

# Study highlights 'vicious cycle' of workplace incivility

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Workplace incivility is on the rise and a new Portland State University study found that employees who experience or witness incivilities are more likely to be uncivil to others, a worrying trend that could intensify as people return to in-person work.

"People have gotten used to not having to engage in [interpersonal communication](#) as much and that can take an already distressing or tense situation and exacerbate it because people are out of practice of not having to have difficult conversations," said Larry Martinez, associate professor of industrial-organizational psychology and co-author of the study. "These spirals that we're seeing might be stronger in a post-pandemic world."

Uncivil [behavior](#) at work can range from criticizing someone in public, rude or obnoxious behavior or withholding important information to more subtle acts such as arriving late to a meeting, checking email or texting during a meeting, or ignoring or interrupting a colleague.

Incivility can mean different things to different people, so it can be easily overlooked or missed.

"Incivility is typically ambiguous and not very intense, but it has [harmful effects](#) all the same," said Lauren Park, a recent Ph.D. graduate in industrial-organizational psychology who now works as an HR research scientist.

Park and Martinez's study is the first comprehensive review of its kind to analyze the factors that predict uncivil behavior in workplaces. They focused on the instigator's perspective to better understand [incivility](#) and how to stop it at its source.

Among the findings:

- Employees who have more control over their jobs are less likely to reciprocate incivility. Researchers suggest that employees with greater job control have more freedom in deciding when and how their work tasks are completed, offering them the time and energy to seek social or organizational support, mentally and/or

physically detach from work, reflect on the situation, or confront their uncivil colleague.

- Employees whose immediate team or workgroup engages in more civil behavior are less likely to reciprocate incivility.
- Employees who are older are less likely to reciprocate incivility.

In a remote working world, Park and Martinez said incivility could more easily go unchecked as people hide behind Zoom boxes or chat messages and it can be difficult to discern intent from text without body language or tone of voice. Even as people return to work, organizations may choose to adopt a hybrid model where employees may only come in for team-based work.

"There will inevitably be some conflict as people might be meeting coworkers in person for the first time or they'll be working together again in the same physical space," Martinez said. "Relationships will need to be renegotiated in different kinds of ways and the likelihood that people are going to be able to address these situations in a conducive manner as compared to before the pandemic will decrease."

Park said it's key that organizations provide support to employees who've experienced incivility.

"They're at a high risk of starting these vicious cycles," she said.

"Providing support is not only the right thing to do but it stops that behavior from spiraling through the organization."

Martinez added that complaints about uncivil behavior shouldn't be discounted and organizations should have policies and practices in place that take incidents seriously and address them in a way that curtails them from continuing.

The study was published in the *Journal of Occupational Health*

*Psychology.*

**More information:** Lauren S. Park et al, An "I" for an "I": A systematic review and meta-analysis of instigated and reciprocal incivility., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000293](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000293)

Provided by Portland State University

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