

NATIONAL SURVEY TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

A national survey on workplace bullying would assess the problems facing Irish workers, according to Genevieve Murray, co-ordinator, researcher and trainer with the Anti-Bullying Centre. She tells Michael McHale that greater public awareness is key in dealing with the issue before it spirals out of control.

Through her work with the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at Dublin City University (DCU), Genevieve Murray has encountered a diverse range of approaches to how managers tackle workplace bullying.

These can range from avoiding the issue until it becomes an industrial dispute, to sticking to well thought-out practices and procedures that protect all parties in dealing with issues that arise before they develop into a serious conflict.

“Bullying is an escalated conflict that is mishandled or not recognised until it’s too late,” Murray tells ‘Health & Safety Times’. “Bullying is all about frequency and duration. It’s about when a person is subjected to behaviours on a regular basis over a period of time.

“But my big issue is with leadership – a lack of awareness that your employers manage your staff. You have managers, supervisors and employers who are very good at their job, but they’re not actually aware of how to handle conflict with humans.

“Bullying is not an industrial relations process, it’s an emotional issue that’s in the workplace. For a lot of people, due to a lack of awareness of how to manage it, or manage conflict, this issue then escalates and turns into an industrial relations issue.”

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR
Workplace bullying is defined by the Health and Safety Authority as ‘repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the



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place of work and/or in the course of employment, which could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual’s right to dignity at work’.

In Murray’s experience, such bullying is more likely to emanate from subtle gestures and actions than the more aggressive or physical forms commonly seen in schools across the country. Spreading rumours about colleagues is an all too common practice, while organisational bullying can include withholding information, over-monitoring people, and giving unrealistic work targets and assignments.

One way in ensuring such practices become less frequent and are dealt with when they do arise is in ensuring managers realise that, when they take on a supervisory role, they are managing human beings as well as the work they do.

Much of Murray’s work focusses on intervention and prevention. When managing staff, she believes that simple steps such as listening to and valuing the opinions of all staff equally, as well as talking to staff about the workplace, can make a big difference to stopping workplace bullying before it becomes a more formal matter.

“When anything goes formal, it’s so complex that there’s no winner. And that’s the sad part about it. People think ‘I’ll get my pound of flesh’ but it never works that way. It’s too complex.”

CREATING AWARENESS

In order to ensure that companies are made aware of what needs to be done in a workplace bullying situation, Genevieve Murray believes they should not be afraid to contact organisations such as the Anti-Bullying Centre, which has the knowledge and expertise in this area. The involvement of such organisations in the formation of anti-bullying policies and procedures can also ensure that these sensitive matters can be dealt with in a fair and balance manner.

However, she has concerns that some companies may see managers seeking help from an outside organisation as a sign of weakness. “I think an element of fear is there as well; such issues are frowned upon, and managers are highlighting that they’re not performing and managing if they have to contact somewhere like ourselves.

“But actually they’re doing themselves a favour. If they don’t work on this (bullying), it’s going to escalate and it’s going to come back on them. And then maybe they’re not in a position to handle it at that point.”

Effectively acting on set policies and



The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) co-hosted a seminar on ‘Managing Bullying in the Workplace’ during European Safety Week in October in Dublin. Pictured at the seminar (l-r): Dr James O’Higgins Norman, ABC director, Dr Sharon McGuinness, HSA’s assistant chief executive, HSA psychologist Patricia Murray, and Genevieve Murray, ABC co-ordinator researcher and trainer.

procedures is also essential, especially when employers receive complaints of workplace bullying. Even with little things like reverting to the complainant a set length of time after the initial grievance was made. “It’s important that they make that call because the person who made that complaint is hanging on in there,” Murray believes.

“They’re totally consumed by this situation and they’re assuming that the people who put these procedures in place are doing them. And in many cases they don’t. But again it’s a lack of awareness. The policies are there, but are they ever

spoken about at meetings? Are they ever discussed? Very rarely.”

CODE OF PRACTICE

Since 2007 a Code of Practice has been in place to provide practical guidance for employers on identifying and preventing bullying at work.

However, while enforceable legislation exists for individual issues of harassment in the workplace (The 2000 Equal Status Act), bullying has not yet made it into Irish statute.

While legislation would have a more powerful effect to enforce employers

Little is known about whether online bullying among work colleagues should be treated with concern by Irish companies.



to take bullying seriously, Murray believes that dealing with the matter is a human issue and something that managers should not be afraid to tackle.

“It’s also important to note that if something does escalate, that whatever policy is in place, is an effective policy. A lot of people don’t know how to work that policy and many times they just leave it until something happens.”

Coupled with this lack of knowledge is the fact that the increasing use of online media adds to the risk of bullying among staff. While much research and public discussion has centred round cyberbullying in schools, little is known about whether online bullying among work colleagues should be treated with concern by Irish companies.

CYBER BULLYING

Murray cites one incident of workplace cyberbullying as a prime example of an employer realising their duty of care to their staff. “I recently heard from an employer who received a complaint of cyberbullying from an employee, and they seemed very concerned, even though it was on Facebook and outside of hours.

“She was very conscious, irrespective of that. It was an employee of hers giving out about something concerning another employee... She was quite prepared to ring us to get support, where other managers might not do something.”

Another area where little information is available concerns how Ireland’s high unemployment has affected levels of bullying in the workplace. Given the fact that employers know their workers are less likely to be able to move jobs as easily as before, the recession may have inadvertently led to an increase in the number of workplace bullying incidents, and have made staff even more afraid to speak out.

It is because of this statistical vacuum that Murray believes a national survey on workplace bullying is required, which would assess the problems facing Irish workers, and lead to greater public awareness of the issue.

ABC FACTFILE

The Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) was founded in 1996 by Professor Mona O’Moore. In 2014, ABC was relaunched as the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre and is located within the School of Education Studies, DCU.



**National Anti Bullying
Research and Resource Centre**

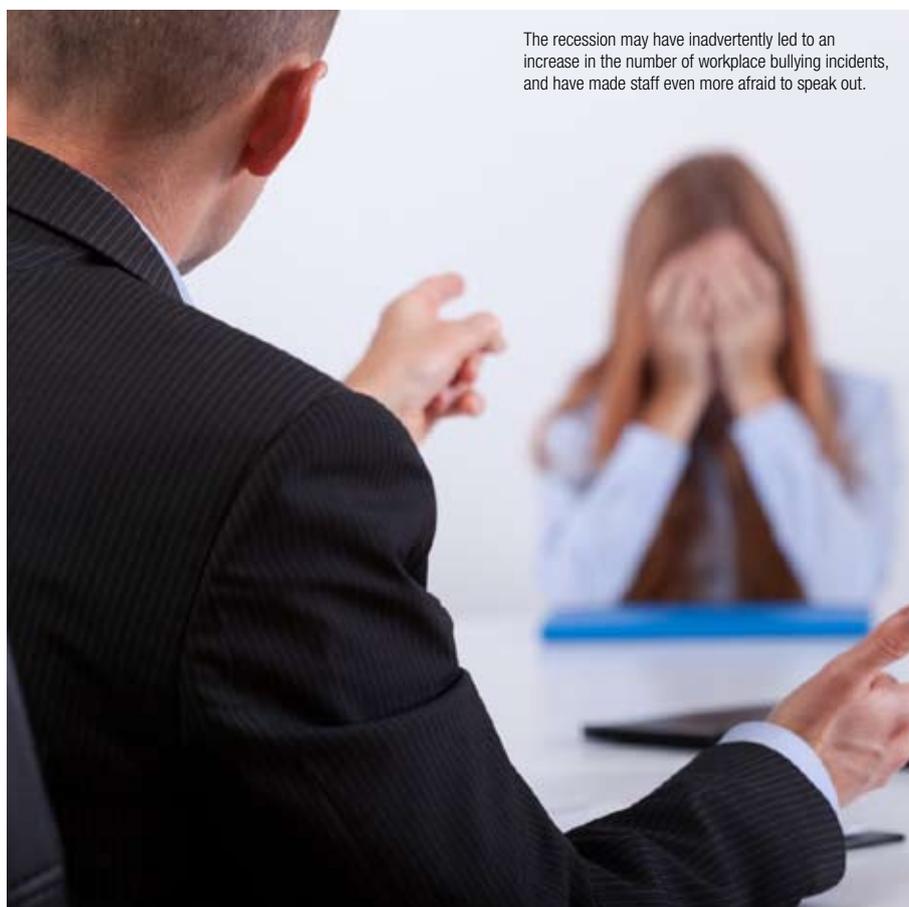
Since it was founded ABC has led the field of research in school and workplace bullying in Ireland and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research. The centre provides resources and training to those who wish to address school and workplace bullying.

The aims of ABC:

- To conduct research into the multi-level and multi-factorial nature of workplace and school bullying.
- The creation of greater awareness and understanding of bullying behaviour.
- The promotion of ways and means by which bullying behaviour may be prevented or reduced.
- To support the implementation of the National Action Plan on Bullying.

As the problem of bullying in schools and the workplace continues to evolve ABC will partner with colleagues across disciplines and in other universities to ensure that its research is relevant and of use to those who are confronted with bullying in society.

**For further information and updates visit www4.dcu.ie/abc/index.shtml*



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