

Study finds overidentification skews online job reviews

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Both companies and job-review websites could benefit from emphasizing ethical behavior, according to a new study. Credit: Andrea Piacquadio / Pexels

Corporate consultants have preached "aligning" oneself with one's workplace for decades. And a new study shows how far some have taken the notion, to the point they are quite willing to tell flattering lies about their organization to online review sites like Glassdoor.

A focus on "[commitment](#)"—as opposed to "identification"—that

includes [ethical behavior](#) and takes a longer view could counteract this tendency, according to a paper published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. The paper's co-authors are Cameron Piercy, University of Kansas assistant professor of communication studies, and Caleb Carr of Illinois State University.

Likewise, [review sites](#) like Indeed could improve their accuracy by cautioning reviewers against this tendency toward "unethical pro-organizational behavior" (UPB), the authors wrote.

"This paper shows that people are willing to lie on behalf of their [company](#) in online reviews if they are highly identified, but that commitment to the long-term values and goals of the company may reduce that willingness to deceive in the reviews," Piercy said.

Piercy said statistics show workplace-[review](#) websites are exploding in popularity, but that reviews come in "a J-shaped distribution, where only extreme viewpoints dominate the reviews of any given organization."

"There are really disgruntled people and really happy people, and nobody in between really reviews their workplace," he said.

In their survey of about 300 respondents, Piercy and Carr tried to capture the differences between identification with and commitment to a company or entity.

"We have identification with the company, which is a sense of oneness or belonging," Piercy said. "When you talk about your workplace, do you say 'we,' or do you say 'they'? That subtle shift in language is one way that that identification manifests.

"The other way we measured it was commitment. So the questions included "How long would you like to stay at your job?" "How attached

are you to your job?"

"Those two are really similar concepts, but they are meaningfully different, and we found that affects how people rate their company in online reviews."

Piercy said the authors extended previous studies on unethical pro-organizational behavior to the online-review space.

"If you really see your workplace as part of who you are, even if you don't like it, you might give it a positive review, anyway," he said. "And that's what we found in the paper: The more identified you were, the higher your review was. And then the way we teased out unethical behaviors was ... we asked people questions like "If it would help your organization, would you exaggerate the truth to customers?" and "Would you conceal information from the public that could be damaging to your organization?"

"My co-author questioned whether people would be truthful about that. But when we measured it, the responses show there are some people who are willing to lie, and there are some people who are not willing to lie on behalf of their company, and it relates exactly to those forms of attachment that I just described."

Unethical pro-organizational behavior is bad for companies, Piercy explained, due to what he called "the sinking ship problem."

"If you look in the organization-science literature, it's universally good; we want people to be identified," Piercy said. "We want them to care about their work, to internalize what they're doing. But it's also bad, because if the organization is going down and you just keep bailing water instead of abandoning ship, you will drown. So commitment captures that. It's a long-term focus on you and the organization

succeeding. So we might say that if people at Enron had really been committed to Enron's success, they wouldn't have deceived the public the way they did in the first place. They would recognize that the lie has a long-term corrosive effect."

The paper concludes by spelling out implications for both businesses and job-review sites.

"What does it mean for these platforms," Piercy said, "knowing that they know about the J-shaped distribution problem? So we said, "What if the review site said, "Think about the long-term success of the company" and "Think about the implications for people who might read these reviews?" Focus on the commitment side of things, not just identification." If you primed people to think about the fact that others might be using these reviews to make a decision to apply to the company or to work there, they might give more honest answers.

"And then we say for managers there's a lot of evidence that shows the more ethical a company is in its practices, the better long-term success it has. So organizations should focus on healthy attachment—balancing identity with commitment: We're strong because of what we do at work and in our community, and what's best for the company is not necessarily the easy decision."

More information: Cameron W. Piercy et al. Employer reviews may say as much about the employee as they do the employer: online disclosures, organizational attachments, and unethical behavior, *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/00909882.2020.1812692](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2020.1812692)

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