

Is workplace rudeness on the rise?

January 28 2020, by Shannon G. Taylor

Workplace respect

Survey participants were asked how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement, "I am treated with respect at work," where 1 means strongly agree and 4 means strongly disagree. While things have gotten a little worse since 2002, the average response suggests most people feel at least somewhat respected at work.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: General Social Survey Get the data

You don't have to look hard to see uncivil behavior these days, whether [in political discourse](#), [in college classrooms](#) or [on airplanes](#). One study [found](#) that rudeness is even contagious, like the common cold.

The workplace, where my research is focused, is hardly immune from this so-called [incivility epidemic](#). [Past surveys suggest](#) virtually all workers experience rude or uncivil behavior, while over half report being treated badly at least once a week. And some researchers have

claimed [it's pervasive](#) and [getting worse](#).

But is it really? [I've spent the past decade](#) studying workplace [rudeness](#) and other forms of mistreatment. While I do believe it's a significant problem, it's hardly an epidemic.

The rise of rudeness?

First let's consider whether workplace [incivility](#) is on the rise.

That is, are employees actually more likely to be interrupted, made fun of, addressed unprofessionally, demeaned or excluded at work?

To answer this question, I examined data from the [General Social Survey](#), which has been gathering data on hundreds of trends in American attitudes, behaviors and attributes since 1972. It's administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

I looked at an item that's been included every four years since 2002: "I am treated with respect at work." Participants answer on a scale of 1, or strongly agree, to 4, or strongly disagree.

In 2002, the average score was 1.69, meaning workers generally agreed they were treated with respect. In 2018, that rose to 1.76, meaning a few more people disagreed with this statement than in the past. A statistician would call that significant, but on a scale of one to four, it's a pretty tiny change.

Misleading statistics

Now, let's consider prevalence. Just how rampant is workplace rudeness?

A [frequently cited statistic](#) is that 98% of workers have experienced uncivil behavior. But this kind of data point misleads us into thinking that everyone is being rude to each other all the time.

In reality, when an [employee](#) reports experiencing high levels of incivility, it's unlikely he or she is mistreated frequently by everyone in the office. The trouble with research investigating the incidence of workplace rudeness is that it doesn't consider an employee's interactions with every co-worker but instead her experiences of incivility in general.

Rudeness occurs between two people. It requires an offender and a victim, comprising what researchers refer to as a "dyad." So to understand the prevalence of workplace incivility, we should consider not only an employee's general tendency to be mistreated but also—and [more importantly](#) – the relationships that employee has with each of his or her colleagues.

In 2018, three colleagues and I [conducted a study](#) to determine how widespread [workplace incivility](#) is when considered from the viewpoint of employee relationships. We gave workers at a chain of casual dining restaurants in the Southeastern U.S. a survey and asked them to report how frequently they experienced rudeness over the past 12 months on a scale from "never" to "very frequently."

We found that 69% of employees reported experiencing some incivility in the previous year. But this happened only in 16% of their relationships with co-workers. In other words, while a majority of employees reported experiencing incivility, most indicated that these experiences came from just a few coworkers—just about one in eight, in fact.

These findings show that while most people experience workplace rudeness at least once in a while, most of their relationships are not characterized by rude or discourteous behavior.

Concerns about the deterioration of courtesy and professionalism in today's workplace are understandable. Yes, there are jerks out there, but rudeness is nothing new. It may spread like the flu, but it is no epidemic.

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Citation: Is workplace rudeness on the rise? (2020, January 28) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-workplace-rudeness.html>

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