

The Hidden Costs of Workplace Incivility: A Strain on Employees and Organizations

Workplace incivility (i.e., rudeness) can be [defined](#) as low-intensity deviant behaviour with unclear intent to harm what is typically counter to workplace values and norms.

Because everyone has their perception of what behaviours are rude, the line for what is rude may not always be clear. I often refer to this as the “fuzzy line of rudeness.”

One way to frame workplace incivility is a lack of awareness, regard or concern for how one’s behaviour may impact another. The consequence of a person experiencing incivility is a feeling of disrespect.

The cost of incivility is shocking. A recent U.S. [study](#) found that workplace incivility costs around \$2.7 billion daily. Employees who experience incivility [report](#) the following consequences: 48 per cent intentionally decrease work effort, 38 per cent deliberately reduce work quality, 80 per cent waste time worrying about the incident, 66 per cent report declining performance and 12 per cent quit. Another [study](#) reported that incivility is an intrusive form of antisocial behaviour linked to negatively impacting employees’ stress levels and potentially their physical and mental well-being.

Uncivil behaviours range from unintentional to intentional acts. Simple examples of workplace rudeness include poor manners (e.g., not saying please and thank you), foul language, interrupting others, ignoring or failing to acknowledge (e.g., regularly not returning a good morning salutation), using supplies or resources without refilling (e.g., never put paper into a photocopier or make coffee). A long list of actions can be perceived as rude.

What is and is not rude is subjective. One person may perceive their behaviour as responsible, while another sees it as a sign of disrespect (e.g., regularly checking their phone when talking to someone one-on-one). In this example, this is normal behaviour for one person; they see nothing wrong, whereas their colleague sees it as a sign of disrespect. Because the line of rudeness is not always clear, mental harm and stress can be inflicted by rudeness with no malicious intention.

On the other end of the continuum are intentional acts of rudeness, possibly originating from bias, revenge, narcissism-motivated behaviour to dominate or looking for a reaction. Regardless of the motivation, the intention is for personal gain (e.g., social dominance). The person may not be aware of their motivations but engages in behaviours creating stress, frustration and unpleasant emotions for another.

Some employees’ rudeness may be linked to psychosocial risk factors such as work demand or changing deadlines. Staff shortages increase workers’ fatigue and stress levels, making employees more reactive and less aware or empathetic of how their behaviour impacts peers. Incivility is not confined to particular sectors.

It happens across all sectors, including health care, IT, finance, government agencies, first responders, manufacturing, and professional services.

Addressing workplace incivility is not only a moral or ethical consideration for senior leadership. Businesses must maximize organizational potential. Unchecked rudeness can diminish workers' morale, reduce productivity and erode trust among employees and teams. Research suggests the financial cost of doing nothing is prohibitive.

The “fuzzy line of rudeness” may present challenges but also underscores the need for intentionality and leadership in shaping workplace norms. Proactive efforts to address incivility are investments in the foundation of organizational success: its people.

Employers who want to create a psychologically safe and inclusive workplace prioritize civility and set professional respect as an expectation. They train employees on civility and the employer's role and rights and mitigate risks by building stronger, more resilient workplaces that set the standard for excellence by valuing respect and civility.

Incivility's Negative Impact

Howatt HR's applied workplace assessment research aligns with [literature](#) that suggests workers exposed to acts of incivility have high stress levels, increasing the risk of burnout, mental harm, injury and illness (i.e., anxiety, depression).

Rudeness can be framed as a prepared fear (i.e., biological preparedness), like a fear of spiders, snakes or sharks that drives unconscious behaviours to anticipate fear, framing the workplace as dangerous. Workers who get caught in a constant state of high arousal because of fear of incivility are at greater risk of mental harm or engaging in self-protection through counter-productive behaviours such as hostility or aggression.

Beyond the personal impact on an employee's well-being, [incivility](#) (e.g., [negative](#) interactions in the workplace) contributes to job dissatisfaction. The financial costs linked to incivility can be noted in increased costs due to turnover, recruiting, training, workplace complaints investigations, absence, disability, low productivity and reduced operational effectiveness.

Employers should mitigate the risk of incivility and rudeness as a part of their workplace mental health initiatives or psychological health and safety programs. Organizations with high levels of incivility risk it escalating into bullying, harassment or violence.

Because incivility is often subtle and does not breach workplace violence and harassment policies, it is not addressed with a systemic approach that sets clear expectations for every employee to create a civil and respectful workplace promoting inclusion and psychological safety.