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INCIVILITY, THE NEXT FRONTIER: TO WHAT EXTENT INCIVILITY DIFFER BETWEEN OFFLINE AND ONLINE WORKPLACES



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Summary: Workplace incivility is a significant issue in any workplace because of its ambiguous intent and low-intensity deviant small actions that can accumulate over time, resulting in severe consequences (such as job dissatisfaction or demotivating work environment) for both the organisation and the employees themselves. The proliferation of online working and communications has increased the need to understand how people are perceiving and interpreting the acts of incivility. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the underlying individual differences and reactions of workplace incivility in online working. This paper will be making both a theoretical and practical contribution to the field of workplace incivility and by recommending policies to minimise incivility in the online environment and potentially identifying vulnerable people and the support that can be offered to them.

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Andersson and Pearson (1999) introduced the concept of workplace incivility. This definition of workplace incivility states that it is a low-intensity divergent attitude having an ambiguous intent for harming the target, to break the norms of the workplace for communal respect. For example, eye-rolling, sighing, sarcastic comments, dismissive or silent treatment. The implications are costly to the organisation such as: job dissatisfaction, increasing stress, turnover intentions, job insecurity and lower employee engagement (Loh & Loi, 2018). Wang and Chen (2020) found that the act of incivility not only affects one individual but destroys the whole work environment, due to the incivility spiral. When the number of cases of incivility increases in the work environment, employees are affected by having negativity in their approach and feel demotivated, resulting in loss of confidence and trust. When employees misbehave with each other, it disrupts the ethical and moral values, resulting in creating a habit of mocking each other without feeling bad. Therefore, workplace incivility is a major issue in most organisations, regardless of sector, industry or market (Cameron & Website, 2011).

Increasingly people are working exclusively from home by utilising digital technologies to carry out their daily tasks (Béland et al., 2020; Spurr & Straub, 2020). An important factor contributing to this acceleration is COVID-19 (Shkalenko & Fadeeva, 2020). Nevertheless, virtual working is not a new concept, and it presents its own set of challenges and barriers (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). One of the most challenging aspects of virtual working is team communication (Alsharo, Gregg, & Ramirez 2017). Employees are increasingly available beyond work hours via email and chat tools. Guy (2021) shows an average 2.5 hour increase in the average workday for employees that work from home. The drastic shift towards virtual working has also caused uncertainties in the workplace, including workplace incivility, which is a major issue itself. (Achara, Onyemaechi, & Eberechi, 2020; Monika & Radosław, 2020; Stalmašeková, 2020; Tul, 2021).

The mentioned implications of workplace incivility typically relate to the traditional workplace, which is office-based with face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, workplace incivility can occur within the digital or online context as well. For instance, the way people communicate in the workplace is increasing, and every new digital tool to communicate is different than the other with its own merits and demerits (Hacker, Vom Brocke, Handali, Otto, & Schneider, 2020). For example, video conferencing is a synchronous communication method, while email is asynchronous (Li, Finley, Pitts, & Guo, 2011). Emails are unscheduled while video conferencing is mostly scheduled; once the email has been sent, it cannot be changed and can be perceived wrong, and further clarification can take time depending on the situation; meanwhile, in video conferencing, further clarification can be given instantly if perceived wrong as it is in real-time. Furthermore, Gartner predicts that by 2024, only 25% of the meetings will be taken in person and the rest from virtual means, such as video conferencing (Standaert, Muylle, & Basu, 2021). Workplace incivility originates from communication, it can be from any channel (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005), hence there is a risk of incivility within the digital context.

Furthermore, researchers have found that there is high risk of incivility through emails (Lim & Teo, 2009; McCarthy, 2016; Miner et al., 2018) as well as high chance of arising online due to lack of visibility and disagreement through anonymity (Ezerins & Ludwig, 2021). Additionally, Ferreira, Cheng, and Adams (2021) commented that the new digital tools for remote and collaborative work can spread incivility more rapidly than ever before. For example, Asana, Flowdock, Jira, Slack, Teams, WebEx, and Zoom, are some tools that make collaboration easier but also create possibilities for incivility, as it can occur in any communication channel (Hacker et al., 2020; McCaskill & Turner, 2022; Pearson et al., 2005).

Moreover, Bartlett and Bartlett (2016, p.8, cited in Ezerins & Ludwig, 2021) showed that the new digital tools have led to informality, and their research participants mentioned that they acted “*in ways they would not, should the situation be face-to-face*”. Consequently, there is a difference in ways incivility can arise from traditional and virtual work channels.

Samosh (2019) identified the 14 most frequent forms of incivility that employees often came across to: criticise/insult, dismissive, shout, inappropriate language, talk (indirect), unfair treatment, name-calling, inappropriate jokes, fight/argue, lying, invasion of privacy, sabotage/backstab, threat/intimidate, and withhold information, respectively. However, with the rise of virtual work, there can be other forms of incivility. For instance, Karl, Peluchette, and Aghakhani (2021) identified six key issues in virtual meetings that others find uncivil: lurking (camera on/off), showing up late, multitasking, eating, failing to mute, and camera issues (such as, walking around with camera, camera angle or not looking in the camera). Consequently, different channels bring different forms of incivility.

Although there is an existing body of research into workplace incivility in virtual work environment, a number of limitations with this work are evident. For instance, Park and Haun (2018) studied experienced incivility in the form of emails and identified that the stress from incivility is transmissible to family. However, their research is limited to only one channel of virtual work, and they suggest “*future studies must examine how the targets perceive face-to-face and online incivility differently or similarly and make attributions across the incivility channels and sources*” (Park & Haun 2018, p.1279). Furthermore, McCarthy (2016, p.370) mentioned that some participants in multiple instances said, “*I just don’t get upset about email that others might think of as rude*”. Konuk (2021) also shares similar thoughts that some people find the poor email etiquettes rude while others tend to ignore them. Now the question arises, why one person might regard a poorly constructed email as an act of incivility while the other person does not: “*recipients might interpret incivility incidents differently*” (Park & Haun, 2018, p.1279). The difference in interpretation can be because of numerous factors, such as gender, age, personality, experience of working traditionally and virtually, or even culturally related (Di Fabio & Duradoni, 2019; Ezerins & Ludwig, 2021; Hutton & Gates, 2008; Karl et al., 2021; Namin, Øgaard, & Røislien, 2022; Schilpzand, Da Pater, & Erez, 2016; Taylor, Hardin, Welch, & Smith, 2018). Moreover, McCarthy (2016, p.364) stated, “*A qualitative interview approach is used to explore and analyse employees’ perceptions and investigate what employees think, feel, and say about their experiences with incivility at work*”.

Additionally, Brass (2021) conducted a survey-based quantitative study and focused on understanding the impact of incivility in virtual work. The findings showed that incivility between management and staff led to job burnout and workplace anxiety in virtual work, but the prediction that these experiences will be more frequent and present in virtual work than traditional work was not supported. However, Brass (2021, p.8) commented that the virtual work incivility literature is limited, which could have affected the results and suggested that future researchers to carry out “*qualitative interviewing to evaluate the ‘hows and whys’ of further understanding employee’s feelings and experiences of incivility in virtual work, and how this impacts their feelings*”. Consequently, Brass’s (2021) finding fails to understand the cause of such results due to the limitations of the method used because it is unable to analyse individuals’ perceptions and experiences like qualitative does. Furthermore, Ezerins and Ludwig’s (2021, p.20) systematic review of incivility in the virtual work focuses on potential interventions for mitigating virtual incivility, but they suggest “*Further qualitative research should attempt to determine how the topography of behaviours construed as uncivil differ in a virtual context from face-to-face interactions*”, because the existing literature lacks to answer

such behaviour. Resultantly, the research on workplace incivility in virtual work environment is missing in-depth qualitative research (Brass, 2021; Ezerins & Ludwig, 2021; Schilpzand et al., 2016; Vasconcelos, 2020).

Based on this review, a qualitative study using multi-method approach becomes appealing for a thorough investigation. Multi-method approach is able to capture people's emotions, reflection and perspective to better explore the subtleties of different interpretations of why one person considers something as an act of incivility and others do not. Moreover, in order to explore the differences between incivility in traditional and virtual workplace thoroughly, the study will capture both the data for offline and online workplace incivility.

Following are the research aims that the study will address:

1. To explore the differences and impact between workplace (face-to-face) forms of incivility and digital (on-site and off-site) incivility
2. To explore the underlying individual differences and reaction of incivility in the virtual working environment
3. To extend the theory of workplace incivility and recommend practical implications of it.

Going forward, data collection methods that can capture the richness of reflection from the lived experiences of the participants is important to explore and investigate the phenomenon. The best and unique way to approach is by using multi-method approach: online qualitative surveys and the diary method which is becoming increasingly common due to its richness (Spencer, Radcliffe, Spence, & King, 2021). Generally, purely qualitative research surveys are underused and undertheorised (Terry & Braun, 2017). The method allows participants to use their own sense-making frameworks to collect rich, detailed data. Consequently, they can provide information about people's subjective worlds and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, audio diaries are helpful where participant's emotions, reflection, perspective, and choice of an event needs to be studied in exploring a phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Both the online survey and diary are an asynchronous communication method, which offers participants and researchers the flexibility to record whenever they want. Furthermore, both of these methods allows the researcher to compare and contrast participants' data simultaneously, which gives freedom to move from one situation to another. The benefits of audio diaries make the study stand out in the workplace incivility literature, as only a few studies in the literature have taken the conventional diary approach (Vasconcelos, 2020). Therefore, this study uses qualitative survey and audio diary method to capture the data, as it also brings flexibility and time-saving for participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

The data collection method is divided into two different stages, respectively:

1. Online Qualitative Survey: recruiting 300 participants to answer up to 9 open-ended questions along with some close-ended demographic and personality related questions to explore different forms of incivility in both the domains and its impact.
2. Audio Diary: 40-60 participants from the original sample of 300 participants will be invited back over a 6-week period to send audio diaries daily. At this stage, the audio diary study is not designed as the data from survey will be analysed halfway and then the questions will be formed.

The participants are recruited from Prolific, a sample of total 300 participants will be recruited. In terms of gender, it will be a balanced sample of 50% Male and 50% Female. The key filters that will be used to recruit are below:

Employment Status	Full-Time
Employee Interaction	Yes
Employment-Sector	Business Management & Administration, Finance, and Legal
Customer Facing	No

In September, when we present this paper, we will share our findings which will allow us to understand the extent to which the in-person experience differs from the online experience. We will have identified whether hybrid working may have introduced different forms of incivility or potentially change the experience, and reflect on what the theoretical implications are for the theory and the practical implications.

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