

# Rudeness between colleagues can lead to workplace bullying

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Employees who have previously been the subject of rude behavior run a greater risk of being bullied at work. These are the findings of a year-long series of surveys carried out by a researcher at Malmö University.

The findings are published in the journal *BMC Psychology*.

"The results show how important it is to act immediately when you see disrespectful behavior in the [workplace](#)," says senior lecturer Kristoffer Holm.

Three surveys were conducted by Holm in collaboration with a Swedish trade union for engineers.

On three occasions over the course of a year, questionnaires with the same questions were sent to 5,000 randomly selected workers from the trade unions. The questions addressed the degree to which one experienced incivility or was being bullied at work. A final part dealt with how these actions affected well-being. A total of 1,005 people answered one or more of the questionnaires.

"We specifically looked at those who we could see answered at least two of the [questionnaires](#), and in this way we could follow the development over these twelve months," says Holm.

Rude behavior can be disparaging or sarcastic comments, not being invited to different events or being treated disrespectfully in different ways. Bullying is something that is repeated systematically where the victim feels that they are at a disadvantage; repeated negative actions that the person has difficulty defending against. But it is not just bullying that has consequences—even incivility can lead to poorer well-being, according to Holm.

The results show that there is an increased risk of workplace bullying over time for people who previously experienced being treated rudely. To some extent, the study also provides evidence that there is an increased risk of witnessing bullying if one has previously witnessed rudeness.

Of the participants in the study, approximately 73% report that they have been treated rudely in the past month, approximately 10% said that they have been bullied.

"The major contribution of our study is that we can see that there is a clear connection between rudeness and bullying over time. The risk was clearly elevated over the entire time span in the study. If you don't act in time, work-related conflicts can develop into [bullying](#) in the worst case," says Holm.

"Early interventions are necessary. Rude behaviors can easily be normalized and spread in a workplace until someone is put at a disadvantage."

**More information:** Kristoffer Holm et al, Workplace incivility as a risk factor for workplace bullying and psychological well-being: a longitudinal study of targets and bystanders in a sample of swedish engineers, *BMC Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s40359-022-00996-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00996-1)

Provided by Malmö University

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