victims of the negative communications that result from TDE exhibit a range of responses, including (a) “a sense of shame” (p. 295); (b) feeling “helpless” (p. 283); (c) becoming “speechless, disoriented” (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010, as cited by Dzurec et al., 2014, p. 286); and (d) eventually may leave the organization (Wiedmer, 2011, p. 36).

Employers face risks due to the ever-increasing potential for miscommunication when using electronic modes of communication in the workplace and the increasing likelihood that users may begin to exhibit behaviors associated with TDE. For example, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) states that an employer is “liable for harassment by non-supervisory employees or non-employees over whom it has control” if the employer is aware of

the harassment and fails to take corrective action (p.1). The terms *harassment* and *violence* are often encompassed within the term *workplace bullying* (Wiedmer, 2011, p. 35). According to Vega and Comer (2005), one method of bullying includes “electronic bullying... through hostile or misleading emails” (p. 106). However, the EEOC also notes that prevention “is the best tool to eliminate harassment in the workplace” (EEOC, 2010, p. 1). In light of these findings, “employers must have a full range of policies in place and means available to them to create and maintain a healthy workplace culture and climate” (Wiedmer, 2011, p. 35).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to identify destructive behaviors that result from the toxic disinhibition effect in the workplace and methods to identify, prevent, and effectively address these behaviors. For the purpose of this study, destructive behaviors include harassing and sending inappropriate or unprofessional communications via email, instant messaging (IM), message boards, and/or collaborative software (e.g., Microsoft SharePoint). The seminal source for this study is Dr. John Suler’s article titled “The online disinhibition effect” (2004). Additional references are found excluding terms such as *school*, *game*, and *social media*, as behaviors found in these settings are outside of the workplace focus for this study.

### **Research Question**

How do the effects of the toxic disinhibition effect (TDE) manifest in the workplace and how can those effects be identified, addressed, and prevented?

### **Audience**

Many organizational employees use electronic media to facilitate communication, but the primary audience for this study includes employers and their workplace managers. According to Wiedmer, employers “have a moral and social responsibility to protect employees from bullying

and to safeguard those who comprise their workforce” (2011, p. 37). Managers must be able to conduct or provide specific training employees require to appropriately utilize computer-mediated communication without engaging in inappropriate behaviors, while recognizing other challenges such as those arising from the toxic disinhibition effect that are unique to the virtual environment (Ale Ebrahim et al., 2011, p. 3).

### **Search Report**

**Search strategy.** This research study explores the destructive behaviors that often accompany dissociative effects that occur when using electronic media.

Dr. John Suler (2004) produced a seminal article on what he described as the “toxic disinhibition effect” (TDE), which suggests some people, communicating via electronic media, “self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person” (Suler, 2004, p.1). Searches using the University of Oregon Libraries reveal sources that cover more in-depth research into the specific behaviors Suler identified that reference his 2004 seminal work. The intent of this effort is to identify research sources that describe the specific destructive behaviors that occur as a result of TDE and strategies to not only recognize these behaviors, but also identify approaches for how to avoid or minimize the impact of those behaviors.

Not all relevant works identified properly display in every Internet browser. As such, some titles are viewed utilizing an additional browser. Browsers utilized are:

Internet Explorer

Firefox

An initial reference review is conducted in three areas:

1. The online disinhibition effect

2. The toxic disinhibition effect
3. Creating empathy and fostering teamwork in the workplace.

**Keywords employed in the search:**

- Online disinhibition effect
- Toxic disinhibition effect
- Workplace cyber bullying
- Email conflict
- Computer mediated communication
- Workplace inhibition
- Online anonymity
- Workplace anonymity
- Workplace cohesion
- Workplace trolls
- Workplace social media
- Effective workplace communication
- Workplace social presence
- Email misuse at work
- Disinhibition effect, workplace, conflict
- Online disinhibition effect at work
- Online disinhibition effect organization
- Online disinhibition effect workplace
- Workplace trolling

- Microaggression
- Flaming
- Problematic Internet Use (PIU)
- Prosody
- Preference for online social interactions (POSI)

**Delimitations.** Search results are limited in the following ways:

- Works must be complete, available, and reproducible in full text.
- Works must be complete within the past 10 years.
- Works must have at least two keywords in the focus of study.
- Behaviors studied are limited to those defined as destructive and/or illegal.

**Databases.** An initial search strategy limited to searching only for the negative consequences of computer mediated communication fails to yield a significant number of results with dates more recent than 2008. The results are promising but repetitive. An expanded search includes positive effects of inter-personal communication and yields greater results. The expanded search also includes Google Scholar. While some of the results have credibility and anonymity issues, with forum discussions yielding the most issues, they do lead to additional search terms including *trolls*, *workplace cyber bullying*, *empowerment*, and *workplace cohesion*. Using Google Scholar, full text downloads are not always available to the general public, but full text copies are available in the online UO Libraries. Relevant works are gathered from the following databases:

- Academic Search Premier
- Google

- Google Scholar
- JSTOR
- Social Sciences Premium Collection
- SAGE Journals
- UO Catalog
- ScienceDirect
- APA PsychNet

The initial references identified are several years old; some are more than a decade old.

Using more modern terms such as *flaming*, *cyber bullying*, and *social media* within UO Libraries and online search engines yields numerous results dated less than five year old. Examining citations within those works provides additional references.

**Documentation approach.** Article summaries are analyzed and searched for keywords related to the topic. Once found, articles are downloaded in Adobe, Microsoft Word, or Rich Text Format, then abstracts are examined for further topic support. If the work identifies as supportive, it is downloaded, relevant sections are electronically highlighted, then the article is saved to a flash drive with keywords, first author's last name, and year published as the file name. Articles are then placed into one of three categories (TDE behavior identification, consequences of TDE, or potential solutions) depending on overall relevance, but may still be referenced in the other two sections.

**Reference evaluation criteria.** As suggested by Bell and Frantz (2014), these references are evaluated based on the following criteria:

**Relevancy.** A source is deemed relevant if it is scholarly (published in a peer reviewed journal with references and citations) as opposed to popular, cited by other scholarly works, and includes at least two of the identified keywords as part of the main theme.

**Currency.** Initial search parameters are set at no later than ten years but further refined to five years or earlier to allow for more current technology and findings.

**Quality.** Quality sources are defined as those that are published in a peer-reviewed journal, trusted online source (e.g., UO Library) and/or textbook with a non-repetitive, well-formatted argument and/or discussion. The work also must be formatted in accordance with APA guidelines, be free of typographical and grammatical errors, and published without sensationalized vernacular.

**Authority.** Works that are authored by PhD, EdD, and/or BSN credentialed authors and published in peer-reviewed journals are considered more authoritative than non-reviewed works by authors without these academic credentials published in popular articles. Credentials are verified utilizing online searches and by viewing additional works by the author within the UO Libraries.

**Objectivity.** Works that are published in peer-reviewed journals by credentialed authors are considered to have been validated for objectivity. Works that do not meet these criteria are typically removed as sources but sometimes do yield relevant citations that must also be verified.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

The following annotated bibliography presents 16 references that inform the workplace behaviors that can generally be considered offensive and/or destructive, or what Suler (2004) refers to as “toxic disinhibition effect” or TDE behaviors (p.1). The concepts and positions presented within these summaries represent those of the authors(s) and are not original works from the author of this report. This report also notes research that helps to identify the communication conditions that are typically present that can lead to an increased potential for TDE behaviors to manifest. Finally, the annotated bibliography identifies research that addresses how to recognize those conditions and methods to employ to prevent TDE behaviors from manifesting in the workplace or minimize the impact of these behaviors. The literature is organized into three categories; (a) TDE behaviors, (b) consequences of TDE, and (c) potential solutions. Each annotation consists of three elements: (a) the full bibliographic citation, (b) an abstract, and (c) a summary.

#### **Category 1- Toxic Disinhibition Effect Behaviors**

Ale Ebrahim, N., Ahmed, S., & Taha, Z. (2011). Virtual teams and management challenges.

*Acadenmic Leadership Journal*, 9(3), 1-7. Retrieved from:

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00690027>

**Abstract.** Collaboration is becoming increasingly important in creating the knowledge that makes business more competitive. Virtual teams are growing in popularity and many organizations have responded to their dynamic environments by introducing virtual teams. Additionally, the rapid development of new communication technologies such as the Internet has accelerated this trend so that today, most of the larger organization employs virtual teams to some degree. A growing number of flexible and adaptable organizations have explored the

virtual environment as one means of achieving increased responsiveness. Howells et al. state that the shift from serial to simultaneous and parallel working has become more commonplace. Based on conventional information technologies and Internet-based platforms virtual environments may be used to sustain companies' progress through virtual interaction and communication.

**Summary.** This work identifies communication difficulties found when using computer-mediated communication technologies and discusses the importance of identifying and recognizing those difficulties and the need for training to avoid the difficulties. The authors point out that collaboration is becoming increasingly important in creating the knowledge that makes businesses more competitive and that virtual teams are growing in popularity. They note many larger organizations employ virtual teams to some degree but that a virtual team cannot be successful unless the knowledge and information in the company are effectively captured, shared and internalized.

The authors suggest virtual teams are often formed to overcome geographical separation and that virtual teams reduce the time required to get a product to market. However, with the lack of physical interaction, the authors assert that team members need special training and encouragement, which must be strengthened by webs of communication technologies. These technologies require a strong Information Technology (IT) presence but, even with the appropriate technology, team members vary in their education, culture, language, time orientation and expertise, which can also create challenges which must be overcome. The authors suggest that managers should establish a connection between different departments and companies through virtual teams while also addressing conflict, cultural and functional diversity, and possible mistrust among the team members.

Angouri, J. & Tseliga, T. (2010). ‘You HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE TALKING

ABOUT’: From e-disagreement to e-impoliteness in two online fora. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6(1) 57-82. doi:10.1515/JPLR.2010.004

**Abstract.** This paper reports on an ongoing project in the area of intentional impoliteness as perceived by the participants and as marked in discourse in the asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) context. We focus on occurrences of “impolite talk” and examine the context bound nature of communicative strategies adopted by the interactants in order to deliberately do impoliteness. We also analyze how impoliteness is lexicalized in relation to the inherent characteristics of the CMC context. Specifically, this paper draws on a sample of data from two Communities of Practice (CofP): Greek students and professional academics. 200 posts were collected from interactions where dispute occurred. Special attention is paid to the use of spelling and punctuation and one interactional discourse particle, namely [re] (untranslatable), in unmitigated confrontational disagreement that breaches the norms of unmarked behaviour in the two CofPs. Our preliminary findings show that (im)politeness is firmly embedded in the micro (discourse) and macro (social) context. The impoliteness strategies employed by the interactants indicate different judgments of what constitutes marked behaviour and are contingent on factors such as the overall purpose of communication, the co-constructed norms of the forum, the relationship between participants and the dynamic group identities which the interactants call upon in any given situation.

**Summary.** The authors of this work, using multiple forums (the author uses a plural term, “fora”), study disagreement and impoliteness in computer-mediated communications. They argue that disagreement escalates beyond what some may call reasonable, resulting in computer-mediated discourse (CMD). This study also examines asynchronicity: the ability to

communicate with hours, days, or even weeks between messages, the impact of the ability to refer back to those written messages long after they have been created and how text-based communications lack verbal and visual cues normally available during communication. The authors suggest these impacts on communication lead users to use informal spelling, punctuation, and emoticons in an effort to overcome the inherent limitations of text-based communications. This work also discusses the impact of the lack of prosodic features and some commonly occurring symbols and text, which the authors argue have changed the lexicon of the common user. The authors also describe behaviors not normally found in text-based communications, such as presenting a false-consensus effect.

Graham, S. (2007). Disagreeing to agree: Conflict, (im)politeness and identity in a computer-mediated community. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(4) 742-759.

doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2006.11.017

**Abstract.** Recent research on politeness has attempted to re-examine the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987) and refine the framework to be more applicable to a wider variety of circumstances (Watts, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Although, as Locher (2004) notes, there have been several empirical studies building on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness, there are relatively few studies which explore the dynamics of these newer models in empirical research. This empirical study addresses this gap by exploring how expectations of (im)politeness are negotiated within an e-mail community. Examination of the communicative practices indicate that, in this e-community, the norms for interaction within the community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Lave' and Wenger, 1991; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999) merge with the norms of (polite) interaction within the computer medium to create a unique set of expectations for what constitutes polite behavior

in a computer-mediated setting. Deviation from these norms frequently results in conflict, but the (active) negotiation of norms of politeness in this community of practice, or C of P (through conflict) give group members an opportunity to (re)negotiate the group identity.

**Summary.** The author suggests that identifying (im)politeness within an interaction is difficult since “perceptions of (im)politeness vary from one individual to another” and that assessors must consider “community norms” when attempting to identify impolite behavior (p.743). The work reviews how conflict emanates from differing interpretations of what types of behavior are considered (im)polite, how that conflict plays out over an extended period of time, and how “community” members help define what is and is not (im)polite (p.743). The author argues the aggressor’s intent to attack, the context of the interaction, and the perception of the hearer must all be considered when assessing (im)polite interactions.

The author also reviews “netiquette” (p. 745) and provides a new term, “blatting.” Blatting is a scenario that occurs when a recipient of a private message responds while including others in the discussion without first obtaining the permission of the message originator, violating the original writer’s privacy (p.745). The author also discusses the importance of the subject line, how that line can help clarify the sender’s intent, and how messages must be tailored to all recipients, “both to the one(s) to whom you are responding as well as the other readers” (p. 750).

Haugh, M. (2010). When is an email really offensive? Argumentativity and variability in evaluations of impoliteness. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behavior, Culture*, 6(1) 7-31. doi: 10.1515/JPLR.2010.002

**Abstract.** The analysis in this paper centres on an email exchange between a lecturer and a student at the University of Auckland which resulted in the dismissal of that lecturer. This

dismissal gave rise to significant controversy, both off- and online, as to whether the email itself was simply “intemperate” and “angry”, or more seriously “offensive” and “racist”.

Through a close analysis of the interpretations of the emails by the lecturer and student, as well as online evaluations made on blogs and discussion boards, it becomes apparent that the inherent discursivity of evaluations of impoliteness arises not only from different perceptions of norms, but also from the ways in which commentators position themselves vis-à-vis these evaluations. It also emerges that the relative level of discursive dispute is mediated by the technological and situational characteristics of the CMC medium in which these evaluations occurred. It is concluded that research into various forums of online interaction provides a unique window into the inherent variability and argumentativity of perceptions of offensive behaviour, as a public record of discursive disputes surrounding particular alleged violations of norms of appropriateness can be (re)scrutinized in such forums.

**Summary.** The author of this work observes “most of the current approaches [to workplace bullying] still assume that (recognition of) the speaker’s intentions plays a central role in defining impoliteness or rudeness” (p. 9). Haugh argues that an unintended attack “can nevertheless be evaluated as impolite or offensive, or alternatively rude” (p. 10) and that attempting to attribute impolite intent “underplays both the inherent discursivity of intentions, and the pivotal role (perceptions of) norms play in evaluations of impoliteness” (p. 10). The author further suggests that socio-cultural presumptions also play a role and must be observed and considered.

The author also notes that the past interactions between the aggressor and victim must be observed to define what may be considered *normal* behavior, and that these interactions are co-constructed. The author further explains it is important to understand how both the victim

and aggressor observe empirical norms (what is likely to occur) and moral norms (what should occur).

Haugh also introduces the term “flaming”, which is described as the “antinormative hostile communication of emotions ...that includes the use of profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements” (p. 8), as well as identifying simple software designed to analyze text to produce counts for specific words or terms- textSTAT. By using this software, Haugh is able to define cultural norms to define what, if any, messages contain offensive verbiage.

Lapidot-Lefler, N., & Barak, A. (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 434-443.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.014

**Abstract.** The present research studied the impact of three typical online communication factors on inducing the toxic online disinhibition effect: anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact. Using an experimental design with 142 participants, we examined the extent to which these factors lead to flaming behaviors, the typical products of online disinhibition. Random pairs of participants were presented with a dilemma for discussion and a common solution through online chat. The effects were measured using participants’ self-reports, expert judges’ ratings of chat transcripts, and textual analyses of participants’ conversations. A 2×2×2 (anonymity/non-anonymity×visibility/invisibility×eye-contact/lack of eye-contact) MANOVA was employed to analyze the findings. The results suggested that of the three independent variables, lack of eye-contact was the chief contributor to the negative effects of online disinhibition. Consequently, it appears that previous studies might have defined the concept of anonymity too broadly by not addressing other online communication factors, especially lack of eye-contact, that impact disinhibition. The findings are explained in the

context of an *onlinesense of unidentifiability*, which apparently requires a more refined view of the components that create a personal sense of anonymity.

**Summary.** This article discusses online disinhibition as a basic, wide-spread effect associated with a wide range of behaviors that have been observed among many people engaged in online activities and interactions. The authors argue that accumulated research shows that disinhibition significantly affects modes of discussion, information-searching behavior, online learning, interpersonal contacts and relationships. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak also assert that behaviors in computer-mediated communication technologies, such as instant messaging, video chats and social networks have shown rapid advancement and growth over the last decade. A phenomenon the authors observe common to online communication participants is the online disinhibition effect. They suggest many behaviors witnessed in cyberspace such as violence, incitement, flaming, and verbal attacks may be attributed to the online disinhibition effect. The authors define flaming behavior as the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication. Flaming typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments, but flaming behavior can also be observed in the use of capital letters, use of extra question marks and exclamation points and in the mixture of letters, numbers, and symbols to represent shouting or name calling. It can also be seen in the use of color (e.g., red) or bold face in the script to express hostility.

The authors suggest that organizations that use computer-mediated communication also find a reduced willingness among employees to engage in cooperative communication, reducing workplace performance. They point out that several studies have shown that anonymity is a

main factor in inducing the online disinhibition effect and those who employed computer-mediated communication demonstrated higher degrees of disinhibition, reflected in flaming behavior, than did those who engaged in face-to-face communication. The authors suggest that, given that computer-mediated communication usually involves invisibility, it fosters a unique form of social presence that is defined by the degree of perception, awareness, recognition, or acknowledgment of others. They argue that diminished social presence may lead to a process of communication-induced deindividuation, which in turn may produce instances of disinhibition.

The authors suggest these behaviors occur because cyberspace allows users to control their level of social presence, impacting the degree of intimacy. This lack of visibility forms a unique social presence common in online communication that accelerates the processes of online disinhibition. While webcams may allow for visibility, they do not ensure eye-contact during interactions. The authors find visibility and eye-contact are two distinct factors, each influencing interpersonal communication in a different manner, and that a lack of eye-contact plays a major role in triggering behaviors related to negative online disinhibition.

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321-326.  
doi:10.1089/1094931041291295.

**Abstract.** While online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person. This article explores six factors that interact with each other in creating this online disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Personality variables also will influence the extent of this disinhibition. Rather than thinking of

disinhibition as the revealing of an underlying "true self," we can conceptualize it as a shift to a constellation within self-structure, involving clusters of affect and cognition that differ from the in-person constellation.

**Summary.** The author of this study identifies behavior observed in online interactions that users may not normally exhibit in face-to-face interaction such as rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, and threats. He labels this phenomenon *toxic disinhibition*. He identifies six factors that are involved that lead to toxic disinhibition: (a) dissociative anonymity, (b) invisibility, (c) asynchronicity, (d) solipsistic introjection, (e) dissociative imagination, and (f) minimization of authority.

Suler describes dissociative anonymity as the fact that, as people move around the Internet, others they encounter cannot easily determine who they are. He suggests when people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Suler suggests users, feeling anonymous, do not have to own their behaviors by acknowledging them within the full context of integrated online/offline identities.

He suggests invisibility is a factor because in many online environments people cannot see each other and are not forced to react to the physical reactions displayed by the receivers when offering text that may be considered offensive. Users will not feel inhibited by how the receiver is physically reacting. Avoiding eye contact and face-to-face visibility disinhibits users, which may cause them to act in manners not consistent with their in-person personas. Suler argues asynchronicity plays a role because people do not interact with one another in real time. If users were in a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others, users are less likely to use what could be considered rude language or

offer harsh criticisms. Suler argues asynchronous communications allow users to make statements and not suffer any immediate negative reactions to those statements.

Suler defines a solipsistic introjection as a scenario in which a person may feel that his or her mind has merged with the mind of another person. The user may even assign a visual image to what he or she thinks the other person looks and behaves like while interacting with others online.

Dissociative imagination, Suler suggests, plays a role by allowing users to split or dissociate online fiction from online fact. Users begin to visualize their online or in-text personas as beings with different personalities than those shown during in-person interactions.

Suler suggests the minimization of authority impacts our online persona by removing or altering social barriers. For instance, on the Internet, everyone has an equal opportunity to voice opinions. The author suggests what mostly determines influence on others is one's skill in communicating (including writing skills), persistence, the quality of one's ideas, and technical know-how. Without the gaze of an authority figure, users are much more willing to speak out and misbehave.

Suler argues that the self does not exist separate from the environment in which that self is expressed. If someone contains his aggression in face-to-face living, but expresses that aggression online, both behaviors reflect aspects of self: the self that acts nonaggressively under certain conditions, the self that acts aggressively under other conditions.

Vega, G. & Comer, D. (2005). Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can break your spirit: Bullying in the workplace. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 58(1/3), 101-109.

doi:10.1007/s10551-005-1422-7

**Abstract.** Workplace bullying has a well-established body of research internationally, but the United States has lagged behind the rest of the world in the identification and investigation of this phenomenon. This paper presents a managerial perspective on bullying in organizations. The lack of attention to the concept of workplace dignity in American organizational structures has supported and even encouraged both casual and more severe forms of harassment that our workplace laws do not currently cover. The demoralization victims suffer can create toxic working environments and impair organizational productivity. Some methods of protecting your organization from this blight of bullying are proposed. Bullying has always been part of the human condition; history is rife with references to abuse of power and unnecessary or excessive force. The classic bully story is of Joseph and his brothers, a tale of envy and hostility. The refinement of bullying to include various forms of legally defined social harassment is a relatively late phenomenon, however, dating to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the United States, bullying is not illegal, whereas it is illegal in many other countries. Bullying is not about benign teasing, nor does it include the off-color jokes, racial slurs, or unwelcome advances that are the hallmarks of legally defined harassment. Workplace bullying is the pattern of destructive and generally deliberate demeaning of co-workers or subordinates that reminds us of the activities of the schoolyard bully. Unlike the schoolyard bully, however, the work place bully is an adult, usually (but not always) aware of the impact of his or her behavior on others. Bullying in the workplace, often tacitly accepted by the organizational leadership, can create an environment of psychological threat that diminishes corporate productivity and inhibits individual and group commitment. The two examples that follow will help to clarify the difference between harassment and bullying.

**Summary.** The authors of this work identify workplace bullying behaviors, amongst other behaviors, as using rude, foul and abusive language and leaving offensive messages on email. They suggest that these bullying behaviors, along with the more subtle electronic bullying that may confront the victim at his or her desktop through hostile or misleading emails, can be directed towards individuals on the basis of gender, race, religion, and age.

The authors argue that these bullying behaviors affect the workplace by causing employees to quit, reducing productivity, and contributing to a loss of creativity and innovation. They suggest efficiency is likely to decline as staff members take extra sick days. They argue these costs tend to have a domino effect, by impacting the workload of coworkers, creating additional organizational impact. The legal countermeasures employees must use can deflect organizational operational funds to legal defense funds, and potential unemployment insurance and workman's compensation claims, which can lead to a financial loss as well as a loss of qualified personnel.

The authors find bullying affects people's health and well-being to an alarming extent through depression, anxiety, aggression, insomnia, psychosomatic effects, stress, and general physical and mental ill health. They argue the long-term effects of being victimized can create in targets a need to protect their self-image by working harder and longer and by strengthening their self-respect through any means available to them. In worst-case scenarios, bullying has been linked to suicide.

The authors find that any organization that truly wishes to discourage bullying needs a policy explicitly stating that bullying will not be tolerated. However, written documents are only effective if employees know about them and believe that upper management stands behind them. They suggest that, once an individual joins an organization, they can benefit from

training that explains the company's anti-bullying policy. They also suggest using *peer listeners*. Peer listeners are staff who are recruited, selected, and trained to serve as informal compassionate experts, and advise their coworkers on bullying and harassment policies and procedures in the workplace.

Workplace Bullying Institute. (2010). Results of the 2010 WBI U.S. workplace bullying survey.

Retrieved from:

<http://www.workplacebullying.org/wbiresearch/2010-wbi-national-survey/>

**Abstract.** None provided.

**Summary.** Other sources establish how workplace bullying occurs in the workplace, this study by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) is consistently cited as a seminal study and establishes the prevalence in U.S. workplaces and breaks down those numbers by race, political affiliation, gender, education level and general economic health. The WBI conducted the first national study of bullying in the workplace in 2007. The survey defined workplace bullying as "repeated, health harming abusive conduct committed by bosses and co-workers" (2010, p. 1). In 2010, WBI created a second survey and commissioned Zogby International to collect data for the second representative study of all adult Americans on the topic of workplace bullying. The 2010 definition is expanded to include "repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, & humiliation" (2010, p. 1). The survey found that 35% of workers have experienced bullying firsthand, 62% of bullies are men, 8% of the targets are women, bullying is four times more prevalent than illegal harassment, and the majority (68%) of bullying is between people of the same gender. WBI made an assumption that

bullying rates would rise between 2007 and 2010 in response to the economic downturn, but the 2010 survey found that the prevalence of workplace bullying held steady between the two surveys at 35% (p. 3). A significant finding exists in the 2010 survey in that women bullies target other women in 79.8% of cases. This is a 9.8% increase from 2007.

### **Category 2- Consequences of the Toxic Disinhibition Effect**

Dzurec, L, Kennison, M., & Albatineh, R. (2014). Unacknowledged threats proffered “in a manner of speaking”: Recognizing workplace bullying as shaming. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 46(4), 281-291, doi: 10.1111/jnu.12080

**Abstract.** Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine workplace bullying victims’ perceptions of what they heard their bully counterparts say through their use of prosody.

Design: From a sampling frame of 89 manuscripts referenced in the authors’ previous studies, we identified a subset ( $n = 10$ ) that included quotes regarding bullying victims’ perceptions of communication experiences with their bully perpetrators.

Methods: We used hermeneutics and a recursive metasynthesis to interpret quotes embedded in the manuscripts chosen for this study.

Findings: Two-thirds of language is expressed nonverbally through prosody or “manner of speaking”—rhythm, stress, intonation, and vocabulary choice. We found that as bullies communicated with their intended victims over time, they used prosody across subtle, linked communications, or boldly and openly in public venues, to establish a context-embedded, one-way communication process of “doublespeak.”

Conclusions: Bullies’ confusing prosodic communication processes served to recontextualize victims’ situations and, through mechanisms largely unacknowledged by the victims, to subtly demean their personhood, and to shame them and render them voiceless.

Clinical relevance: This study directs formal attention to the language of workplace bullying. Further study might strengthen opportunities to effectively address and curtail the long-term personal, professional, and organizational injuries deriving from workplace bullying.

**Summary.** The authors of this work suggest language is a powerful tool used to convey information and emotion while supporting a wide range of purposes, some of which can cause undue strain on employees. They point out that language can be more darkly convoluted to establish and sustain despair such as in cases of domestic abuse, blackmail, and, in the case to be discussed in this article, workplace bullying. The authors argue a subtle bully will skillfully ensnare intended victims using well-chosen, well-delivered, subtle and understated communication strategies and that victims themselves often fail to recognize that they are being bullied until it has gone on for some time.

The authors of this study discuss prosody, the manner of speaking and behaving, and its effect on workplace communication, including computer-mediated communication. They suggest that, by the speaker's use of capitalization and emoticons, they can instill some prosody within text-based communications. They also argue that, with competitive responding (akin to engaging in a one-way argument then leaving the discussion), bullies control the interaction. Victims of competitive responding will usually attempt to respond from a sense / source of values, with honesty and directness, which tend to fail because bullies are primarily concerned with establishing power, not open discourse. The authors find their analysis suggests bullies proffer negative influence through their use of prosody.

The authors also offer a three-step process to analyze text to interpret whether or not the text presented can be categorized as bullying: description, reduction, and interpretation. They examined the parts of the text as well as the whole interaction simultaneously in an effort to

overcome observer bias. The authors found bullies' messages were often shrouded in language suggesting they were for the benefit of the victims and/or the organizations. They also found victims have difficulties labeling the behavior but later agreed it was an unacknowledged shame, that they were expected to feel as though they had done something wrong when no particular behavior or event was described. The authors also discuss the difference between shaming and banter used to increase workplace cohesion; the difference is in the intent of the message, either to shame or increase cohesion.

Eisenberg, S., & Sano, H. (2012). Workplace bullying from a plaintiff's perspective. *American Bar Association*. Retrieved from:

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/labor\\_law/2012/03/national\\_conference\\_on\\_equal\\_employment\\_opportunity\\_law/mw2012eeo\\_eisenberg.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/labor_law/2012/03/national_conference_on_equal_employment_opportunity_law/mw2012eeo_eisenberg.authcheckdam.pdf)

**Abstract.** None provided.

**Summary.** The authors of this work use as the basis of their analysis the Washington State Department of Labor & Industry's definition of workplace bullying as "repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s)" (p 2). They argue that the concept of bullying is difficult to apply in a workplace environment because some of the elements of bullying within that definition are key components of most interactions between a supervisor and subordinate such as negative feedback.

The authors also observe that different businesses have different cultures. They discuss the relationship Steve Jobs, former Apple CEO, and his notoriously rude behavior when

interacting with staff and how those behaviors are, at times, encouraged in some organizations.

Eisenberg and Sano also point out how it can be difficult to prove bullying, especially when an aggressor in a supervisory position may still provide positive performance reviews and promote those with whom they engage in the bullying behaviors identified above.

The authors note that while forty-seven of fifty states have adopted school anti-bullying legislation, not one state has adopted workplace anti-bullying legislation. They also find that courts have been willing to link workplace violence to workplace bullying and that OSHA “has defined workplace violence to include ‘threats and verbal abuse’” (p. 6). They further suggest courts may become more open to litigation involving workplace bullying through traditional tort remedies such as intentional infliction of emotional distress, defamation, and tortious interference (p. 7).

The authors also suggest that those affected by workplace bullying document and record instances of bullying, create a log of bullying events, save relevant voicemails and print offensive e-mails. They also suggest reviewing employment policies and speaking with human resources to get advice early in the process. The authors suggest employers who “implement policies are likely to actively implement and enforce them, not simply based on economic self-interest, but because of liability risks associated with uneven enforcement” (p. 8).

Joinson, A., & Piwek, L. (2013). Technology and behaviour change: For good and evil. *Social impact of technology*, New York, NY: STI Press

**Abstract.** Since the first basic stone and bone tools were used by Plio-Pleistocene hominids over three million years ago (McPherron et al., 2010), the ability of humans to fashion tools

has not only extended our capacity to conduct tasks, but may also have had a transformative impact on our own selves. For instance, tool development may have been a key facilitator in the development of a large, energy hungry brain in humans (Gibbons, 1998). In more recent times, technologies and inventions - ranging from tally marks as a pre-cursor to numbers, the number zero, writing, the printing press, the stirrup, and the computer - have transformed not only individual human abilities through an extension of physical capabilities (McLuhan, 1964), but also society through both the intended and unintended consequences of widespread adoption and use.

**Summary.** This work examines the way in which technology changes behaviors and the process by which the changes are achieved. The authors propose that the impact of technology on behavior can be thought of as operating through three related processes: extension, amplification and shaping. Extension refers to how technology extends our capabilities to communicate with vast numbers of people across virtually unlimited distances over an extended period of time. Amplification describes our ability to amplify our message by not only extending reach, but also providing support for our argument(s). Shaping affects communication by providing the format and, in some cases, conditions required to share a message (e.g., Twitter's 140 character limit).

The importance of these findings for this research study is the identification of how technology amplifies certain behaviors, including social presence, and how an overreliance on technology, combined with incorrect assumptions, can lead to negative and/or destructive behaviors. One such behavior involved users associating voice or presence with the technology facilitating it, thus dehumanizing those with whom they interact. Another potentially negative behavior technology seems to amplify is group-think. For instance, when

interacting with large groups online, the authors suggest users typically focus more on losses than gains (i.e. the stock market), focus on events or scenarios that have a low probability of occurring (i.e. catastrophic events), and “evaluate events differently when they are further in the future (‘hyperbolic discounting’)” (p. 9). By recognizing these behavior traits and trends, Joinson and Piwek suggest managers and users can utilize technology to amplify social presence while working to minimize the potentially negative traits which have also been found to be present if left unchecked.

McKay, R. & Fratzl, J. (2011). A cause of failure in addressing workplace bullying: Trauma and the employee. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(7), 13-27.

doi:10.1007/s00420-008-0370-9

**Abstract.** Employees traumatized by workplace bullying may respond with post traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Organizational workplace bully policies are not well adapted to recognize or adequately deal with this aspect of workplace bullying. Most workplace bully policies are focused on the legality rather than the complexity of the issue or the needs of the victim. If an employee does not feel they can speak up the bullying can become traumatizing. This paper includes a case study of an employee who has experienced workplace bullying and shown signs of trauma. Based on this case, recommendations are made for organizations to address workplace bullying more adequately.

**Summary.** This article suggests some victims of workplace bullying suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p. 13). The authors describe common vulnerabilities victims share, identify how organizational processes and policies covering workplace bullying do not adequately consider the victim’s needs, and note how some policies can

contribute to the infliction of further harm on the victim by forcing the victim to confront their aggressor.

The authors suggest most organizations approach all bullying cases in a similar fashion that requires victims to confront the perpetrators to describe how they feel victimized in an effort to open lines of communication. The authors refer to this process as “fact finding” and observe that organizations are typically looking to “reconcile the two parties in order that work can continue with the least disruption” (p. 14). The concern the authors note is that, by forcing them to confront the aggressors, this process may actually cause more trauma for the victim. The authors also note some victims may engage in a fight / flight response to being bullied in an effort to avoid the thoughts and feelings associated with the traumatic experience, resulting in lost productivity, potential lawsuits, or even workplace violence against the aggressors.

The authors define four “vulnerabilities” victims often share: “(a) a genetic disposition to anxiety, (b) adverse early life experiences, (c) maladaptive personality traits, and (d) fostering of illness behaviour within the family” (p. 15). McKay and Fratzel also suggest that an awareness of these vulnerabilities and early identification, helps mental health professionals facilitate recovery for victims of harassment in the workplace.

### **Category 3- Potential Solutions**

DeRosa, D., & Lepsiger, R. (2010). *Virtual team success: A practical guide for working and leading from a distance*. SanFrancisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

**Abstract.** This book leverages robust research studies and provides a practical resource for virtual team members and leaders. Based on a research study which is one of the most comprehensive studies ever conducted on virtual teams, this book offers a wealth of solid recommendations. To help organizations and leaders enhance virtual team performance, the book includes information on: key challenges [including the “primary hurdle” of communication], factors for success, characteristics of effective virtual teams, a model for success, effective practices, enhancing performance of low performing teams. The book also includes sections on future challenges and issues.

**Summary.** The authors of this book provide an overview of the unique challenges virtual teams face, including being geographically separated, lack of face-to-face (FTF) interactions, cultural differences, and lack of clearly defined goals and roles. They also provide common characteristics found in successful virtual teams to be considered when forming a team, including team size, leader characteristics such as strong interpersonal and communication skills, the ability to predict and manage change, and the ability to foster collaboration. DeRosa and Lepsiger also discuss using various communication technologies such as “email, videoconferencing, instant messaging, blogs, wikis and web-based bulletin boards” (p. 35); technologies that, when utilized improperly, can lead to the negative behaviors associated with TDE. DeRosa and Lepsiger also identify four components they find to be critical to virtual team success in a model they named the “RAMP” (p. 60): (a) **R**elationships, (b) **A**ccountability, (c) **M**otivation, and (d) **P**rocess. The authors identify effective computer-mediated communication technologies best used with each RAMP component, including Instant Messaging for real-time updates and one-on-one email for brief exchanges of

information to help form relationships. To increase motivation, the team leader may utilize presentation software to share messages of praise with the entire group.

The authors also provide advice on how to respond to a variety of challenges established teams face, such as boosting performance, increasing accountability, providing recognition for performance, producing more effective communication, and increasing collaboration.

Wiedmer, T. (2011). Workplace bullying: Costly and preventable. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 77(2), 35-41. doi:10.1080/02783190009554027

**Abstract.** Workplace bullying is a pervasive practice by malicious individuals who seek power, control, domination, and subjugation. In businesses or schools, such bullying is an inefficient way of working that is both costly and preventable. Senior management and executives are ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining bully-free workplaces.

Workplace bullies can be stopped if employees and employers work together to establish and enforce appropriate workplace policies and practices. This article presents information about workplace bullying, including its prevalence, targeted individuals, bullying behaviors, employer practices, and steps to prevent bullying. In the end, leadership and an environment of respect provide the ultimate formula for stopping workplace bullying.

**Summary.** This work discusses the destructive impacts of workplace bullying in terms of finances, emotions, health, morale, and overall productivity. Wiedmer defines workplace bullying as the repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators that takes one or more of the following forms: verbal abuse; offensive conduct/behaviors (including nonverbal) which are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; and work interference—sabotage—which prevents work from getting done. He argues that no one is immune from potentially being subjected to bullying in the workplace.

He suggests that to combat workplace bullying, often referred to as psychological harassment or violence, employers must have a full range of policies in place and means available to create and maintain healthy workplaces. Wiedmer notes that bullying hurts the bottom line through lost productivity, low morale, the departure of experienced workers, and higher health care costs for victims suffering from stress.

The author notes that the result of bullying is that workers can suffer from debilitating anxiety, panic attacks, clinical depression, and even posttraumatic stress, thus forcing employees to quit or lose their positions, transfer, and/or get fired without reasonable cause. Wiedmer finds that it is veteran employees, who are the most productive and valuable, not the underperforming employees, who are often selected to be targets. He further suggests that employers have a moral and social responsibility to protect employees from bullying and to safeguard those who comprise their workforce.

Wiedmer suggests that bullying rarely exists when all workers honor each other as valuable; treat one another with dignity; communicate to include, not exclude or control; are heard by another and respond with courtesy and curiosity; acknowledge thoughts and feelings; ask rather than ordering, yelling or swearing; provide clear and informative answers to legitimate questions; know the right ways to receive encouragement and support; speak of others positively; and seek to connect and build communication for all parties. The author also states that while eliminating workplace bullying is the responsibility of all employees, senior management and executives are ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining bully-free workplaces.

Yeh, S., Hwang, W., Wang, J., & Zhan, S. (2013). Study of co-located and distant collaboration with symbolic support via a haptics-enhanced virtual reality task. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 21(2), 184-198. doi:10.1080/10494820.2012.705854

**Abstract.** This study intends to investigate how multi-symbolic representations (text, digits, and colors) could effectively enhance the completion of co-located/distant collaborative work in a virtual reality context. Participants' perceptions and behaviors were also studied. A haptics-enhanced virtual reality task was developed to conduct collaborative work. An experiment was conducted with which participants were separated into four groups with the combinations of two variables: w/o multi-symbols and co-located/distant. Performance results show that multi-symbolic representations significantly helped users reduce the time in completing a task in the co-located case. Perception results show that awareness, presence and social presence are highly correlated to usefulness, ease of use and playfulness. Further, behavior analysis found two strategies beneficial to the completion of collaborative work with which divide and conquer is used in problem solving. In addition, the major failure mode is identified and it implies that participants had problems in depth perception. In summary, multi-symbolic representations in haptics-enhanced virtual reality systems have potentials to effectively help collaborative work.

**Summary.** The authors of this study use the scientific method to prove geographically separated participants show reduced performance. They note that geographically separated participants need a "higher frequency of discussion, sharing and communication between team members to improve the performance in a collaborative work" (p. 196) and that "group awareness [including behavioral, cognitive, and social] is considered as a crucial factor" (p. 185) to working effectively.

The authors suggest “better perceptions in presence and social presence can contribute to effective performance in a collaborative work” (p.186) and that, by adding technology-based solutions such as tele- and video-conferencing and webcams, participants feel a stronger social presence, counteracting five of the six factors Dr. Suler identifies which may lead to the toxic disinhibition effect including: (a) dissociative anonymity, (b) invisibility, (c) asynchronicity, (d) solipsistic introjection, and (e) dissociative imagination.

The authors also study the effects of multi-symbolic representations (text, digits, and colors) on both co-located and geographically separated participants. They found these representations significantly increased performance in co-located participants but had little effect on those who are geographically separated. The authors attribute the differences in performance to the amount of verbal interaction; even though all are provided with communication technology, geographically separated participants do not utilize the ability to communicate as much as co-located participants. This suggests simple voice communication is not enough to overcome collaboration barriers between geographically separated users and that video-conferencing and webcams are necessary to increase the users’ presence.

Zhang, X., & Venkatesh, V. (2013). Explaining employee job performance: The role of online and offline workplace communication networks. *MIS Quarterly*, 37(3), 695-722

**Abstract.** By distinguishing between employees’ online and offline workplace communication networks, this paper incorporates technology into social network theory to understand employees’ job performance. Specifically, we conceptualize network ties as direct and indirect ties in both online and offline workplace communication networks, thus resulting in four distinct types of ties. We theorize that employees’ ties in online and offline workplace communication networks are complementary resources that interact to influence

their job performance. We found support for our model in a field study among 104 employees in a large telecommunication company. The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

**Summary.** The authors of this article note that many organizations continue to invest vast sums of money in “information and communication technology (ICT)” in an effort to facilitate communication and increase performance (p. 695). However, they also find social networks (both online and offline) also affect workplace performance and suggest many organizations do not recognize the impact that social networks have on employee performance and knowledge transfer. Zhang and Venkatesh point out that when employees ask one another work-related questions, it is important for them to receive feedback in a timely manner and that most employees are more likely to pose those questions to other employees who are similar to them as far as “sociodemographic, behavioral, and personal characteristics” (p. 700). The authors further suggest that organizations should foster and encourage these online social networks because more frequent interactions provide additional opportunities to clarify misunderstandings and facilitate more complex knowledge transference.

Another concept the authors present is the social *cost* of some employees, or the amount of energy necessary to maintain effective social relationships. The authors point out that the more “time and effort an individual spends on helping others or maintaining relationships, the less time the individual can use for his or her own work” (p. 701). The authors add that this cost can be mitigated by using a network and technology (such as video conferencing) to “allow the transmission of nonverbal and paraverbal cues, such as body language, facial

expressions, increased personal focus, and support of high velocity of feedback” in order to increase knowledge transfer, enhancing performance (p. 701).

### **Conclusion**

This annotated bibliography includes 15 scholarly references that address what John Suler (2004) describes as the toxic disinhibition effect (TDE). TDE occurs when people communicate via computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and “self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person” (Suler, 2004, p. 1). The study is targeted towards employers and workplace managers who are responsible for preventing instances of bullying and uncivil behavior towards their employees. The literature is divided into the following sections: (a) TDE behaviors, (b) consequences of TDE, and (c) potential solutions.

#### **TDE Behaviors**

The literature suggests that U.S. workplaces continue to implement computer-mediated communication (CMC), with email the dominant form, and that use rates are climbing closer to 100% (Osterman Research, 2014, p. 1). According to the research and advisory company Gartner, Inc. (2014), organizations continue to invest vast sums of resources in CMC in an effort to increase communication and performance (p. 1). However, Joinson and Piwek (2013) suggest CMC tools are changing how we “view” coworkers by dehumanizing them and increasing the potential for negative behaviors associated with what John Suler (2004) describes as the toxic disinhibition effect (TDE).

TDE results in a variety of potentially harmful behaviors. Some of these behaviors include harsh criticisms, threats, flaming (profane and/or hostile language), blatting, (including other users in a CMC conversation without consent), and even workplace bullying (Wiedmer, 2011). Research suggests users lose unspoken information normally available in face-to-face (FTF)

interactions such as porosity, inflection, body language, and synchronous communication and, because of this lost information, DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010) observe that in “a virtual environment...it’s more common for people to misinterpret what someone has said or come to the wrong conclusions” (p. 63).

Suler (2004) identifies six factors which can contribute to users engaging in behaviors associated with TDE: (a) “dissociative anonymity, (b) invisibility, (c) asynchronicity, (d) solipsistic introjection, (e) dissociative imagination, and (f) minimization of authority” (p. 1). Research suggests that technological solutions such as teleconferencing and video chat can address and overcome these factors by increasing social presence. Increasing social presence reduces users’ inclination to dehumanize or deindividuate coworkers, attitudes which can increase the potential for negative behaviors associated with TDE (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012, p. 435; Suler, 2004, p. 1).

### **Consequences of TDE**

Sources suggest the consequences of bullying affect all facets of the workplace, from the individual employees to the overall U.S. economy (McKay & Fratzi, 2011; Vega & Comer, 2005; Wiedmer, 2011). Eisenberg and Sano (2012) note the Washington State Department of Labor & Industry defines workplace bullying as “repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s)” (p. 2). Wiedmer (2011) suggests bullying affects employees’ “finances, emotions, health, morale, and overall productivity” (p. 35). Dzurec, Kennison, and Albatineh (2014) report that victims of bullying feel a sense of shame and as if they have done something wrong. McKay and Fratzi (2011) go so far as to suggest employees can even suffer from Post Traumatic

Stress Disorder (PTSD), wage potential lawsuits, or even engage in workplace violence as a result of workplace bullying (p. 15).

Eisenberg and Sano (2012) suggest workplace bullying costs U.S. businesses some \$180 million each year in lost productivity (p. 6). In one case of workplace bullying, the court affirmed an award of \$820,000 in favor of the plaintiff (*Espinosa v. County of Orange*). McKay and Fratzl (2011) also suggest workplace bullying can affect bystanders as well as victims, and that these bystanders can also experience symptoms of PTSD. Joinson and Piwek (2013) suggest computer-mediated communication (CMC) can extend the effects of bullying by reaching a large audience with little effort and amplifying the effects experienced (p. 4).

### **Potential Solutions**

As employers face increasing risks and potential for miscommunication, technology can provide potential solutions to this technologically amplified problem. DeRosa and Lepsiger (2010) identify critical leadership qualities necessary to prevent the negative behaviors associated with TDE from occurring; these qualities are strong interpersonal and communication skills, the ability to predict and manage change and the ability to foster collaboration. The EEOC notes that prevention “is the best tool to eliminate harassment in the workplace” (EEOC, 2010, p. 1). In light of these findings, Wiedmer (2011) suggests “employers must have a full range of policies in place and means available to them to create and maintain a healthy workplace culture and climate” (p. 35); these policies include “disciplinary and legal consequences, additional supervision and oversight, training or counseling, and relationship-building activities” (p. 39). Workplaces must also select leaders and managers who are competent in using CMC technologies by recognizing not only the benefits but also the limitations of technologies such as email and video conferencing. In addition, leaders and managers must proactively implement

relevant policies to reduce the potential for negative behaviors to emerge and impact workplace performance.

Yeh, Hwang, Wang, and Zhan (2013) as well as Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012), suggest the negative behaviors associated with TDE can be avoided and/or addressed by using technology such as videoconferencing and webcams to increase social presence. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) state that an increased social presence is essential to prohibiting TDE from manifesting in the workplace (p. 436).

Studies have shown that, while technology and better management practices can prevent TDE from occurring in the workplace, laws are being updated to ensure those negative behaviors are reduced, if not eliminated (Vega & Comer, 2005; Workman, 2010). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) states an employer is “liable for harassment by non-supervisory employees or non-employees over whom it has control” if the employer is aware of the harassment and fails to take corrective action (p.1). Therefore, it is in the organization’s interest to actively implement policies and procedures, through managers and Human Resource personnel, designed to reduce the prevalence of the negative behaviors associated with TDE to not only protect their employees, but also to protect organizations from costly lawsuits (Wiedmer, 2011).

Studies show that TDE exists in our homes and in our workplaces (Haugh, 2010; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; McKay & Fratzi, 2011; Phillips, 2011; Workman, 2010). These behaviors are easy to identify but may be difficult to recognize without training. The effects of TDE in the workplace on the employee and on the organization are well documented, as are the consequences of failing to address those behaviors (McKay & Fratzi, 2011; Wiedmer, 2011). Common effects of TDE in the workplace are lower morale, increases in lost time due to stress-

related illnesses, and lost staff due to transfers or termination, resulting in consequences that include reduced productivity, increasing costs for training and counseling, and even lawsuits (Wiedmer, 2011; Workman, 2010). Studies have shown that low cost technology such as videoconferencing and webcams exists to prevent these behaviors from manifesting, but organizations must also take a proactive approach through policies and actions taken to identify behaviors and educate staff and managers on how to identify and avoid the behaviors, ultimately preventing the negative behaviors associated with TDE from occurring in the workplace (Yeh, Hwang, Wang, & Zhan, 2013).

### References

- Ale Ebrahim, N. Ahmed, S. & Taha, Z. (2011). Virtual teams and management challenges. *Acadennic Leadership Journal*, 9(3), 1-7. Retrieved from:  
<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00690027>
- Angouri, J. & Tseliga, T. (2010). ‘You HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT’: From e-disagreement to e-impoliteness in two online fora. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6(1) 57-82. doi:10.1515/JPLR.2010.004
- Barak, A., Boniel-Nissim, M., & Suler, J. (2008). Fostering empowerment in online support groups. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5) 1867-.1883.
- Bell, C., & Frantz, P. (2014). Critical evaluation of information sources | University of Oregon Libraries. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from  
<http://library.uoregon.edu/guides/findarticles/credibility.html>
- DeRosa, D., & Lepsiger, R., (2010). Virtual team success: A practical guide for working and leading from a distance. Josey-Bass. SanFrancisco
- Dzurec, L, Kennison, M., & Albatineh, R. (2014). Unacknowledged threats proffered “in a manner of speaking”: Recognizing workplace bullying as shaming. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 46(4), 281-291, doi: 10.1111/jnu.12080
- Eisenberg, S., & Sano, H. (2012). Workplace bullying from a plaintiff’s perspective. *American Bar Association*. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/labor\\_law/2012/03/national\\_conference\\_on\\_equal\\_employment\\_opportunity\\_law/mw2012eeo\\_eisenberg.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/labor_law/2012/03/national_conference_on_equal_employment_opportunity_law/mw2012eeo_eisenberg.authcheckdam.pdf)
- Espinoza v. County of Orange, 2012 WL 420149 (Cal. App. Ct. Feb. 9, 2012).

File, T. & Ryan, C. (2014). Computer and Internet use in the United States: 2013. *United States Census Bureau*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.census.gov/history/pdf/2013computeruse.pdf>

Gartner. (2014). Gartner survey reveals that 73 percent of organizations have invested or plan to invest in big data in the next two years. Gartner Group, September 2014. Retrieved from:

<http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2848718>

Graham, S. (2007). Disagreeing to agree: Conflict, (im)politeness and identity in a computer-mediated community. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(4) 742-759.

doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2006.11.017

Hardaker, C. (2010). Trolling in asynchronous computer-mediated communication: from user discussions to academic definitions. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6(2). 215-242.

doi:10.1515/JPLR.2010.011

Haugh, M. (2010). When is an email really offensive? Argumentativity and variability in evaluations of impoliteness. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behavior, Culture*,

6(1) 7-31. doi: 10.1515/JPLR.2010.002

If I do it for the lulz: a qualitative & psychological analysis of Internet trolls. (n.d.). *Trolling for the Lulz*. Retrieved from:

<http://trollingforthelulz.weebly.com/online-disinhibition-effect.html>

Joinson, A. (2003). Understanding the psychology of internet behaviour: Virtual world, real lives. *Palgrave Macmillan, New York*.

Joinson, A., & Piwek, L. (2013). Technology and behaviour change: For good and evil. *Social impact of technology*, STI Press, New York

Lapidot-Lefler, N., & Barak, A. (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 434-443.

doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.014

McKay, R. & Fratzl, J. (2011). A cause of failure in addressing workplace bullying: Trauma and the employee. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(7), 13-27. doi:

10.1007/s00420-008-0370-9

Newman, A. (2007). Real-time computer-mediated communication: Email and instant messaging simulation. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 70(4). 466-470.

doi:10.1177/10805699070700040305

Osterman Research. (2014). How have email and instant messaging use changes since 2001?

*Osterman Research*. Retrieved from:

<http://ostermanresearch.com/wordpress/?p=18>

Phillips, W. (2011). Meet the trolls. *Index on Censorship*, 40(2), 68-76.

doi:10.1177/0306422011409641

Purcell, K. (2011). Search and email still top the list of most popular online activities. *Pew*

*Research Center*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/08/09/search-and-email-still-top-the-list-of-most-popular-online-activities/>

Shachaf, P., & Hara, N. (2010). Beyond vandalism: Wikipedia trolls. *Journal of Information*

*Science*, 36(3), 357-370. doi:10.1177/0165551510365390

Sifianou, M. (2012). Disagreements, face and politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(12), 1554-

1564. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2012.03.009

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321-326.

doi:10.1089/1094931041291295

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2010). Harassment. Retrieved from:

<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/harassment.cfm>

Vega, G. & Comer, D. (2005). Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can break your spirit: Bullying in the workplace. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 58 (1/3), p. 101-109.

doi:10.1007/s10551-005-1422-7

Workman, M. (2010). A behaviorist perspective on corporate harassment online: Validation of a theoretical model of psychological motives. *Computers & Security*, 29(8), 831-839.

doi:10.1016/j.cosed.2010.09.003

Workplace Bullying Institute. (2010). Results of the 2010 WBI U.S. workplace bullying survey.

Retrieved from:

<http://www.workplacebullying.org/wbiresearch/2010-wbi-national-survey/>

Yeh, N.C, Lin, Jcc, & Lu, HP. (2011). The moderating effect of social roles on user behaviour in virtual worlds. *Online Information Review*, 35(5), 747 – 769.

doi:10.1108/14684521111176480

Yeh, S., Hwang, W., Wang, J., & Zhan, S. (2013). Study of co-located and distant collaboration with symbolic support via a haptics-enhanced virtual reality task. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 21(2), 184-198. doi:10.1080/10494820.2012.705854

doi:10.1080/10494820.2012.705854

Zhang, X., & Venkatesh, V. (2013). Explaining employee job performance: The role of online and offline workplace communication networks. *MIS Quarterly*, 37(3), 695-722