

# **Volunteers not safe from workplace bullying**

April 1 2015, by Jo Manning

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Despite the charitable nature of volunteering, new research from Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University has found one in three volunteers can experience workplace bullying.

The research is the first of its kind to investigate whether workplace bullying is an issue for volunteers in Australia.

It surveyed 136 volunteers from a range of organisations and found one third indicated they had been subject to workplace bullying while working as volunteers.

The survey included respondents from organisations as diverse as sporting clubs, op shops and palliative care organisations. It included views from front line staff to board members.

Bullying included paid staff bullying volunteers, volunteers bullying other volunteers and volunteers bullying paid staff.

One respondent to the survey reported spending four hours working with just a five minute tea break while the volunteer manager "sat at the back and chatted".

"I was alone at the front serving the customers and the lot. No appreciation or gratification," they said.

Other responses included:

- "Palliative care volunteers who have been at the hospital the longest seem to think they have the right to vet new volunteers and to boss them around and give them menial tasks."
- "Being continually harassed and abused by a member of a higher echelon of the association on many occasions. This was observed by other members and only on one occasion was anything said or done."
- "A volunteer chairman who is autocratic and who both overtly and surreptitiously bullies and manipulates staff and volunteers to achieve his own way."

Associate Professor Maryam Omari from ECU's School of Business said the rate of bullying in the volunteering sector was similar to the rate in traditional workplaces.

"Bullying is highly subjective, and that behaviour that may be unwelcome and inappropriate by a person may be seen as benign by others," she said.

"The best strategy to deal with these negative behaviours is appropriate role modelling by senior staff, and dealing with inappropriate behaviour at the earliest possible stage prior to escalation."

Associate Professor Omari said bullying came in many forms but could broadly be defined as behaviour that is unwelcome, inappropriate in the given context, and causes distress to the recipient.

Volunteering expert Dr Megan Paull from Murdoch University's School of Management and Governance said that it was just as important in organisations where volunteers worked that action was taken against [workplace bullying](#).

"Volunteers are often seen as being free to leave an organisation where

they are uncomfortable but research has shown volunteers are committed to an organisation, it's cause and the people involved," she said.

"People will usually choose to stay and put up with bad behaviour, rather than abandon an organisation contrary to traditional workplaces where bullied staff will often leave."

Dr Paull said it was vitally important in organisations where volunteers played a major role that the behaviour of [volunteers](#) and towards them reflected the values and goals of the organisation.

The project was conducted with the assistance of Volunteering WA.

The research was published in the journal *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*.

Provided by Murdoch University

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