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OF VIRTUAL WORKERS

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Approval Page



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**Approval of Dissertation**

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the 12 participants who shared their experiences with me. I cannot write your names here as I promised to respect your privacy, but you know who you are, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me your time, your trust, and your perspectives on this important topic.

The purpose of this research was to share insights on the experience of working virtually, as well as to shine a light on the murky business of dysfunctional conflict and bullying in the virtual workplace. I hope the findings will inspire other researchers to learn more about virtual work and workplace bullying so that future workers do not experience the harm that comes from this phenomenon.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore workplace bullying that occurs in the virtual workplace through the experiences of workers who have observed or experienced the phenomenon. This qualitative study investigated the experiences of workplace bullying as lived by virtual workers, shedding light on how workplace bullying occurs in a virtual context, as well as enhancing our understanding of the impacts on workers. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were held in 2018 with 12 adults who worked as virtual workers and either observed or experienced negative acts associated with workplace bullying in their virtual roles. The results confirmed that virtual workers are at risk of workplace bullying and that the effects are consistent with the physical, psychological, and social effects found in many studies regarding collocated workers. Findings also show that the nature of virtual work may bring some additional risk of incivilities that workers have to manage, which could increase the likelihood of bullying in this context.

*Keywords*: virtual workers, remote workers, distributed workers, global workers, workplace bullying, virtual workplace, qualitative research, NAQ-R

Preface

This dissertation is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Peggy Flanigan.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Many employees who are engaged in knowledge work are situated together with their work group in collocated work arrangements. Whether in office or workstation settings, they work interdependently in relatively close physical proximity with one another. These workers may leverage mediated technology (such as telephone, email, and instant messaging) to support their interdependent work, but they also have the opportunity to interact in a face-to-face manner with colleagues and supervisors. Although mediated technology facilitates communication in terms of the actual message (the words conveyed), it cannot replicate the richness of face-to-face communication (Belanger, 1999).

The opportunities occur both formally (in a boardroom, for instance) or informally (such as at the water cooler, walking in the corridor, or visiting in one another’s workspace), and in each of these circumstances, the workers experience the richness of the full range of human communication, which includes what is heard, what is observed, and what is felt. Communication includes social proximity (the physical space between people), which might relate information about the closeness or formalness of a relationship, or the underlying intention of a message. The communication is further nuanced through body language, which includes an individual’s stance, posture, as well as gestures, all of which convey additional information to the receiver, such as the casualness or formality of the subject discussed, the confidence of the individual (with respect to the relationship or the message), the energy and intensity of the message, the emotions connected with the message, as well as any power dynamics the sender wishes to convey (Zhou & Zhang, 2008). While intimacy and aggression are both communicated by being in very close personal space, it is position of hands and arms, softness or hardness of the gaze, the set of the jaw and many other small but important body positions and gestures that communicate to the sender whether they are in the presence of someone to trust or fear (Phutela, 2015). Although technology facilitates communication, it cannot replicate the richness of face-to-face communication (Belanger, 1999).

## Virtual Workers

Virtual workers (also known as work anywhere workers, teleworkers, geographically distributed workers, disbursed workers, or remote workers) are not located in the same physical location but they work interdependently with colleagues and/or supervisors using mediated technology. Their communication, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration are almost exclusively conducted through technology. For virtual workers, supervisors and colleagues might be several hundred miles to several time zones away. Some virtual workers will never meet in person, whereas others may meet face to face only several times a year (Cascio, 2000; Lipnack & Stamps, 2008).

Though there are challenges with social isolation, as well as the fidelity of meaning and intention when communication is limited to mediated technology, the benefits of being able to work anywhere appear to outweigh these issues. Virtual work continues to be a desired and growing work arrangement. According to Gallup’s (2017) State of the American Workplace report, 35% of respondents indicated they would change jobs for an opportunity to work off-site, full-time (p. 45). When broken down by generation, the desirability becomes even more pronounced; the study reports that 31% of Baby Boomers and Gen Xer’s would change jobs to work virtually, whereas almost half (47%) of Millennials would leave their current job for a virtual opportunity (Gallup, 2017, p. 48). Mateyka, Rapino and Landivar (2012) estimated that the number of U.S. workers who are almost exclusively home-based increased from 3.6% in 2005 to 4.3% in 2010. About a quarter of these workers are in management, business, or financial roles. Between 2000 and 2010, Mateyka et al. reported a 69% increase in the number of home-based workers who were in computer-related, engineering, or science roles.

Organizations see value in virtual work, primarily because it allows them to draw from a larger talent pool (nationally or globally) without the challenges of relocation, which can include the costs for and complexities of moving, and the complications and delays with acquiring visas or immigration documents (Treinen & Miller-Frost, 2006). There may be tangible cost savings in corporate real estate with home-based staff (Cascio, 2000). There may be cost reductions due to the lower market cost of labour in small centers (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). More importantly, however, virtual work is a desirable competitive differentiator in acquiring and retaining talent (Cascio, 2000).

For most virtual workers, flexibility with respect to time and location is of significant value. This includes the ability to time-shift. If the worker, for example, has a preference for starting later in the day, then perhaps a Connecticut worker may look for work with a firm based on the west coast. Workers with dependents may be able to time-shift their daily work activities (earlier or later) to accommodate the dependents’ needs while still accomplishing a reasonable work–life balance. In this way, both the worker and the organization win. The organization gets the benefits of the talent and meets the needs of the employee without any changes to their own local work practices or hours.

## Workplace Bullying

Bullying in the workplace is a pervasive, complex, and destructive phenomenon that at best undermines productivity and at worst irrevocably damages workers’ lives (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). It is also one of the most preventable workplace hazards. Estimates of the incidence of bullying (expressed as a percentage of the country’s workforce) vary by country; the estimates range from the low single digits in Scandinavia to as much as 55% reported in Turkey (Agervold, 2007; Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011). A Canadian study by Lee and Brotheridge (2006) reported an astonishing 40% of workers experience bullying during their working life.

Bullying is not only a stressor, but a chronic stressor, putting workers at risk of short- and long-term psychosocial and physical harm (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010). The harm due to workplace bullying is of increasing occupational health and safety concern by governments, courts, and private healthcare organizations (Harthill, 2011). The impacts can be far reaching and include both economic and social repercussions. The effects of depression and anxiety resulting from workplace bullying, for example, are reflected as a loss of worker confidence, sleep disorders, an inability to concentrate, and poor memory, which in turn, may affect work performance (Branch, Ramsey, & Barker, 2013; Namie, 2007; Rayner & Hoel, 1997; Yamada, 2003). Poor work performance resulting from bullying and can lead to job loss and unemployment, which in turn may undermine family and social networks (Cleary, Hunt, Walter, & Robertson, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Namie, 2003; Quine, 1999). Some workers are so severely harmed by workplace bullying that they are unable to return to work due to debilitating anxiety or depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), elevated chronic health conditions, or worse, suicide (Kivimäki et al., 2003; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001).

The cost to teams and productivity may not even be known by organizations. However, aggregate societal costs have been estimated by researchers. Economic costs for health, workforce turnover, and unemployment in the UK are estimated to be between £1.8 billion and £30 billion annually. The higher estimate includes impacts to productivity and longer-term economics (such as pensions) and damage to professional reputation (Giga, Hoel, & Lewis, 2008; McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003). Estimates of costs in Australia are between AUS $6.8 billion and $36 billion annually (Productivity Commission, 2010). U.S. studies estimate USD $5 billion alone is spent annually on psychological services connected with workplace bullying (Lim & Teo, 2009). Canadian insurers have observed that psychological services are the fastest growing category with insured workers, and the workplace is a key source of stress (Greenberg, Fournier, Sisitsky, Pike, & Kessler, 2015).

## A Possible Link Between Virtual Workers and Workplace Bullying

To date, studies on workplace bullying have tended to focus on collocated working arrangements. Given the pervasiveness of workplace bullying in the collocated setting, it is likely that it is also occurring among virtual workers. Studies on conflict in virtual teams have acknowledged that dysfunctional conflict may occur but have not mentioned bullying as a process or outcome (Martínez-Moreno, Zornoza, Orengo, & Thompson, 2015; Paul, Seetharaman, Samarah, & Mykytyn, 2005). A few studies appear to hint that bullying may occur in a virtual work context. There is research on the impacts of using personal social media to effect cyberbullying on coworkers (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Farley, Coyne, Sprigg, Axtell, & Subramanian, 2015; Heatherington & Coyne, 2014; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Suler, 2004; Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & De Witte, 2017), and research that reported global teams seem to see more escalated conflict (Brenner, 2013; Filippova & Cho, 2016; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2006; Petersen, 2014), as well as a study on workplace bullying occurring in call centers (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2009), but there do not appear to be any studies on workplace bullying in the context of virtual workers.

Emerging areas of social science research in the context of mediated technology provides some of the strongest evidence that workplace bullying is likely occurring in the virtual context as well. Research investigating the interactions between individuals when using computer-mediated technology has revealed the phenomenon of cyberbullying (Aquino et al., 2006; Campbell, 2005). Dysfunctional behaviours in virtual gaming communities (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Gurău, 2011; Bowman, 2013), social media (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015), and distance learning organizations (Smart & Cappel, 2006), which have similar dynamics to working virtually demonstrate that bullying does not require proximity between individuals to be effective, nor does it require any formal organizational structure. Research on cyberbullying, in particular, shows how effective the use of technology can be in quickly destabilizing the target to the point of psychological crisis (Clark, Werth, & Ahten, 2012; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Yang, 2012). Research on other virtual environments such as online learning communities, social media, and multiplayer gaming communities demonstrates a disinhibition effect, which observes that people tend to be more aggressive and less compassionate when communication is not face to face, and even more so if the sender can be anonymous (Chesney, Coyne, Logan, & Madden, 2009; Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Faris, 2012; Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Yang, 2012).

Studying conflict among virtual workers, Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter, and Levitt (2004) observed that with interactions largely limited to mediated technology for communications, there could be challenges with respect to interpersonal dynamics that might play out differently than those experienced in collocated teams:

Cross-functional, geographically distributed workers provide great advantages by bringing to bear the diverse skills of scarce specialists on problems or projects that span traditional organizational boundaries, in such diverse areas as software development, engineering, nursing, purchasing, and new product development. Although companies are rapidly adopting cross-functional, geographically distributed work, little is known about the challenging new social and work environments that these organizational forms create for team members. (p. 2)

However, there is also research that suggests that strong social ties and friendships can flourish between individuals who have never seen each other. Some research has shown that supportive relationships have a mediating effect on conflict. Richard and Hoadley (2013) observed that in some gaming communities in which relationships have developed between players, the player community would rally and sanction the bullying offender, as well as offer support to the target. This supports that technology itself is not the cause of the poor relationships and behaviours but can be used as a tool for the communication of intentions.

Research on conflict within virtual teams has demonstrated that teams can experience task, relational, and process conflict just as is found in collocated work settings (Wakefield, Leidner, & Palvia, 2006; Walther, 1992). Tensions arising from role ambiguity, unaligned expectations, lack of clarity around purpose, poor coordination, and poor communication have been found to give rise to bullying in collocated settings (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Samnani & Singh, 2012).

However, unlike collocated setting, workers may also be at risk of workplace bullying due to unique challenges in the virtual environment. Inherent ambiguity related to time-shifting and the reliance on mediated technology for communication and coordination, which interfere with important cues for understanding intention and evaluating authenticity, may create additional and elevated incivility (Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2012; Cascio, 2000; Espinosa & Carmel, 2003; Kraut, Lewis, & Swezey, 1982). Additionally, inherent isolation may impact workers’ feelings of relatedness and belonging, both of which have been found to help buffer against perceptions of offence (Mulki, Locander, Marshall, Harris, & Hensel, 2008). Particularly in global and regional teams, the challenges of working in highly diverse groups with varying cultural norms may cause virtual workers to misunderstand social cues and infer intention and offence.

Further, as organizations capitalize on the opportunities to use specific skills across the organization, virtual workers may be challenged to develop strong trust as they lack sufficient time to develop relationships with individuals due to a wide portfolio of projects or tasks (Hall, 2018; Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004). Strong trust is necessary to help weather incidents of significant or unusual conflict, and virtual teams tend to rely on swift trust (trust given in advance of earned trust) much longer simply because the opportunities to develop earned trust are less available (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996; Petersen, 2014). The lack of a foundation of trust has been found to undermine online learning groups, resulting in disengagement or disrespectful behaviour (Birchall & Giambona, 2007).

Social media has been shown to blur the lines between work and personal lives and this research may further strengthen observations by home-based virtual workers that there is already a blurring of the lines between home and work associated with virtual work (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998). Some workers have been observed using social media to obscure what are effectively workplace dynamics as social observations, particularly incidents of passive-aggressive behaviour that originate in the workplace (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). Supporting Johnson and Indvik’s (2001) social media findings, organizational research by Farley et al. (2015) and Privitera and Campbell (2009) has indicated that the increasing prevalence of personal technology in the workplace (such as smart phones) blurs the lines between work and nonwork environments. During a video conference, for example, participants can be engaging in a totally parallel meeting, sending text messages to one another, in real time, on their personal devices (which workers may believe to be outside the reach of the organization) that may change attitudes and mindsets about the subject or of participants in the meeting, even before the meeting concludes. Whereas disrespectful behaviour occurred in the past, with individuals editorializing the subject or people presenting in meeting with others in close proximity, the efficiency of the technology allows an individual to effortlessly and surreptitiously connect with a wider group of others, not only those in the room but anyone the technology can touch. Not only does this reach make it easier to share disrespectful opinions about people, it also magnifies the harm to those targeted.

Research on virtual teams has also demonstrated that conflict between virtual workers may tend to escalate more quickly in the virtual context than it does in collocated teams, suggesting that conflict can become emotionally charged more quickly for virtual workers (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Petersen, 2014). This outcome may be due to a higher propensity for miscommunication and a poor line of sight to intention resulting from the reliance on mediated technology (Filippova & Cho, 2016). Research regarding online learning, for example, has shown a similar effect: The escalation of conflict occurs quickly, as disinhibited participants join in, overwhelming the team norms and culture (Fryling, Cotler, Mathews, & Pratico, 2015; Xie, Miller, & Allison, 2013; Yang, 2012).

For the reasons presented, I believed workplace bullying likely exists for virtual workers and that understanding this phenomenon in this context was worthy of study to determine if workers are also at risk of significant harm in this occupational setting. Therefore, objective of this research was to explore the following questions:

1. How is bullying manifested in a virtual workplace setting; i.e., what bullying behaviours are experienced?
2. Do virtual workers who are exposed to workplace bullying experience high levels of stress and, if yes, what are the work, health, and social impacts of that stress?

The exploration of these questions should help to alert academics, governments, and organizations to the reality that virtual workers also experience workplace bullying and the harm that flows from it. The results of this research may assist academics, government, and organizations to develop awareness, education, policy, and programs to address this phenomenon proactively, as well as create effective early intervention strategies for virtual workers who are at risk.

# 

# Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter presents important foundational research literature on both workplace bullying and virtual work. The purpose was to understand the landscape of existing knowledge on the subjects as revealed by previous researchers and to determine whether any gaps exist in the current literature at an intersection of of virtual workers and workplace bullying, which would identify opportunities for further study.

## Research on Bullying in the Workplace

Workplace bullying is quite possibly one of the most diverse areas of psychosocial research. Studies regarding this phenomenon are found across many disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, business, healthcare, medicine, psychiatry, occupational health, economics, and law. Bullying itself appears to be part of the human condition. It appears to have been found in all stages of life, whether in families, day cares, schools, universities, religious organizations, service organizations, and nursing and retirement homes. It has been found in many different types of organizations and job types.

The prevalence of workplace bullying. Globally, the prevalence of workplace bullying estimates vary greatly country to country. In Denmark and Sweden, where research on bullying has been ongoing for over 30 years, and where governments require organizations to provide training on handling such situations, to do regular proactive identification of potential bullying by means of a workplace survey every three years and to actively investigate all alleged instances of bullying, the prevalence is estimated at 1%–2% of the workforce (Agervold, 2007, 2009; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008). Other countries tend to have much higher rates. Studies have reported annual estimates for Norway at 8.6%, the UK at 10.6%, Ireland at 23.1%, and South Africa at 20.4% (Nielsen et al., 2011). Other studies have reported even higher rates in Spain at 26% (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Salin, & Morante, 2008) and Turkey at 55% (Nielsen et al., 2008). In the U.S., where there is very little occupational health and safety legislation to support the prevention of bullying, the estimates of workers targeted range from 13%–18% of the workforce when using a self-reported survey (Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Namie, 2007) to as high as 34% when using a criterion-based survey (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

The definition of workplace bullying. Although no single definition of bullying appears in past research, workplace bullying has typically been defined by three characteristics (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2002; Escartín, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa, & Martín-Peña, 2009; Vranjes et al., 2017):

* 1. repetitive, potentially escalating actions between two or more actors in the workplace whereby the actions are intended to be controlling, interpersonally abusive, offensive, or negatively impacting a worker’s output;
  2. there is a real or perceived power imbalance; and,
  3. the victim of the bullying behaviour experiences harm.

Even though intentionality is included in the definition, the true intention behind the bully’s action may be ambiguous to the target (Aquino & Thau, 2009). To some degree it is sufficient that the target perceives that there are intentions to control, abuse, offend, or negatively impact the work performance (Hauge et al., 2009).

A real power imbalance, as cited in the literature, is typically based on legitimate authority. The relationship between a supervisor and subordinate is an example of a real power imbalance, where the supervisor has been granted organizational power that exceeds that of the subordinate. A perceived power imbalance is created through circumstances, such as the relationship between a worker and a more politically or socially powerful colleague, or not being part of the in crowd (Farley, 2015; Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, & de Castro, 2014; Sansone & Sansone, 2015).

**The beginnings of workplace bullying research*.*** The history of research on workplace bullying is relatively recent. It began in earnest in the late 1980s, in Sweden, with Heinz Leymann (1990), who originally called the phenomenon psychoterror. He observed a high incidence of suicide among his patients and found the roots of their trauma appeared to be in dysfunctional workplace relationships. Leymann saw parallels between his observations of psychoterror and the research done by Dan Olweus in regard to bullying in Swedish schools, which Olweus called mobbing (Leymann, 1990).

After Leymann’s (1990) research was published, research began in other parts of Europe; in particular, Norway and the UK. Work in Scandinavia was focused predominantly on understanding the scope of bullying, including the incidence of the phenomenon and how to reliably measure it. Studies in the UK, many of which were based on bullying among nurses and healthcare workers in the National Health Care System, were focused on the nature, antecedents, and typology of bullying, as well as the severity and impact on health and wellness. Research in the U.S. followed shortly thereafter, underscoring that the phenomenon was not culturally based. Studies in the U.S. were conducted from both sociological and psychological perspectives, including research to determine if bullying was a manifestation of individual qualities such as poor leadership or dark personalities. There were even a few studies to see if the phenomenon was widely found in the general working population (Namie, 2003).

Bullying appears to have been found just about everywhere.Since Leymann (1990) began his work, a huge body of literature now exists. Hundreds of studies of workplace bullying have been published in many different countries and industries (Escartín, Zapf, Arrieta, & Rodriguez-Carballiera, 2011), including, more recently, customer service in India (Bairy et al., 2007; D’Cruz & Noronha, 2009), the manufacturing industry in China (Sims & Sun, 2012), the education and government sectors in Turkey (Aytaç et al., 2011; Bilgel, Aytaç, & Bayrem, 2006; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007), and management in the United Arab Emirates (Al-Nasser & Behery, 2015).

Researchers have looked at this phenomenon from many different perspectives to gain insight into bullying’s roots, effects, and impacts. Some have investigated potential organizational causes, such as leadership, work organization, organizational change conflict systems, team dynamics, and personality disorders (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007; Hoel & Salin, 2003; P. R. Johnson & Indvik, 2001; O’Boyle, Forsyth, & O’Boyle, 2011; Salin, 2003; Samnani & Singh, 2012; Wheeler, Halbesleben, & Shanine, 2010; Whitson, 2012). Others have probed the effects of bullying on individuals, such as decrease in job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship; intentions to leave; productivity; coping; and the role of bystanders on individuals (Georgakopoulos, Wilkin, & Kent, 2011; Haythornthwaite, Menefee, Heinberg, & Clark, 1998; Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Vahtera, 2000; Quine, 1999; Robinson, O’Reilly, & Wang, 2013; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 2001). Yet a third group has worked to identify and understand the harm, including legal implications to organizations and individuals, of chronic stress, psychological harm, physiological impacts, and damage to careers, among others (Anjum, Ming, Siddiqi, & Rasool, 2018; Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Branch & Murray, 2008; Cleary et al., 2009; Cobb, 2011; Cooper, Hoel, & Faragher, 2004; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2002; Eriksen, Hogh, & Hansen, 2016; Glendinning, 2001; Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011; Keashly & Burnazi, 2004; Law, Dollard, Tuckey, & Dormann, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Magerøy, 2017; McCormack, Casimir, Djurkovic, & Yang, 2006; Namie, 2003; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2013; Ortega, Christensen, Hogh, Rugulies, & Borg, 2011; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002; Salin, 2003; Vega & Commer, 2005; Wasser, 2013; Yamada, 2003).

Studies on workplace bullying also represent a wide range of workplace settings and types, underscoring how pervasive the phenomenon is. Here is a partial list of studies demonstrating the breadth of industries and groups that have shown bullying has occurred:

* Private and public industry (Bayram, Gursakal, & Bilgel, 2009; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996);
* Government institutions (D. Lewis, 2004; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007);
* Schools, including elementary, junior high, high school, college and university (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt‐Back, 1994; Fahie & Devine, 2014; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Lester, 2009; McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008; Yaman & Graf, 2010);
* Customer service (Bishop & Hoel, 2008; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004);
* Charitable organizations (Jenkins, Winefield, & Sarris, 2011; Jenkins, Zapf, Winefield, & Sarris, 2012; Paull & Omari, 2015);
* Unions (Beale & Hoel, 2010; Guiler & Albright, 2013);
* Retirement or care homes (Engström, Skytt, & Nilsson, 2011; Goodridge, Heal-Salhub, PausJenssen, James, & Lidington, 2017; Schwendimann et al., 2014; Sedensky, 2018);
* Health care, including nurses, administration staff, doctors, and student doctors (Ariza-Montes, Arjona-Fuentes, Law, & Han, 2017; Kivimäki et al., 2000; Niedl, 2008; Quine, 1999; Randle, Stevenson, Grayling, & Walker, 2007; Silver & Glicken, 1990);
* Migrant workers (Cheo, 2017);
* Military and paramilitary organizations (Archer, 1999; Tuckey, Dollard, Saebel, & Berry, 2010; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002); and
* Emergency care (Boyle, Koritsas, Coles, & Stanley, 2007; Maguire, O’Meara, O’Neill, & Brightwell, 2018).

Not all bullied workers know that what they experience in the workplace is bullying or will admit it. As has been observed in studies by Salin (2003), Agervold (2007), and Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007), not every individual who is experiencing bullying knows it or will admit to it. Salin advanced several possible explanations for this difference. Individuals might genuinely lack an understanding of what is occurring to them. Individuals might also believe the situation is not as dire as it truly is. Lack of admission of bullying could also stem from a social desirability effect, whereby the victims want to save face, protect their identity, and not appear weak.

Bullies tend to carry more power in the organization and act alone. The goal of the bullying behaviour is to limit the influence of the targets or acquire more control over them. Sawyer (2015) observed bullies in this way:

The bully in the home has the same attributes as the bully in the schoolyard, the bully in the workplace, the bully on the football field, and the bully in cyberspace. A bully trades in unfairness. . . [and] profits from the unfairness. [Bullying] must be invisible to all except the target. (p. 1)

The key aspect of bullying, as Sawyer (2015) pointed out is outcome (the unfairness) is not obvious or conspicuous. Even the target is not certain, at least initially, that they are being targeted to their disadvantage. Bullies in the workplace typically operate within the boundaries placed on them by organizational constraints, such as established rules, norms, expectations, and policies. Therefore, it is often difficult to definitively prove an intention to bully, even in the face of reasonable evidence. As such, it is more practical to identify behaviours that are associated with bullying, as well as the frequency and duration of those behaviours, to ascertain if bullying is likely to be occurring.

Research on power dynamics associated with workplace bullying has found that it appears to occur more often by a single perpetrator and more often by someone who carries more organizational power by virtue of the position held (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006; Namie, 2003; Rayner, 1997). Table 1 shows results from research on the target’s view of the perpetrator by Namie & Lutgen-

Table 1  
*Targets’ Perception of Principal Perpetrators, taken from a a 2010 Survey by Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Who was (were) the principal perpetrators? | Percentage |
| Solo perpetrator | 65.7% |
| Multiple perpetrators | 29.7% |
| Not sure | 4.6% |

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Note*. Adapted from G. Namie and P.E. Lutgen-Sandvik “Table 1. Solo or Multiple Harassers.” 2010, , p.353. International Journal of Communication.

Performance reviews are abused to advance bullying. Trauma is an outcome linked to events that are unexpected and perceived as undeserved and unjustified (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). The misuse of the performance review process, which results in documented assessments that targets feel are undeserved and unjustified, has been reported in past workplace bullying research (S. Johnson, 2011; Ilgen & Davis, 2000). The issue becomes more problematic if there is some truth to the observed declining performance, but the reason for the decline is not captured, leaving the impression that the negative assessment is justified. With so much emotional energy devoted to keeping oneself together, one simply has less mental energy to put to the task, and as such, there may be performance impacts. Wright and Cropanzano (1998) observed that emotionally exhausted workers “exhibit diminished job performance. Without the benefit of outside help or intervention, [they] respond to stress [with coping strategies] designed to minimize further resource loss” (p. 492).

The performance review has wider implications for bullied workers. Unfavourable reviews can create difficult environments (Dalton, David, & Viator, 2015). Reviews that discredit individuals in a formal and official way appear to be a source of trauma and stigmatization for individuals who are bullied. Wayne and Kacmar (1991) observed that workers use the performance review for impression management. The review is considered the most current official, organizational view of the individual’s competency and capabilities, and it carries significant weight, even as it might be different than previous performance reviews. A substantial change in performance can be rationalized by any number of plausible explanations, such as a personality conflict between a supervisor and worker, changes in workplace expectations, recent workplace dissatisfaction, or worker disengagement.

Matrixed organizations can create tensions between organizational leaders that impact workers. A matrix organization is one in which workers have two formal lines of authority to answer to: a line manager (typically in-country) and also a dotted-line connection to a regional or global specialist. In a matrix organization, the direct supervisor is effectively the supervisor on record for all human resources (HR) activities, budgets, and accountabilities, but the managerial lead, such as a regional or global specialist, has significant influence in terms of the overall direction of work and coordinated achievement of deliverables. The specialist often has access to additional budget and resources that are critical for the delivery of programs.

When the bully is a matrixed supervisor or manager, and the direct supervisor is too accommodating or weak politically to address the bullying behaviour, additional negative outcomes can ensue. The direct supervisor may unwittingly make the bully’s efforts even more effective by withdrawing support the target would typically be expecting from one’s own supervisor. Harold and Holtz (2015) reported that the lack of support from the direct supervisor also results in two unfortunate outcomes. The first outcome is that it breaks the trust between the direct supervisor and the worker because the worker does not feel protected by the organization. This finding has been supported by research on the psychological contract between the organization and the worker promising safety (including psychological safety), which the supervisor enacts on behalf of the organization (Kakarika, González-Gómez, & Dimitriades, 2017). The second is that the supervisor undermines their own political clout in the organization, and subordinates might see their own positions as more vulnerable as a result.

Research has discovered there are organizational antecedents associated with workplace bullying and some of the research has been captured in Table 2. The list is organized by high-level categories which include changes to the organization and personnel, poor leadership, lack of clarity of purpose or role, work-generated stress, and changes to the reward structures. Hoel and Salin (2003) named an increasing contingent workforce, which they felt resulted in less time for conflict resolution and socialization, as an organizational antecedent of bullying. This was echoed in a recent meta-study by Feijo, Graef, Pearce, and Fassa (2019). They highlighted flexible work arrangements among risk factors for workplace bullying. Part-time and contracted work arrangements appear to cause tension in collocated workplaces because they raise issues of unfairness with different rules regarding compensation, benefits, and flexibility. The Feijo et al. study also highlighted that being able to work from home appeared to be a source of discontent with some of the collocated workers who felt this was a desirable and preferred work arrangement that they were not able to gain for themselves.

The five authors in Table 2 highlighted organizational change as an antecedent of workplace bullying in collocated settings (Feijo et al., 2019; Hauge et al., 2009; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Neuman & Baron, 2011; Salin, 2003). The general categories include changes to the structure of the organization or team, poor leadership, lack of clarity or poor line of sight, stress, and changes to motivation.

Hauge et al. (2009) and Harold and Holtz (2015) observed that laissez-faire management, in particular, was problematic. They reported that managers and supervisors reactively sorting out issues rather than proactively managing traffic flow provided fertile ground for dysfunctional conflict between colleagues. “Passive leadership has a significant direct effect on behavioural incivility and an indirect effect through experienced incivility. Moreover, our results suggest that the relationship between experienced incivility on behavioural incivility is stronger at higher levels of passive leadership” (Harold & Holtz, 2015, p. 16).

Table 2  
*A Comparison of Research Featuring Organizational Antecedents of Workplace Bullying*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Antecedents identified | | Hoel & Salin (2003) | Hauge et al. (2009) | Salin (2003) | Feijo et al. (2019) | Neuman & Baron (2011) |
| Changes to the structure or composition of a team | Change in ownership |  |  | X |  |  |
| Downsizing or resizing |  |  | X |  |  |
| Change in organizational design | X |  | X |  |  |
| Increasing span of control | X |  |  |  |  |
| Introduction of contingent or flexible workforce | X |  | X | X |  |
| Worker autonomy |  | X | X |  |  |
| Poor leadership | Laissez-faire management style | X | X |  | X |  |
| Authoritarian management style |  |  | X | X |  |
| Managerial autonomy | X |  |  |  |  |
| Lack of clarity; poor line of sight | Role conflict or ambiguity |  | X |  | X |  |
| Job security | X |  |  |  |  |
| New philosophies | X |  |  |  |  |
| Stress | Pressure to deliver |  |  |  | X |  |
| Unfairness or injustice |  |  |  |  | X |
| Work intensification | X |  |  |  |  |
| High demands | X |  |  |  |  |
| Power imbalance |  |  | X |  |  |
| Frustration or dissatisfaction |  |  | X |  |  |
| Low costs to bullying |  |  | X |  |  |
| Changes to motivation | Change to reward |  |  | X |  |  |
| Competition |  |  | X |  |  |

Aggression in business may also provide a catalyst for dysfunctional conflict. Neuman and Baron (1998, 2011) observed that when workers perceive an unfairness, they may violate norms (such as refusing to return an email or phone call or refusing to invite a colleague to a meeting) and/or produce negative affect (such as apathy towards another colleague). This is consistent with Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) research on incivility in the workplace, describing the spiraling effects of incivility, whereby one worker who has experienced incivility and develops a sense of being treated poorly, feels entitled to pass on the poor treatment and engage in uncivil behavior with others.

Schminke, Cropanzano, and Rupp (2002) reported that in decentralized but formalized organizations, workers tend to report higher perceived levels of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Decentralization, as described by Schminke et al., pertains to autonomy, the ability to make decisions locally. The researchers looked at whether there were a number of written rules and policies that were widely available for reference by any employee, as well as evidence of job descriptions and formal performance reviews as evidence of decentralization. The researchers felt this encouraged a sense of expected fairness in an organization, and thereby discouraging uncivil behaviour. It seems research by Tariq and Weng (2018) did not support Schmike et al., at least in respect of virtual work. The researchers revealed that the delayering, increased autonomy, and restructuring resulting from the shift to virtual work created more politicizing and competition among workers, leading to power shifts and causing power vacuums. These changes can affect a worker’s status, undermine a worker’s sense of certainty and security, impact autonomy and power, as well as a sense of relatedness or fairness (Heames, Harvey, & Treadway, 2006; Rock, 2008). Rock (2008) stated that workers can perceive these kinds of changes as threats.

Bullying destabilizes individuals through its threat to identity. Staples, Hulland, and Higgins (1999) reported that remote workers’ self-efficacy assessment is critical to their effectiveness on the job, job satisfaction, and ability to cope. Impacts to self-efficacy, such as shame, interfere with one’s ability to cope and changes what individuals believe themselves capable of (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Ewald, 2006).

Individuals often do not realize they are in a prebullying stage and unwittingly become more destabilized even as the targets invest more effort in adapting to and coping with the phenomenon (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Eventually, the adapting and coping strategies become ineffective, particularly as the environment changes to a bullying stage (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). As the individual devotes more energy to self-preservation, this becomes confirmation to the bully that the bullying campaign is achieving its objective, with the individual becoming less resistant, more compliant, and likely to remain so as the individual’s confidence in the effectiveness of the resistance is completely undermined. By the time the individual reaches this mid stage, the bully has already begun the final stage, the concluding stage, which may include the removal or dismissal of the individual, if that is necessary or desirable to the bully in achieving the goal.

This model presents a timing error that is to the disadvantage of the target. By the time the target appreciates the severity of the circumstance, the bully is already contemplating the next stage, even as the target is still progressing through the previous stage. If the bully carefully observes the target’s reactions to what is occurring, through the words the target uses, the target’s waning portrayal of confidence, and changes in behaviour in response to a sense of diminished importance in the eyes of others, the bully is able to appreciate the rate at which the target is moving through the model, which reflects the degree of destabilization of the target’s identity. If the target is progressing more slowly, the bully will simply change the tactics such that the target’s efforts to maintain identity prove ineffective (humiliation, for example). Experienced bullies may even develop a keen sense of what motivates people to try to keep up their identity, thereby knowing which bullying tactics are most effective and efficient, developing a bit of toolkit for gaining compliance and obedience more quickly (Davis & Nichols, 2016).

Bullying is more often resolved by the target leaving the organization.Workplace bullying is an antecedent to job loss (Glambek, Matthiesen, Hetland, & Einarsen, 2014). Namie (2007) found that in resolved bullying situations, the target lost the job by termination, transfer, or resignation about 87% of the time, whereas the bully was terminated or transferred less than 13% of the time. From a different point of view, this means that in13% of the cases, the target remains with the workgroup, whereas the bully remains in the group in 87% of the cases. The research does not indicate how often the target and bully remain together in their work group. According to Namie (2007), the following is a breakdown of how bullying is resolved for the bullied worker:

* In just under 33% of the cases, the worker resigned (including early retirement);
* Another 17% are transferred inside the organization; and
* About another 37% are terminated by the organization.

Since it is unlikely that in all cases of transfer it was company initiated (the employee was looking to affect a transfer in the balance of cases), the organizations determined to resolve the cases by termination or transfer in less than 54%. In the other 17%, where the target remains with the workgroup, it is unclear whether the situation is resolved to the satisfaction of the targeted worker so that they might again feel safe at work.

Namie (2003) observed that the average duration of bullying, as reported by workers themselves (not validated independently), was about 22 months. However, Namie’s (2003) results might be on the lower end. Research by Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) on loss of identity through workplace bullying suggested that bullied workers may not, initially, be aware they are being bullied. The behaviour typically has been going on for some time prior to the target acknowledging it is bullying. Lutgen-Sandvik’s work echoes findings by O’Moore, Seigne, McGuire, and Smith (1998), who discovered that there appeared to be a significant time lag between when individuals first realized they were bullied and when they reported it for the first time. O’Moore et al. found that, on average, women waited 2.3 years before reporting the phenomenon, whereas the men in their study waited on average 3.7 years. If Namie’s (2003) estimate is taken into consideration, the time elapsed between the first realization and the resolution could be as long as 4.2 years for women and 5.6 for men, suggesting that the bullying may go on for longer than workers are prepared to admit.

Early retirement may also be an indicator of chronic stress in the workplace. The value of talent to the bottom line, as well as the high cost of turnover and lost organizational knowledge, encourages organizations to keep a valued employee with the company until retirement (Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004). The point of a discounted pension is to discourage employees from retiring early by providing a financial disincentive to leave before the anticipated retirement date. An employee’s decision regarding retiring early is rooted in two factors: financial security to leave the organization (and maintain a desired standard of living) and the level of personal interest in staying in the role. Therefore, employees taking early retirement may indicate that there is a problem in the workplace. Employees, feeling the negative effects of bullying, may find early retirement an alternative to resignation.

Older workers may be at increased risk. Keashly (as cited in Harris, 2012) found that older workers may be vulnerable to workplace bullying due to stereotypical narratives of declining productivity due to age. Research by McCarthy, Heraty, Cross, and Cleveland (2014) appears to support Keashly’s observation. McCarthy et al. reported that respondents in their research, who were organizational management types, defined older workers as “in the last third of their career, . . . no longer expecting promotion, [and] . . . actively planning for retirement” (pp. 382–383). The mean age of an older worker, as defined by the organizational managers surveyed by McCarthy et al., was just over 52 years of age. Their survey revealed a bimodal distribution around 50 and 55 years, with another smaller cluster at 60 years. Another study on aging workers by Sanders and McCready (2010) found that skill variety and coworker support, as well as the capacity for decision-making and good supervisor support, were most important to older workers in terms of their job design. Perhaps coworker and supervisor support are such a fundamental part of the role for aging workers that it becomes a more effective destabilizer when it is not present.

Keashly also found older workers may be vulnerable due to their inherent higher cost structure (both in terms of salaries tending to be at the top end of the compensation band and in terms of benefits, such a weeks of vacation). Keashly also observed that professional envy (as older workers tended to have higher-status jobs due to tenure) and intergenerational conflict heightened the risk of bullying for older workers (as cited in Harris, 2012). Therefore, bullied older workers tend to retire early, if they can (Namie, 2017).

Difference between dysfunctional conflict and bullying is perhaps degree and frequency. Dysfunctional conflict is defined as unproductive conflict that leads to a decline in the frequency or quality of communications between individuals or a decline in their collective performance (Menon, Bharadwaj, & Howell, 1996). Examples would be: when there appeared to be no desire to fix an issue or come to resolution; no desire to come to a common understanding (shared awareness of the issue); passive-aggressive behaviour; intentional misunderstanding or deception to deflect accountability or responsibility; or, a desire for drama or chaos. The difference between dysfunctional conflict behaviour and bullying may not be large. Research by Leon-Perez, Medina, Arenas, & Munduate (2015) reported that escalated task conflict that becomes relational conflict may explain the occurrence of bullying situations.

## Research on Virtual Work

Davenport and Pearlson (1998) credited the financial difficulties in North America of the 1980s with organizations discovering that virtual workplaces would allow them to shed real estate and facility costs without losing staff. As well, with the improvement in computing power, network connectivity, and telecommunications bandwidth, organizations have leveraged these work arrangements to bring together unique skill sets that were otherwise in different locations. Later, organizations discovered they were able to move work around to more cost-effective environments.

With the rise of collaboration tools (workflow applications in particular), virtual work arrangements have expanded across the globe. This trend has had three distinct advantages for global organizations. The first advantage is time-shifting, which allows an organization to shorten local time cycles by continuing work processes in other locations as the workday moves around the globe (Olson, 1983). If a report takes two workdays to finish in New York, the process can be shortened significantly if the report sent by staff in New York t at the end of their workday to staff in New Delhi at the start of their local workday so that it can be continued towards completion. At the end of New Delhi’s day, the report is sent back to New York for further work. The competitive advantage becomes more pronounced with longer process chains. A process that takes 30 days could theoretically be halved by having teams work on the process using local time zones around the globe (Treinen & Miller-Frost, 2006). Some studies have shown a marked difference in productivity using this technique (Dutcher & Saral, 2012). Bloom, Liang, Roberts, and Ying (2015) reported a 13% increase in performance when processes were time-shifted compared to collocated colleagues doing similar work with similar processes. This improvement occurred with the participants being randomly assigned to the remote or collocated working environments. Bloom et al. further observed that 9% of the improvement was attributed to staff working through breaks and decreased sick time, and the balance was due to “a quieter and more convenient environment” (2015, p. 165).

The second advantage is financial, and it is twofold: reducing the cost of labour as well as the cost of real estate (Cascio, 2000). The costs of similar skill sets (labour) are vastly different around the globe, reflecting local market conditions. For example, consider two similarly qualified and experienced legal assistants, one in New York and one in New Delhi. Assuming the credentials and quality of their deliverables are comparable, the New Delhi legal assistant will likely deliver a local market cost advantage. Workers in large metropolitan centers may also command a premium, reflecting higher living costs, compared to smaller centers. Therefore, organizations may be able to attract similar talent at different rates.

The costs of real estate are also variable. The cost of an office in New York is substantially higher than one of similar quality, square footage, and accoutrements in El Paso, Texas. Having employees work from home provides an even better cost advantage. The cost of any office setting is far more expensive than the costs associated with an employee, even if the employer contributes towards the home office in terms of expense reimbursement, allowing the organization to use part of the employee’s home as a corporate location.

The third advantage regards access to talent. The ability to draw talent from virtually anywhere would be attractive for workers and business (Cascio, 2000; Treinen & Miller-Frost, 2006). Skilled workers do not necessarily live in the same place. An organization may not be able to afford to have highly specialized skills for only one project, but it can justify the cost of the resource across a number of projects that may not be in the same location. Workers may be unwilling to devote a significant part of their day to a difficult commute (P. R. Johnson, Heimann, & O’Neill, 2001; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). They may be living in another state, close to family, or in a better climate. Workers who work this way also have greater flexibility to live where they want without giving up both interesting and high-paying work (Akase, 2018). A worker could, in theory, work for a financial firm in New York supporting the launch of a new brand from the worker’s home office in rural Connecticut. Workers may also be unable to move due to issues with visas or custody arrangements. In an era of increasing administrative and political barriers to relocation, virtual work allows flexibility for both workers and organizations to pivot with organizational needs (Akase, 2018).

Virtual work changes some fundamental elements of work. As networks and bandwidth connectivity improved, having people work interdependently at greater distances seemed reasonable and doable (Bailey & Kurland, 1999; Lipnack & Stamps, 1999, 2008). In truth, working at greater distances and being completely reliant on technology to perform interdependent tasks have posed unique challenges for virtual workers compared to their collocated counterparts. However, organizations may not recognize that virtual work is not simply a parallel to collocated work; in fact, it is different in many important ways and tends to implement differently (Ferrazzi, 2014; Fiol & O’Connor, 2005; Watkins, 2013). This may be a reason why even as virtual work arrangements continue to grow, organizations are struggling to sustain high productivity across their teams. A study by Govindarajan and Gupta (2001) reported that of the 70 global virtual teams they surveyed, only 18% were deemed to have been successful, with another 33% deemed to have failed in achieving the objective. A more recent study by Online Consulting (DeRosa, 2019) found that 27% of 50 global virtual teams were not performing to expectations.

**Technology impacts the fidelity of communication.** Having accurately interpreted communication, as well as being aligned in activities, appears to be more difficult for virtual workers (Bailey & Kurland, 1999; Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wilemon, 2004). For virtual workers, the option to seek out the other party and sit down for a face-to-face dialogue, letting the full presentation of human communication unfold, is not possible. Human communication is a complex presentation of visual stance, words, gestures, distance, and tone, most of which happen at a subconscious level. The cadence and turn-taking of natural discourse can be disturbed due to a number of factors including the nature of asynchronous technology (one-sided, out-of-sequence, and time shifting communication), leaving voice or text messages (too short, too long, incomplete, out of sequence), or delayed or freezing images when using video messages (Daim et al., 2012; Kankanhalli et al., 2006; Kiesler, Siegal, & McGuire, 1984). Hinds and Mortensen (2005) observed that task and interpersonal conflict were higher on distributed teams than on collocated teams in the same multinational company. They reported that spontaneous communication (connecting with others as issues arise to understand them) mediated conflict by developing support of a shared identification and context.

Additionally, subtleties such as emotion, humour, and sarcasm are difficult to convey virtually (hence the development of emojis), which can make the interpretation of messages even more difficult, distorting the certainty of intention (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Because of this difficulty, growing literature on virtual work shows that tasks tend to be developed ahead of the relationships on virtual teams, and therefore virtual workers are especially challenged to develop an environment that is deemed emotionally safe and respectful (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Peters & Manz, 2007).

Research has shown that this complex interplay of signals may provide important cues to intention, with the caveat that it is variations from the baseline behaviours (normal for the particular individual) that trigger a concern or sense of danger (Matsumoto, Hwang, Skinner, & Frank, 2011). The finding highlights two important aspects of communication fidelity: individuals often have to see each other’s communication presentation to perceive a change, and individuals may sense something is amiss but not be able to interpret its accuracy of intention. These important communication cues are unavailable, or at least highly constrained, to individuals using mediated technology (Walther, 1992; Walther & Tidwell, 1995). As such, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of intention are more likely to occur when using mediated technology (Kankanhalli et al., 2006; Wakefield et al., 2006). This may be a reason why, even as virtual work arrangements continue to grow, organizations are struggling to sustain high productivity across their teams.

Virtual work tends towards swift trust, not earned trust. Trust between individuals, particularly deep trust, allows individuals to manage conflict between them. Thin trust tends to disappear in the face of conflict. Meyerson et al. (1996) observed that the concept of swift trust was necessary for groups of individuals who must work together to accomplish goals but who do not know one another (may have never met), as occurs in working virtually. Swift trust was anticipated as a temporary collective accepted norm for groups of individuals coming together for a finite time on a common task with a clear objective to address uncertainty, perception of risk, and sense of vulnerability (due to having no knowledge of the others in the group), and to manage expectations (Meyerson et al.).

Research shows that virtual workers take longer to move from swift trust (which can be fragile under difficult circumstances) to earned trust (also known as knowledge-based trust because individuals have developed it as a result of experience with each other) simply because the natural opportunities to develop more robust confidence in one another occur less frequently. Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2004), studying trust in a distance education setting, observed that in work situations with more uncertainty, risk, and expectations, particularly in the absence of usual social cues, swift trust is critical to forming the group as well as reducing the sense of isolation and loneliness that can occur when working with others from a distance.

Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013) observed that swift trust requires reinforcement through actions and performance that, over time, evolves swift trust into the more stable earned trust. Robert, Denis, and Hung (2014), studying computer mediated technology and the formation of knowledge-based trust, found that due to fewer opportunities to gather confidence about the ability, integrity, and benevolence of coworkers and supervisors, swift trust exists longer than it does in collocated work arrangements. In fact, their research has shown that the use of the technology increased the perception of the risk of team failure and reduced the willingness to engage in opportunities to build trust, thereby delaying the transition away from fragile swift trust. These studies seem to support that earned trust is developed through many iterations of successful exchanges of information between individuals, as well as observing opportunities to engage in prosocial behaviour, that yield positive outcomes. These positive interactions build predictability, enhance reliability, and lower uncertainty. For example, conversations of a social nature that occur in collocated settings, such as before a meeting starts, at the watercooler, in the lunchroom, or even on the bus on the way to work, are all low-risk opportunities to learn about colleagues, which develops confidence and trust. Without these interactions, trust is left to develop on the basis of the performance of the deliverables only, and therefore, when conflict occurs, there is little investment in social capital to draw on.

Merriman, Schmidt, and Dunlap-Hinkler (2007) observed that virtual workers have less trust in their management and in the perceived management support than conventional (collocated) workers do. This observation appears to be in opposition to findings by Khan (2011), who reported that in a survey of 70 workers, there was a marked difference between virtual and collocated workers in their agreement with certain statements associated with organizational affective commitment. The greatest differences in scores, where virtual workers felt overwhelmingly more strongly, were in statements speaking to their role as a worker or a contributor in the organization, such as “my supervisors are proud that I am part of this organization,” “the organization takes pride in my contributions,” and “the organization cares about my general satisfaction at work.” Virtual workers reported higher scores than their collocated colleagues, but far less strongly, in connection with the statement “my organization cares about my opinion.” Collocated workers felt more strongly than virtual workers in statements that spoke to individuality, such as “the organization really cares about my wellbeing” and “the organization strongly considers my goals and values” (Khan, 2011, p. 79).

Virtual workers tend to be highly autonomous. Many of the individuals who have been selected (or elect) to work virtually are considered to be seasoned, experienced, capable, and motivated staff with reasonably good (if not better than average) relational skills (Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahly, 2009). It stands to reason that if workers are allowed to work with less direct supervision, maintaining their own hours and schedule, there must be some degree of trust between the worker and the supervisor (or the organization). As well, there is likely some demonstrated competency in working effectively with others through technology; otherwise, it is unlikely the organization would permit the arrangement. Even a new hire, presumably, would have to demonstrate competency and prior experience in this regard through qualifications, experience, or references. Staples et al. (1999) highlighted that there may be also a higher degree of self-efficacy among remote workers than collocated workers. Self-efficacy is a belief in one’s ability to successfully meet challenges; individuals believe they have the will and capacity to achieve (Benight & Bandura, 2004). That optimistic orientation might be necessary in an environment with more ambiguity and autonomy.

Virtual workers tend towards participatory management approaches. Research has also found that virtual workers may have difficulty managing hierarchy as individuals tend towards egalitarianism (Lee, 2009). Due to a lack of visual hierarchical clues (such as sitting at the head of the table, wearing more formal attire, or having the meeting in the boardroom), virtual workers tend towards an expectation of a participative and democratic management style. Managing groups of virtual workers requires supervisors to have high emotional intelligence, and strong skills in coaching and supporting people who work at a distance (Dubé & Paré, 2004; Golden & Viega, 2008; Harrell, 2008; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Kiel & Watson, 2009; Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002; Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004). Developing trust in their bosses and peers is critical for all types of teams to perform well; however, the complexities that challenge the building of deep trust between virtual workers, or between virtual workers and hybrid teams (which could comprise virtual and collocated workers), makes trust an element that needs intentional development amongst groups of virtual workers (Guinot, Chiva, & Roca-Puig, 2014; Handy, 1995; Zolin et al., 2004). Social capital makes reciprocal exchanges and information channels among interdependent workers possible (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009; Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011; Suzuki et al., 2010). Attempts at building social capital could be invitations to meet, communications meant to invite further dialogues or simply engaging someone to learn more about them and discover commonalities of interest. Similarly, it could be accepting an invitation to meet or inviting someone to be part of the group to help them improve their social capital.

Organizational culture is impacted by local, national, or societal culture, which causes uncertainty. Virtual workers, particularly those with colleagues at greater distances, have to contend with multiple overlays of culture, and this situation causes its own stress and misunderstanding. One of the more unexpected challenges of working for large multinationals is that there are differences in organizational culture when working with other members of the same organization located elsewhere. Although organizations try to align their workers in consistent values, expectations, norms, and behaviours through a common corporate culture supported with consistent policies, processes, and protocols, local culture creates variation in the organizational culture so that it is acceptable in the local environment (Moore & Rees, 2008). Language (including accents and dialects), as well as subtleties in local business etiquette, can impact the way in which business is conducted at a practical level, which can also lead to miscommunication and an inference to intention. Variations within the global corporate culture could give rise to potential unintended offense. Additionally, it could interfere with a worker’s ability to properly read the context of a situation or accurately assess intention.

There is organizational culture, but also local culture, and there can be a challenge to the fidelity of the corporate culture when adapted by the local culture and the realities of where the worker is on the globe (Cramtom & Hinds, 2007). Research by Weber, Shenkar, and Raveh (1996) found that corporate culture and national culture truly are separate constructs. Local national culture adds another layer of variation. This variability is important because national culture is a reflection of societal values and norms, which frame and inform an individual’s worldview. The worldview helps individuals discern understanding and meaning (Sire, 2015). However, as separate constructs, they become parallel norms and expectations that can lead to additional miscommunication and incivilities and become another source of unintentional offence. These events may colour the perceptions of both the individual who is offended and the offender and may cause negative affect that results in less respectful or prosocial interactions in the future. The unintentional offence may be taken as evidence of bullying the offended. The offender may take it as a sign of being too sensitive or using it as a sort of unfair advantage. In any case, there is an incongruity between what each party believes are the rules, the ways of working professionally, which is likely to be escalated as it speaks to the individuals’ sense of identity.

The importance of impression management.Leary and Kowalski (1990) developed a model showing impression management as a function of motivation (in particular, how motivated individuals are to control how others see them) and construction (the ability to create the impression). Barsness, Diekmann and Seidel (2005) observed a relationship between an increase in working remotely and more time devoted to supervisor-focused and job-focused impression management. Additionally, they observed social network centrality (a measure of organizational connectedness which is reflected in the number and strength of linkages between workers) moderated the need for job-focused and supervisor-focused impression management. Davenport and Pearlson (1998) observed that the flexibility of working virtually appears to be offset by the notion that virtual workers cannot ever seem to leave the job.

Virtual workers are also concerned that colleagues perceive them as unproductive, particularly if they are working from home. Social loafing is defined as situations where virtual workers put in less effort than they are capable of (not pulling their weight) when working collaboratively with other members of a team (Blaskovich, 2008; F. Chen, Zhang, & Latimer, 2014 Research on virtual workplaces has shown that social loafing is a concern for virtual teams, primarily because the overall productivity of the entire team is limited by the perceptions of each member’s individual contributions (Blaskovich, 2008; F. Chen et al., 2014). Karau and Williams (1993) reported that social loafing could be reduced through task valence (all members valuing the task at a similar level), smaller groups, ensuring each member has a unique contribution that cannot be replicated within the group, agreed and communicated performance standards, and a level of group cohesion. The workday itself might also be impacted by local culture, which could leave a unintended perception of commitment to work with colleagues. Some parts of the world typically have a longer lunch break in the afternoon, yet staff are working into the evening. In contrast, workers in American cities tend to want to get through work as quickly as possible so that they are not working late. Companies in North America may require virtual workers in Asia to accommodate North American hours of work, meaning workers may be starting in the evening and working through the night. This provision allows some of the work force to have work–life balance, but some may have additional familial challenges to further their careers.

Stresses associated with virtual work. Psychological stress exists in all workplaces (Lazarus, 1995). However, there are stressors that are more significant in virtual work to the distance and reliance on technology, such as coping with the challenges of technology, time-shifting, lack of engagement, sense of loneliness and isolation, and sense of being invisible to the organization (Au & Marks, 2012; Bergiel, Bergiel, & Balsmeier, 2008; Khan, 2011; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). Schoenenberg, Raake, and Koeppe (2014) reported a study focused on the transmission delay effects of conferencing across mediated technology and found that the focus required to deal with the lack of normal communication cues (social proximity and gestures), the difficulty in coordinating the normal communication cadence and the interruptions and delays due to the technology was exhausting workers. They also reported misattribution of intention and messages related to perceptions drawn from unintended delays due to intermittent problems with the technology. Treiber and Davis (2012) observed that the “workplace family,” which can play an important social support role, thereby protecting workers from emotional exhaustion and pain, is also at a distance (if not absent) from virtual workers’ work lives. In a recent study by Grenny and Maxfield (2017), virtual workers remarked that they felt shunned and left out. Additionally, there can be a blurring of the boundaries of work and home life, leading to a poorer work–life balance, and potentially new conflicts with family and others in living arrangements (Chesley, 2005; Chesney et al., 2007).

Schawbel’s (2018) study observed that over 60% of virtual workers in a survey stated feeling not engaged. Schawbel reported that only 5% of the 2,000 virtual workers responding to the survey (which included both employees and global managers) could see themselves with the same organization for their entire career. In contrast, 30% of the collocated workers in the study reported that they could see themselves staying with their organization for their entire career.

Yet, it appears that despite their feelings of disengagement, virtual workers do tend to stay with their organizations. Khan (2011) investigated whether there were differences in attrition rates in the same organization for employees with a supervisor who was collocated with them compared to employees who had a virtual supervisor (who was located at a distance from the employee). The study included a mix of collocated and virtual staff, and a mix of supervisory location. The sample included 60% collocated workers who were U.S. based and 40% who were virtual. Of the 40% who were virtual workers, 60% were based in India and 40% were located in the U.S. Khan’s conclusion was that there was no statistical difference in the rates of attrition between collocated and virtual workers. As there was no statistical difference, there appears to be no difference for workers whether based in the U.S. or India.

Bullying and virtual workers. Peer-reviewed studies demonstrating the prevalence of workplace bullying in this organizational context (virtual workplace) have been difficult to find. However, it is unlikely that bullying would not find a home in this domain as well. Virtual work, by its very nature, likely facilitates some of the most effective destabilization strategies used by bullies, such as isolation, selective communication, a poor line of sight to alliances, and leveraging technology to create an illusion of a bystander community allied with the bully rather than sympathetic to the target.

One unique feature of not meeting in person is that it permits individuals to decide the timing of revealing personal information that might be obvious in face-to-face situations, thereby causing some interference with stereotype inferences. For example, gender, race, physical disability, or age are all personal traits that would be immediately known in face-to-face exchanges, but not immediately known if the interactions are simply based on text messages or emails (Fayard & Weeks, 2007), although assumptions might be made based on the name or email identification. Whether this shrouding translates to less discrimination based on prohibited class in virtual workplaces is unknown and might be an area of interest for future research. So perhaps, this is an area that provides less opportunity for bullying and harassment than might be found in collocated settings

Virtual workers do have conflict, and conflict can lead to bullying. Over the last 30 years, task and relational conflict on virtual teams has been explored in academic research and some observations unique to virtual work have been revealed. The inability to effectively communicate emotions and intention through mediated technology, as well as the reliance on mostly written discourse, creates an environment where workers may take disagreements more personally, reacting more emotionally than they would if the same communication was delivered face to face (Petersen, 2014). The research on conflict among virtual workers suggests that conflicts go unidentified and unaddressed longer than conflicts on collocated teams (Armstrong & Cole, 2002). Two key challenges tend to be miscommunication (including fragmented or incomplete information) and quickly escalating issues that seem out of proportion to their relevance and salience to the task (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Simons and Peterson (2000) reported that relational conflict creates a negative effect that limits accurate information processing, resulting in poor decisions, as well as creating an atmosphere that “encourages antagonistic thinking and sinister attribution of others’ behaviour” (p. 109). Simons and Peterson reported that trust moderates the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. Strong trust tends to take longer to develop among virtual work team members (Greenberg, Greenberg, & Antonucci, 2007). This observation of trust may help to explain why some conflicts tended to escalate through multiple levels in the virtual workplace, sometimes taking on détente-level political handling as the issue made its way up and back down through the management chain.

However, there are also challenges for the bully in this environment, which may impact the bully’s tactics as well. Leveraging bystanders as witnesses and effective peer pressure are more difficult to coordinate and manipulate if all the actors are not simultaneously online, or sufficiently emotionally invested (which might be harder to achieve with so much effort devoted to coordinating tasks). Most of the communication traffic is recorded, thereby removing some of the opportunities for anonymity (or at least plausible deniability) that could destabilize the bully. Therefore, I anticipate that bullying may reveal itself to have some differences in execution in a virtual context than one would find in a collocated context.

## Workplace Bullying as a Chronic Stressor

It may be surprising that a robust and ubiquitous definition of workplace stress does not exist. Looking across the definitions in literature, three characteristics are consistently identified: (a) a change in state (a threat or opportunity) occurs; (b) the change creates a gap between the current level of a worker’s effort or capabilities and what is required to address the change in state, known as person–environment fit (Rock, 2008; Schuler, 1980); and (c) the gap disrupts the normal psychological or physiological homeostasis (Rock, 2008; Schuler, 1980).

Neuroscience is providing insight into why humans react to threats, such as bullying, to help workplace researchers understand why it is so traumatizing to workers and creates real physical and psychological harm (Lines, 2007; Rock, 2008; Sansone & Sansone, 2015). Some innovative research is leveraging restorative approaches and forgiveness as ways to help individuals heal (Egan & Todorov, 2009; Hutchinson, 2009). However, the harm can be significant.

Stress can also be described as acute or chronic. Acute stress is typically identified as a significant but more-or-less single event of stress (Rock, 2008). For example, survivors of a shooting, a hurricane, a riot, or high-rise fire would be seen to be victims of acute harmful stress. Harmful chronic stress pertains to situations where the stress (or more accurately, the source of the stress) continues to be ongoing and unabated, such as poverty, war, domestic conflict, or disease (Rock, 2008). Neuroscience shows that our bodies respond to threat stress in a very predictable way. Homeostasis regulates the human body at a cellular level via the endocrine and autonomous nervous systems, ensuring (among other things) blood flow, healthy body temperature, and distribution of oxygen and nutrients (through blood). It also regulates redistribution of energy to address potentially life-threatening conditions. Once the primitive part of our brain detects a change in the environment, our bodies are flooded with hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) as well as shifting resources (blood) from less critical organs (the stomach and the logic part of the brain, for example) to more critical areas (the cardiovascular system, for example) designed to prepare the body to respond to the threat by flight or fight (Rock, 2008).

According to Rock (2008), humans’ primitive threat response is designed for acute situations (a sudden and likely singular event). Once the threat has passed, the body returns to homeostasis, redirecting blood flow back to the digestive system and brain, as well as discontinuing the flow of threat response chemicals in favour of chemicals that are meant to repair any damage created by the threat (an injury, for example) or the threat response itself (such as due to deprivation of blood, for example). Prolonged exposure to ongoing, unrelenting, chronic stress, such as workplace bullying, prevents the body from returning to normal homeostasis and undertaking any repairs. Over time, as the body remains in this high alert response state, cortisol and adrenal fatigue can occur, where the body no longer responds to threats appropriately. In extreme situations, particularly in the case of cortisol fatigue, the body fails to respond to threats at all, the brain unable to differentiate danger (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2011). Neural changes in the brain, due to both the stress hormones and the diversion of blood, affect and impair memory and learning capabilities, as well as executive functioning. Prolonged exposure can also cause the extinction of learning, which is important for developing a different mental imagery after the traumatic stress (Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2009). Recent workplace bullying studies have provided insight into the long-term effects of the chronic stress, such as the effect on the musculoskeletal system (Magerøy, 2017; Ortega et al., 2011). Early intervention and training are being evaluated as factors that can potentially derail bullying (Olender-Russo, 2009; Samnani, 2013a, 2013b).

It often starts with what appears to be small impacts to health and organizational productivity. Absenteeism is often a bellwether of organizational health and has been observed in connection with workplace bullying where absenteeism tends to rise as the worker feels less safe and increasingly less well (Kivimäki et al., 2000). Work by Dalton and Meesch (1990, as cited in Kelliher & Anderson, 2010) suggested that absenteeism is not going to be effective in identifying distress in virtual workers as they are more likely to suffer presenteeism (due to their concern with image management), which is defined as attending work while ill, injured, or unfit (physically or psychologically), and therefore unable to deliver full productivity (Johns, 2010).This finding was supported by Barsness, Diekmann, and Seidel (2005), who observed that online presence is critical to virtual workers’ organizational survival through impression management, as workers ensure they are seen as present.

People who experience the effects of chronic stress, such as prolonged exposure to workplace bullying, report changes in their worldview, and in particular, feelings of loss of control and isolation (or being left behind), worthlessness, and helplessness (Baum, Fleming, Israel, & O’Keeffe, 1992). Physiological effects of chronic workplace bullying include chronic headaches, gastrointestinal problems, ulcers, impaired cardiovascular reactivity rates, cardiovascular disease (Hogh, Hansen, Mikkelsen, & Persson, 2012; Kivimäki et al., 2003), and long-term skeletal–muscular problems (Bongers, de Winter, Kompier, & Hildebrandt, 1993; Kim, Mofarrahi, & Hussain, 2008; Lundberg, 1999; Magerøy, 2017). Chronic stress and pain tend towards higher rates of depression (Banks & Kerns, 1996). Brodsky (1976, 1984) was an early identifier of work as a source of chronic stress. This is consistent with the findings of many studies on workplace bullying (Bond, Tuckey, & Dollard, 2010; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2002; Hansen et al., 2006; Hogh, Mikkelson, & Hansen, 2011; Law et al., 2011; Tehrani, 2004; Vartia, 2001).

Aside from the prolonged physical effects, the psychological harm can lead to chronic exhaustion, depression, anxiety, memory and cognitive loss, poor threat cue discrimination, and mental health problems (Hansen et al., 2006; Kivimäki et al., 2003; Mathews & MacLeod, 1986; McEwen, 2004; McEwen & Seeman, 1999; Schwabe, Joëls, Roozendaal, Wolf, & Oitzl, 2012; Schwabe & Wolf, 2013). Research has shown that even the presentation of the PTSD found in bullying victims is different from other forms of trauma and tends to resemble the effects experienced by victims of rape and domestic violence (Tehrani, 2004). If workplace bullying exists among virtual workers, this research may also discover indications of chronic stress in virtual workers due to the bullying experienced in their virtual work setting.

The experience with bullying leaves indelible marks on individuals’ awareness, and they become hyperaware, which may interfere with the ability to trust Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Namie, 2003). Individuals fall back to survival mode, redirecting energy to self-preservation, rumination, threat detection, deflection, and managing their own dissonance (Rock, 2008). Research has observed that a loss of identity is often reported as a consequence of bullying, which results in a target’s weakened self-confidence, a loss of dignity, and social withdrawal (Branch et al., 2013; Kouvonen et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2013). The ability to give swift trust is severely eroded, yet this type of trust is important when connecting to new people or circumstances.

Even with effective intervention, the ability to trust may never be fully restored between coworkers who have experienced bullying. Even if the individuals at the heart of the bullying activity move on to other groups or organizations, a hyperawareness to possible cues and a skepticism of other workers’ intentions can linger and affect future opportunities for relationships (Davis & Nichols, 2016). Research on pain suggests that fear of a painful situation is more disabling than the actual experience (Crombez, Vlaeyen, Heuts, & Lysens, 1999). Research on psychological trauma shows it is long-lasting and that it can be relived from memory with incredible fidelity relative to recollections of physical pain, thereby making the experience of workplace bullying all the more damaging and effective (Z. Chen, Williams, Fitness, & Newton, 2008). MacDonald and Leary (2005) observed a tangible relationship between social exclusion and physical pain, demonstrating that simply excluding colleagues may have both negative psychological and physical impacts.

Research by Blanchard, Jones-Alexander, Buckley, and Forneris (1996) reviewed the psychometric properties of PTSD as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and came to the conclusion that PTSD was different for individuals who suffered severe traffic collisions versus those who suffered sexual assaults. Research by Balducci et al. (2011), Mathisen and Einarsen (2004), and Tehrani (2004) has shown that individuals experiencing severe incidents of workplace bullying tended towards the type of PTSD associated with sexual assaults. Mathisen and Einarsen, as well as Tehrani, observed that the American Psychiatric Association (2013), in the most recent edition of *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, did not include workplace bullying as one of its criteria for PTSD. Tehrani’s study, however, demonstrated, that individuals experiencing severe bullying in the workplace scored above the cutoff for PTSD on standardized PTSD questionnaires.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined working definitions for constructs of interest in the research and has reviewed the literature relevant to these key concepts. The literature review reveals that earnest focus on the concepts of workplace bullying, virtual employees, and stress are relatively recent. Although no peer-reviewed studies were discovered on the topic of workplace bullying and virtual employees, a review of the literature reveals four important discoveries that suggest bullying is likely to occur: (a) the research on conflict between virtual workers suggests that, like collocated employees, virtual workers may struggle with both task and relational conflict; (b) observed relational conflict between virtual workers has been shown to cause emotional responses and escalate quickly; (c) research on social media, cyberbullying, and online learning shows that the social distance created by mediated technology (particularly if the communication is also anonymous) appears to give license to individuals to be more uncivil and aggressive in their communication, which may create a climate of disrespect and bullying; and (d) mediated technology, particularly asynchronous means, limits and interferes with the normal cadence of human communication.

The next chapter outlines the research method designed to shed light on the research questions of interest:

1. How is virtual bullying manifested; i.e., what bullying behaviours are experienced?
2. Do virtual workers who are exposed to workplace bullying experience high levels of stress and, if yes, what are the work, health, and social impacts of that stress?

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# Chapter 3. Methodology

The literature review revealed that research on workplace bullying does not include specific research in respect of virtual workers and their experience with the phenomenon. This observation led me to two important research questions. The first was to understand how bullying is manifested in a virtual workplace setting (i.e., the bullying behaviours experienced by virtual workers). The second was to understand if virtual workers who are exposed to workplace bullying experience chronic stress similar to that described by collocated workers. A research design to support the investigation of these two questions is presented and discussed in this chapter.

## The Research Design: An Inductive, Qualitative Approach

The study of workplace bullying is itself challenging because the phenomenon is, to a large degree in the eye of the beholder, meaning that individuals may experience and interpret the phenomenon differently. Different individuals observing or experiencing the same events may come to very different conclusions about whether bullying is occurring or not. Variations in perception may stem from the different personalities of the individuals involved (Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun, 2011; Parkins, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2006), their organizational roles, and/or their relative power distance (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Turney, 2003). Yet, to each individual, one’s reality is one’s truth.

Social constructivist ontology. Both virtual work and workplace bullying occur in the context of organizations, which are socially constructed realities. Individuals create and shape socially constructed environments through their interactions with one another, which in turn influence and shape individuals (Elkind, 2004). Constructivist ontology in social science holds that reality and meaning are subjective, dynamic, and contextual, even within the boundaries of a well-defined research design (Elkind, 2004). It permits a perspective that different individuals’ views and experiences can produce different truths, and these truths can coexist without one being dominant over the others. Barkin (2003) stated that understanding a phenomenon such as workplace bullying requires an understanding of roles, identities, individual and collective interests, the norms and policies (among a number of potential variables) in the context of the organization, and organizational structure. Interactions between individuals create their individual and collective reality, which in turn shapes their reactions and motivations to act.

An exploratory qualitative research approach. I wanted to capture the richness in the details of the workers’ own experience so that I could appreciate (a) the circumstances that might have precipitated the behaviour and understand how the bullying manifested; (b) the feelings, symptoms, thought processes, and actions as workers endured the stress; and (c) how the bullying was resolved, if resolved. Creswell (2012) observed that a qualitative approach is appropriate when investigating the relationships between potential variables, particularly when the objective is to understand a phenomenon in a social context. Mason, Augustyn, and Seakhoa-King (2010) stated, “Exploratory studies in the social sciences are being increasingly advocated, particularly in relation to new research themes or when addressing an existing issue from a new perspective” (p. 432). The university ethics review board approved this approach prior to any data being collected (see Appendix A).

## Development of the Interview Questions

Workplace bullying can be an uncomfortable topic for workers, particularly the prospect of discussing it openly. Exposing the details of one’s dysfunctional workplace experiences tends to bring up uncomfortable feelings such as shame, guilt, or fear. There may be concerns about one’s own behaviours, particularly fears about one’s own contribution to the issue, as well as the emotional pain of recalling confrontations (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009). This consideration drove my decision to use a conversational-style interview approach. This decision met two objectives. First, the style allowed participants to share as much of the experience in their own words as they were willing to share. Second, it allowed me to observe their manner and behaviour (e.g., speech, body language, tone, pauses) for signs of internal conflict, trauma, or deceit.

A framework of semistructured interview questions was developed to guide the overall direction of the conversation, as well as to ensure the key areas were covered in the time allotted (see Appendix B). The framework was developed as a series of primarily open-ended questions to shape the particular queries related to the research questions (Turner, 2010). Depending on the participants’ responses, additional, more probing questions were prepared to gain either further detail or to ensure accuracy and understanding. There were also some multiple-choice questions where participants were offered data ranges to select from, and these were useful to obtain basic referential data (“What range does your age fall into?”). A few questions also utilized pick-lists (“Please indicate if you have experienced any of the following symptoms . . .”) for comparative purposes.

The interview questions were divided into four sections to help with data analysis:

1. Basic referential information (for comparative purposes);
2. Experience with virtual work;
3. Experience with conflict, particularly dysfunctional conflict, which may take the form of workplace bullying in the virtual work setting; and
4. Any physical and psychological effects flowing from the experiences.

I estimated that interviews would take between 90 minutes and two hours, although the participant was offered more time if he or she wanted to continue the discussion. The actual range was between just over 90 minutes to four hours, and the average interview lasted just under two hours. All participants signed a letter of consent prior to the interviews commencing (see Appendix C).

Use of questions from the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) in the interview. Qualitative research methodology relies on the participants’ own experiences and their processing of their own experiences to provide data. Bullying behaviours can be experienced as a gamut of different negative behaviours, or as a narrow range of oft-repeated negative behaviours. Individuals may interpret the intentions behind these negative behaviours differently, and therefore react to them differently (Nielsen et al., 2011).

When asked to describe bullying behaviours, most people tend to describe overt, violent, and intimidating behaviours (yelling, humiliation, physical assault), but overlook more subtle forms such as continuously reminding workers of past mistakes or not giving a worker access to tools or resources others can readily access (Field, 2010). More subtle forms might not be immediately recognized as bullying but rather as just so-called frustrations or microaggressions. Studies on racial bullying highlight that skilled bullies can mask their true intention through multiple events of seemingly innocuous behaviours (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Additionally, bullying is not only about behaviours, but frequency and severity, which are designed to wear down the target (Hauge et al., 2007, 2009; Rayner et al., 2002). Understanding all three dimensions gives insight into the level of psychological distress an individual may be facing, and therefore a window into the risk of harm (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2002; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001, 2002; Zapf & Gross, 2001).

Thus, a challenge in creating a methodology that looked across different experiences was finding an objective way to measure the behaviours, frequency and severity. In the literature, there are three ways in which researchers have measured bullying in the workplace (Agervold, 2007; Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Salin, 2003):

1. self-reported, based on the participant’s own understanding of the term;
2. self-reported, based on a given definition; and,
3. using a standardized scale, which incorporates descriptions of bullying behaviours and asks participants to rate their experience with those behaviours in their work setting.

Research has shown that when these three approaches are compared, the incidence of bullying using self-reported measures (whether or not a definition was given) tends to be consistently lower than when using a standardized scale (Agervold, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Salin, 2003). In other words, individuals who experience bullying in the workplace tend not to recognize (or admit) that they, or others, are being bullied when simply asked about it. Regardless of whether participants do not associate some of the more subtle behaviours with bullying or are unwilling to accept that bullying is occurring, the scale can pick up false negatives.

Researchers believe that the use of a scale provides a more reliable and sensitive measurement for three reasons. First, scales detail specific types of bullying behaviours and their frequency (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). Therefore, this approach provides important detail on how bullying is manifested in terms of both the size and scope of the phenomenon. Second, a scale relieves any trepidation, guilt, or shame about admitting bullying. It is simply recording facts, which are then calculated into a score. The participant is not required to provide a judgment statement so much as recall factual information (whether it happened or not, and if so, what was the frequency). The resulting score is compared to defined threshold values, which indicate the likelihood that bullying is occurring. Third, the scale removes any social desirability bias. Participants do not want to look weak in the eyes of the researcher, and so will not answer that bullying is occurring when perhaps it is (Agervold, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Salin, 2003). This occurs especially if participants are not given a definition and are left to define bullying themselves.

A limitation of a such a scale is that some workers may perceive themselves to be targeted when in fact they were not, and the scale does not differentiate false positives. However, such individuals will state their own compelling evidence for bullying in their qualitative narrative as well, so there will likely be a match between the narrative and the standardized scale. As I did not capture other perspectives (the alleged bullies or any bystanders), the perspective of the participants is assumed to be their truth.

For these reasons, I decided not only to ask the participants about the bullying behaviours that were occurring in their virtual workplace (without giving them a definition) but also to include the suite of questions from the University of Bergen’s Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ-R) to provide a less subjective assessment to help determine the breadth of how bullying was being manifested in their workplace (Nielsen et al., 2011). I received permission to use the full survey instrument (Ø. L. Hoprekstad, personal communication, September 7, 2016), which can be found in Appendix D. The NAQ-R was developed in the 1990s by Einarsen et al. (2009) and is described on the Bergen Bullying Research Group’s website as an “inventory developed for measuring perceived exposure to bullying” (University of Bergen, 2018, para. 1). It has been used with over 10,000 participants globally and has been shown to be both valid and reliable (Charilaos et al., 2015; Einarsen et al., 2009; Giorgi, Arenas, & Leon-Perez, 2011; Kakoulakis et al., 2015; Nam, Kim, Kim, Koo, & Park, 2010).

The behaviours listed in the instrument represent bullying behaviours most often cited by individuals experiencing workplace bullying in collocated settings, and the questions were sufficiently generic to be used with virtual workers in this study. A few questions required some minor adaptation to make them a bit more meaningful in the context of virtual work. For example, a question pertaining to withholding information was reworded from “Someone withholding information which affects your performance” to “Someone withholding information, necessary for you or others to do your/their job, such as data, access to databases, access to applications, or reports?” Research participants were asked about frequency, and the categories given for consideration were *regularly/almost always*, *often*, *now and then*, or *never*. Scores were calculated based on participants’ responses, and the thresholds identified in the NAQ-R were applied.

In some ways, the use of the NAQ-R in conjunction with the interview questions could be considered a mixed-methods design rather than a purely qualitative study. However as with the Salin (2003) and Agervold (2007) studies, the incorporation of this scale was only to help understand the range and frequency of the behaviours manifested in the workplace that could be construed as contributing to a bullying environment, even if the individual did not see it that way. As there were insufficient participants to make any statistical inferences, this is not truly a mixed-methods study.

Measuring stress. Stress has two dimensions of interest as well: the range of symptoms, and the intensity or frequency of the symptoms. As this study focused on the participants’ own experience and perceptions, the assessment of stress was not based on a medical assessment but on the participants’ recalled and reported health and social impacts. To assist in capturing all the symptoms, some of the questions pertaining to mental health were adapted from the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), which is a short survey used by healthcare professionals to determine whether additional, more detailed questions are required about an individual’s level of anxiety or depression (Löwe, Kroenke, Herzog, & Gräfe, 2004). The frequency of the reported symptoms, as reported by the participant, was captured in categories named *sometimes*, *more often*, or *worried*. *Worried* was used to differentiate a symptom that was recognized by the participant as impacting or being likely to impact their work or personal life, or where the participant was actively seeking professional help to address it.

## Participant Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria restricted participants to those who (a) met the attributes of a virtual worker, (b) had some experience with dysfunctional conflict (observed or directly), and (c) could conduct an interview in English. Dysfunctional conflict was left to the interpretation of the individual, but for those who asked for more clarity, it was loosely defined as conflict or tensions between individual workers that could affect the performance of the team of workers.

Although the definition of dysfunctional conflict could be broad, the definition of virtual worker needed to be somewhat narrower to ensure that the participants in this sample were truly virtual workers. Telecommuters, for example, sometimes work from a remote location and sometimes in a collocated setting, but the relationships are the same in each circumstance. Conflict arising from a poor communication could be addressed in a casual meeting at the office. Thus, those workers were excluded. Individuals doing transactional telework, such as in customer service centers (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2009), were also excluded because the at-a-distance relationships with customers were transactional in nature and colleagues and supervisors tended to be collocated. However, hybrid virtual workers, who worked both remotely with supervisors and colleagues but supervised collocated staff, were able participate in the study as a large part of their work (more than 50%) demanded an ongoing, regular, virtual-only interaction with others for coordination, collaboration, and cooperation.

For this study, participants met the definition of a virtual worker if they met the following criteria:

* Geographically isolated from supervisors and/or colleagues (located at least 100 km away from supervisors and/or colleagues that they worked with regularly and interdependently);
* Conducting at least a significant part of their work (50% or more) with supervisors and/or colleagues at a distance;
* Relying on technology for communication and coordination of activities for the vast majority of work activities; and
* Working virtually for at least a year.

The last qualification for inclusion in this study was that all participants needed to be able to conduct an interview in English. This did not appear to be much of a limitation for participation as many of the virtual workers were employed with large regional or global companies where the corporate language of the business was English.

## Sample Size

A key consideration for any study is the potential sample size (Marshall, 1996), as it speaks to the generalizability of a qualitative study (quantitative studies require large numbers). For this study, potential participants were drawn from the intersection of (a) the potential pool of virtual workers and (b) the potential pool of workers who may have experienced or observed workplace bullying. Based on a study by Global Workplace Analytics (2019), the pool of potential virtual workers who work remotely at least 50% of the time is estimated to be about 4.3 million people. Estimating the pool of virtual workers who have experienced bullying was obviously trickier. I turned to studies on collocated workers to make an assumption. Studies on collocated workers have estimated that between 40% and 75% of the North American workforce has directly experienced or observed bullying in the workplace over their working life (Fisher-Blando, 2008; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Therefore, if the estimated rates of workplace bullying in collocated settings are similar for virtual workers, there should be a reasonably large group of virtual workers who could provide insight for this study.

Although the base number was large, there were other potential limitations. When considering the percentage of individuals from that large pool who would be prepared to discuss their bullying experience with a researcher, the number was likely to be significantly lower. Despite society’s increasing focus on mental health, workers who experience workplace bullying feel a stigma, as well as a potential sense of embarrassment and shame. Even though psychological safety is becoming a critical part of modern occupational health and safety regulations and legislation, individuals continue to perceive workplace bullying and harassment as topics that attract judgment, anger, shame, or guilt. Additionally, the details themselves may be painful to recall for some. As such, I wondered if individuals would willingly share their experience with a stranger such as myself, particularly if they have experienced bullying directly rather than having observed it.

The number of participants required for any qualitative research is unique to each study. However, to understand the magnitude of the potential sample size that might be required for this study, I looked to previous qualitative studies concerned with the phenomenon of workplace bullying. These studies are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Studies on Workplace Bullying Using a Qualitative Methodology*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Author | Year | Area of research | *N* |
| S. E. Lewis & Orford | 2005 | Women’s experience with changing relationships | 10 |
| S. E. Lewis | 2006 | Women victims in the public sector setting | 10 |
| Strandmark & Hallberg | 2007 | Health consequences of bullying in the public service sector | 22 |
| van Heugten | 2009 | The phenomenon among social workers | 17 |
| O’Donnell, MacIntosh, & Wuest | 2010 | Understanding sickness and absence among women victims | 18 |
| Gaffney, DeMarco, Hofmeyer, Vessey, & Budin | 2012 | The phenomenon among nurses and in nursing | 81 |
| Ciby & Raya | 2014 | Victims’ experience | 12 |
| MacIntosh, Wuest, & Bulman | 2014 | Men’s sense of self post-victimization | 36 |
| Cowan & Fox | 2015 | U.S. human resources professionals’ roles in investigation | 36 |
| Kwan, Tuckey, & Dollard | 2016 | Role of a psychosocial safety climate in coping | 20 |
| Fields | 2017 | How executive coaches help professionals deal with workplace intimidation | 10 |

*Note*. Studies are listed chronologically.

The sample sizes of past qualitative workplace bullying studies ranged between 10 and 81, and the average was 24. Consequently, and with the understanding that the research would ultimately dictate how many participants would be required for this study, I developed a plan for potentially 20–25 participants.

## Participant Sampling: Chain Referral Method

Chain referral sampling, also known as snowball sampling, is a sampling method that leverages a researcher’s strong and weak social connections (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). The nonprobability sampling method begins with an initial convenience sample of individuals who are typically socially or professionally connected to the researcher. Those individuals are asked not only to participate (if they meet the criteria for the study) but also to pass on the invitation to others who might meet the criteria. This second wave of prospective participants is also asked to pass the information along to their connections, and so on. In this way, the sample bias is decreased (becoming potentially more randomized) as each subsequent cascade brings additional participants who were not initially in the researcher’s orbit.

Baltar and Brunet (2012) reported that chain referral sampling is particularly useful for exploratory and qualitative research. Further, they reported that it is appropriate for hard-to-reach samples, and defined those populations as having at least some or all of the following four characteristics:

1. A relatively small population;
2. Hard to detect because the phenomenon is rare;
3. Not easy to detect because the behaviour is illegal, stigmatized, or results in judgment by others; and
4. The behaviour is unknown to others, thereby making it hard to identify them.

Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) have supported this approach as well, stating, “[The method] is particularly applicable when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study” (p. 141).

The phenomenon in this study meets at least two of Baltar and Brunet’s (2012) characteristics. The first is that participants might feel stigmatized or judged in revealing the particulars of their circumstance. The second is that bullying in this context may not be known to others (at least the entire situation). Virtual colleagues may sense something unusual is occurring but may not know exactly what is occurring or what the role of their colleague is in the circumstances. Family and friends may also be unaware, as unless the worker reveals the issue, there are no local coworkers who might accidently or purposefully reveal the situation to family or friends. Thus, this sampling method provided two avenues to reach potential participants through established relationships: (a) someone would reach out to say, “I think this study might describe what we talked about. What do you think?” or (b) someone might reach out to say, “You’re a virtual worker. Have you seen dysfunctional behaviour?” Given that the potential participant has no obligation in either situation short of acknowledging that they were asked, there would be no risk to the established relationship for contacting the researcher privately.

With these considerations in mind, I decided to source potential participants using two social media networking sites: LinkedIn (a professional network; <https://www.linkedin.com>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>). Baltar and Brunet (2012) reported that the response rate using Facebook is higher than for other traditional snowball sampling methods because the researcher also presents his/her own personal information online, meaning that the respondent typically knows more about the researcher (which builds trust) than with other methods. Mirabeau, Mignerat, and Grange (2013) similarly reported that response rates appear to be higher with social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The authors also highlighted some of the benefits of using social media, such as a large base and low barriers to collection (little or no cost and minimal effort). This observation echoes research by Brickman Bhutta (2012), who observed that Facebook is an effective and affordable method for reaching a reasonably large potential group of participants. Dusek, Yurova, and Ruppel (2015) similarly found LinkedIn to be effective. A key finding from their studies was that researchers get better results when identifying themselves as researchers in their own LinkedIn profile.

Using social media, however, required two foundational assumptions about the sampling frame. The first assumption was that at least a portion of the millions of virtual workers were also users of either Facebook or LinkedIn (or both) and that they would somehow be linked back to my initial convenience sample (my initial list of contacts). Statista (2020) estimated the number of Facebook users at the end of 2019 at over 2.45 billion, so it was likely that there would be a reasonably large cadre of virtual workers amongst its user group. The second assumption was that any of the social network linkages would yield virtual workers exposed to workplace bullying who would be willing to share their experience. This assumption was difficult to estimate. Again, if workplace bullying is as widespread amongst virtual workers as collocated workers, it would stand to reason that some of my contacts or their contacts contained individuals who might become participants.

My initial convenience sample was relatively small. Although I was an early adopter of Facebook, even after more than 10 years of use my contact list was somewhat limited, with fewer than 200 direct contacts. The list included some family and close personal contacts, but also a number of weaker ties including some regional and community service organization contacts, work relationships across several organizations, and contacts in educational settings. I estimated that secondary contacts could be between 1,500 and 2,000 (assuming a quarter of my contacts reached out to another 30 to 50 individuals each). My LinkedIn account was connected to about 150 individuals working primarily in the energy sector, but I expected that secondary contacts might provide access to a wider range of industries.

Chain referral sampling, however, is not without its challenges (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Mirabeau et al., 2013). The main concern is self-selection bias, which limits both generalizability and theoretical validity. Baltar and Brunet (2012) and Mirabeau et al. (2013) observed that this drawback can be overcome by reaching a larger, more comprehensive base sample, and this is the advantage of using social media. A typical criticism of snowball sampling is seeding bias—that the approach is likely to link me to people similar in age, geography, industry, or career experience, for example. Mirabeau et al. suggested that this drawback can be overcome by using multiple seed points. The consideration to use both LinkedIn and Facebook contacts as convenience samples was an attempt to reduce the seeding bias, even as there was some overlap between the seed points. A number of my contacts were virtual workers who, themselves, had contacts around the country and around the world. Several contacts worked in large, global organizations with more than 100,000 people on their global payrolls.

## Privacy and Confidentiality: Prime Considerations

It was crucial to me, and to the participants, that I ensured that each participant’s information remained not only private and confidential, but also completely anonymous. Some were very concerned that their identities could be revealed and wanted me to assure them that their identity would be protected. As such, I went to considerable effort to balance the needs of the participants with the needs of the research itself. All participants were advised that they would be receiving a copy of the study not only to thank them for their participation but to prove that their anonymity had been retained.

In the data-gathering stage, care was taken to ensure that any contact information was kept separate from any data-gathering activity, including any handwritten notes (all such referential information was kept separate and locked in my office). Identification numbers were given to the data and resulting documents, and the cross-referencing file was again kept separate and secure. Recordings were saved on the original recording device, organized by the participants’ identification numbers only, and the device, itself, was password protected. All participants were advised that only my supervisor would be permitted to see the data, and that the data would be destroyed as per the period agreed with the ethics review board (24 months after the dissertation has been approved).

Referential information was intentionally kept at a relatively high level. For example, I asked about job roles to understand the organizational level a job represented (e.g., individual contributor, supervisor, manager, or executive). All the names of organizations were removed in the typed notes, and pseudonyms were given to any named individuals in the typed notes. In general, I tried to refrain from using names in the interview notes even when offered by the participant, instead referring to job roles or titles (e.g., “You talked about the global manager for systems before”) or relationships (e.g., “So the coworker you had worked with in Canada, who moved to the Malaysia office, who supported you . . .”).

The interviews required some flexibility to manage the comfort level of the participants. Although all the data were to be captured as both notes and recordings, not all participants felt comfortable with that approach. All participants were asked for permission to record after they were advised that I wanted to use recordings to support the accuracy of my notes. In two situations, the participant gave permission only for notes, not for recording. Most of the recordings had reasonable fidelity; however, two were quite poor (one had a lot of background noise, and the other did not pick up questions or answers well). Therefore, they were not a useful comparison to the notes.

I used a template for managing the interview and capturing the notes consistently (same question, same order). I typed the handwritten notes into the same template post-interview. The document template also helped in organizing a consistent flow for the interview. However, participants did not always follow this organization. At times, participants picked up the thread of a different topic, and I went with what worked for them. I simply took notes on the blank back page and highlighted the topic for later. When the information was typed up, the data were then kept with the original question.

The recordings were captured on a standard smartphone that was password secured. The recordings were replayed and compared with the typed notes for accuracy and completeness. In some instances, the manner in which the participants responded to open-ended questions was relevant, such that I also transcribed additional notations regarding tone or emotion into the notes. Also, there were situations in which participants added relevant comments into pick list or multiple-choice questions (which were used to obtain demographic, NAQ-R–related, and specific harm information), and these comments were transcribed into the relevant section (along with the pick-list response).

For the analysis, I initially prepared and loaded the data into InVivo. However, I decided to use a less technologically sophisticated approach so that I could see the data and potential themes more simply. I opted to print out the observations and pin the data to boards to do a rough sorting to find similarities and differences. This initial sort formed the basis for identifying the first themes. Additional thoughts in the themes were captured in the form of sticky notes. As I added additional participant information, I reviewed existing themes to determine if there were subthemes that should be split apart to form new themes. As the emergence of new themes appeared to come to conclusion, I reviewed the themes themselves to see if there was any potential sequencing or relationships between them.

## Practical Considerations: Meeting with Virtual Workers

Meeting with virtual workers was another aspect that required some thought. Given that the convenience sample included people who might work close to my location, it was possible that some of the interviews could be done face to face. However, as the waves of sampling moved further from me, it was also possible participants would be located too far away to meet in person. Participants who were located within 100 km (or who could meet me at a location within 100 km) were given three options of interviewing: face to face, by phone, or by Skype. Participants outside this range were given the option of either phone or Skype.

To meet the diverse schedules of the participants, as well as to make it as convenient as possible for the participants, I made myself available to meet daytime or evening, including weekends.

## Study Participants

In October of 2018, I sent out an official invitation to participate, asking potential participants to send back an email address where I could send additional information (see Appendix E). The purpose of asking for an email was to be certain that the communication was both directly with the individual (not someone else pretending to be that individual) and that the potential participant would feel comfortable receiving communication about this topic. There were 22 respondents who sent me their contact information. When contacted by email, only 16 replied, even when contacted a second time (I reassured them it was completely fine if they did not want to participate). After the second time, I did not contact them again regarding the study, taking it as a sign that those individuals had changed their minds. A further four individuals, after engaging several times in connection with study, elected not to continue. Two of those individuals cited concerns that the published study might provide enough information to reveal their identities, and it was a risk they were unwilling to take. The other two cited personal reasons.

Of the 12 interviews conducted in connection with this study, three were done via Skype and three by telephone. I travelled to meet with six of the participants and conduct the interviews in person. The 12 participants reflected the following attributes:

* All participants could be classified as knowledge workers. None were manual labourers, engaged in production, or sole proprietors, and none provided a service directly to the public.
* Half were men and half were women. None of the participants self-identified as any other sex or gender.
* All participants were older than 45, but none was older than 65. The average age was 52.
* The range of tenure in the current position ranged from just under two years to 12. The average experience as a virtual worker was over four and a half years.
* All participants had some advanced education. Four had completed a college diploma, three had completed a bachelor’s degree, and five had a master’s degree or professional designation (engineering accreditation, registration in a provincial legal association, or accounting designation).
* Racially, all considered themselves of a single race, and only two of them were not Caucasian.
* All participants were in a relationship that could be characterized as married or equivalent to married. Most had dependents, though all had less than two dependents.
* All but two were resident in Canada. One participant was resident in Germany and the other in Brazil.
* Nine lived in urban centers and three lived in rural areas that were within two hours of a major urban center.
* Eleven worked for global organizations, but three were really working for in a regional capacity ; one worked for a regional (North American based) organization.
* Eleven worked for very large organizations, having at least 50,000 employees worldwide (some had over 150,000).
* In terms of organizational tenure (whether as a collocated worker or virtual worker), the minimum tenure was just under two years in the current organization and the longest was 27. The average was just over 15 years.
* Eleven participants had worked in one or more collocated settings with their current organization prior to working virtually. Five participants had worked virtually at least once previously.
* The average experience as a virtual worker was just over four and a half years, with the range being just under two years to over 12.
* Six of the 12 participants took on their virtual role as a lateral move resulting from internal organizational changes or a merger and acquisition. Two negotiated a virtual role due to either a change in geographic responsibilities for the organization or a personal circumstance. Three people were promoted into virtual roles. One person was hired into the role with a new organization.
* Eight of the participants were based out of their homes, whereas four were collocated with their staff but working virtually themselves.
* All participants were in work situations where supervisors or colleagues were at least one time zone away, and with the range between one and 12 hours. Four of the participants had most colleagues and supervisors within two time zones; two had colleagues and supervisors with one time zone; and six had colleagues and supervisors who were more than three time zones away.
* Seven of the participants were no longer in their virtual roles. Two had negotiated early retirement with a discount to their pension, and five had received company-initiated terminations from their organizations due to organizational change. The balance (five individuals) of the group remained with their organizations in their virtual roles.

The demographics of the sample appear to reflect similarities to a State of the Remote Job Marketplace study by Flexjobs.com (Weiler Reynolds, 2018), which provided some statistics on remote workers. Flexjobs.com reported that the average age of remote workers is about 46, with remote work being more common for older, more experienced workers, and most common among the Baby Boomer generation (Weiler Reynolds, 2018). The Flexjobs.com observation appears to be consistent with the sample in this research in that the subjects in this study were also mature workers. The average age in the sample for this research was a bit older and is probably reflective of a seeding bias of the snowball sampling technique used in this study (some of the initial contacts were former work colleagues and closer to my age). This bias may limit the generalizability of the research to older virtual workers.

The Flexjobs.com (Weiler Reynolds, 2018) study also reported that remote workers are almost evenly split between men and women and that they tend to have invested in additional education, many having achieved at least a bachelor’s degree. This finding mirrors the characteristics of the sample for the current research. Given the similarities between the Flexjobs.com study and the participants of this study, it was assumed that the sample had some of the characteristics of the population of virtual or remote workers represented in the Flexjobs.com survey.

## Ethical Considerations

The research design was reviewed by the ethics review board of Athabasca University in early summer of 2018 and was approved in August 2018. The copy of the certificate can be found A. The ethics application featured the careful consideration given to the need to ensure privacy and confidentiality for all participants, particularly in any published results. The application also featured considerations in respect of participants who may have potentially experienced significant trauma as a result of workplace bullying and could, therefore, be at risk of being triggered. Procedures were developed so that if participants felt or behaved in ways that suggested they were in a state of emotional crisis resulting from the interview, they would be put in touch with healthcare resources to assist them (such as Alberta Health Services). However, these procedures were not required during the study.

All participants were given a letter of information (see Appendix E) that described the study and included clear language around their right not to answer certain questions, to stop the interview at any time, or to withdraw their participation up to the point at which the dissertation was submitted for review. Participant consent was either documented in a signed form (see Appendix C) or the expressed consent was recorded as part of the interview.

## Researcher Bias

Constructivism accepts that as realities are co-constructed, the researcher and participants cannot be expected to be objective from each other; through their interactions they reveal interpretive and logical insights. Maintaining objectivity is an ongoing challenge for researchers, more so for myself because the participants had some, albeit small, social connection to me through the snowball sampling technique.

I remained committed to following the collected data to the findings. However, I must declare that I have also had experience in working virtually, and therefore I did not come to the topic without a priori knowledge of this environment. Although it is impossible to remove all bias, it was minimized by strict adherence to the process of linking any and all proposed themes back only to those narratives and words used by the participants or raised in peer-reviewed research.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed how the study was designed, including the ethical considerations for the participants, the approach for data capture, and considerations for data security. It also described how the study was implemented and introduced the attributes of the participants who volunteered. The next chapter reviews the findings resulting from the interviews that were conducted.

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# Chapter 4. Results

Following from the previous chapter on methodology, this chapter explores the results from the data collected. It begins with some introductory comments pertaining to the presentation of the participant data, as well as some important notes on participant citations. Data pertaining to each research question are presented separately, as are the themes that flow from the data. A summary concludes the chapter.

## Notes on the Presentation of the Results

Prior to beginning the detail in this chapter, it is necessary to make some comments regarding the presentation of results. The most crucial and salient issue to the participants was anonymity. Privacy and confidentiality regarding the handling of the data (covered in the previous chapter) were important considerations; a guarantee of the respondents’ anonymity was the singular point on which trust was extended to me as the researcher. To ensure anonymity, all respondents are cited in this paper by an assigned pseudonym. In a few rare circumstances, the sensitive nature of what was revealed made it critical to ensure the privacy of the individual was protected. In those few instances, I have withheld even the pseudonym.

Further, the responses presented in this paper have been altered to remove any potential references to organizations, locations, individuals, roles, or names that could uniquely identify participants. Certain words or phrases that could be associated with a particular individual have been modified slightly to ensure that person’s anonymity. The essence of the message was preserved and was compared to the original notes and recordings to ensure the meaning was still intact.

In a few instances, a comment has been repeated under different themes. I have attempted, wherever possible, to extract only the relevant parts for each theme, but at times it was difficult to split the comments between separate subject areas without losing the salient interplay.

## Information About the Participants

Table 4 lists the participants by their pseudonyms and provides some basic information about each person. All participants were fairly accomplished in their fields. Eight had professional-level accreditations including certificates in HR, procurement, project management, and health and safety, and four had professional accreditations in engineering, finance, and law. In summarizing their own careers, all participants described a progression of increasing organizational responsibility. With the exception of one participant who was relatively new to the organization (just under two years), the other 11 participants had over 15 years with the same organization, and several had over 20 years.

Eleven began their careers in a collocated setting. One had landed a virtual job right after graduation from university in the 1990s, though due to the lack of sophisticated mediated computer technology at the time, most of the early interactions with other workers was via telephone. Five of the participants have had two or more virtual roles over their careers.

Table 4  
*Participant Demographics*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Married or living with partner | Highest level of education | Years of virtual experience |
| Alpha | 45–54 | M | Yes | Bachelor’s | 4 |
| Bravo | 45–54 | M | Yes | Bachelor’s | 3 |
| Charlie | 55–65 | F | Yes | Master’s; professional accreditation | 12 |
| Delta | 55–65 | M | Yes | Master’s; professional accreditation | 2 |
| Echo | 45–54 | F | Yes | Diploma | 6 |
| Foxtrot | 45–54 | M | Yes | Diploma | 3 |
| Guelph | 45–54 | F | Yes | Bachelor’s | 2 |
| Harry | 45–54 | M | Yes | Master’s; professional accreditation | 4 |
| Indie | 45–54 | M | Yes | Master’s; professional accreditation | 3 |
| Juliet | 55–65 | F | Yes | Diploma | 5 |
| Kila | 45–54 | F | Yes | Diploma | 4 |
| Lima | 45–54 | F | Yes | Master’s; professional accreditation | 2 |

In terms of experience with workplace bullying, two participants had experienced significant workplace bullying earlier in their careers. One participant described an experience with a supervisor who bullied all the staff quite brazenly. This participant did go to HR and upper management for assistance. At one point she was required to work from home due to concerns about comments her supervisor made about her safety. The supervisor was removed from the team, if reluctantly, by the manager, at the insistence of HR, but remained with the organization and came back later to the same team in a nonmanagerial role.

Another participant described a bullying narrative that occurred when the individual had a virtual team lead. This participant did not ask for or receive any organizational assistance to deal with the bullying as the participant felt there were signals it could be politically unsafe to seek assistance. The participant successfully sought out another role in the company and effected a transfer, using the network of relationships the participant had developed.

Table 5 presents some of the characteristics of the participants’ organizations. All participants worked for private-sector organizations, eleven of which have shares that are traded on international exchanges. Eleven of the organizations are very large, with at least 50,000 or more employees worldwide, with three listing their global workforce at over 100,000. All of the workers had interdependencies with other workers regionally (North America, South America, or Europe) as well as internationally. Of the 12, six had global interaction more than half the time. None of the participants was covered by a collective bargaining agreement. None were contracted employees; all were salaried. Ten had some type of pay-at-risk bonus and/or stock-option program available to them, although not necessarily in the calendar year, and not necessarily every year.

Table 5  
*Participants’ Organizational Attributes*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Industry | Business unit interaction | Business unit type | Organization size | In manager or supervisor role? | Matrix organization by design or practice |
| Alpha | Energy | Global | Technology projects, marketing | > 50,000 | No | No |
| Bravo | Automotive | Regional | Engineering, project management | > 100,000 | Yes | Yes |
| Charlie | Healthcare | Regional | Project management | < 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Delta | Telecom | Global | Procurement | > 100,000 | Yes | Yes |
| Echo | Energy | Global | Health and safety | > 50,000 | Yes | Yes |
| Foxtrot | Energy | Global | Health and safety | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Guelph | Energy | Regional | Financial | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Harry | Professional master’s | Global | Marketing | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Indie | Energy | Global | Marketing, project management | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Juliet | Energy | Global | Financial | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Kila | Energy | Regional | Marketing, HR | > 50,000 | No | Yes |
| Lima | Financial | Global | Corporate | > 100,000 | Yes | Yes |

Four of the 12 respondents were not only virtual workers but also supervisors or managers. Two of these supervisors were not home-based but were situated with their collocated team, and therefore worked virtually from an office setting. The other two supervisors worked in a home office setting and managed direct reports at a distance. Their own reports were in a mix of collocated and home-based settings. The remaining eight participants were individual contributors working exclusively from a home office setting. Five of the 12 reported to a global manager or global executive with in-country and out-of-country relationships. The balance reported to an in-country manager but had many cross-country and out-of-country working relationships. Nine of the 12 were in matrixed leadership situations, where participants officially reported to one manager but were dotted line to other managers or subject matter experts, who had significant influence over them, including authorities and resource allocation.

It was clear from the interviews that despite the concerns the participants had about dysfunctional conflict, they still felt some pride in telling me about the companies they were working for. I looked up the companies represented by the participants to find out more. It was interesting to note that all the organizations represented in this study have won at least one Best Places to Work award in the last 10 years, and most are multiple recipients. I believe this shows that the organizations represented in this study appear to care about their reputations as good employers. All of the companies have some sort of respectful workplace policy (either the participant was aware of the existence of the policy or I confirmed its existence through contact with the company). Ten of the 12 participants worked for an organization with an explicit zero tolerance policy in regard to disrespectful behaviour in the workplace. The implication is that if the companies represented in this study take respectful workplace behaviour as seriously as their policies would suggest, the participants in this study may represent a sample of workers who are at the better end of the spectrum of potential risk. Other virtual workers who do not work for such conscientious organizations could be at an even higher risk for workplace bullying.

## General Observations Shared by the Participants

Collective sense of identity. At the beginning of the interview, to give participants an easy question to begin the process with, as well as to find out something about them, I asked each participant to describe him- or herself. The actual question was, “When people ask you, what do you tell them about yourself?” Participants described themselves with a range of words; however, there tended to be common themes between them. Table 6 captures the responses from the participants.

The themes provided insight into the participant’s collective sense of identity. The highest frequency centered on being skilled, having a strong work ethic, a desire for relatedness and relationships, and being involved in work with others that solve important organizational challenges. Perceived threats to their status and relatedness would therefore be quite problematic.

Table 6  
*Frequency of Words and Phrases Participants Used to Describe Themselves*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Words or phrases | *n* |
| Skilled | Competent, skilled, known for | 10 |
| Good communicator | 8 |
| Good judgement | 4 |
| Problem-solver | 9 |
| Bring people together, foster engagement, help people solve their problems | 8 |
| Strong work ethic | Hardworking | 8 |
| Have high standards | 10 |
| Ethical | 9 |
| Known for follow through | 7 |
| Self-starter | 4 |
| Committed, loyal | 7 |
| Respected | Subject matter expert | 5 |
| Lots of experience, people come to me | 3 |
| Emotionally intelligent | Intuitive | 3 |
| Understand people | 5 |
| Value relationships | 11 |
| Desire for relatedness | Want to be part of a team | 8 |
| Has courage to want to make an impact | Like to work with others to solve important organizational challenges | 9 |
| Want to be part of something significant . . . change and influence | 6 |
| Want to make a difference | 5 |
| Committed to something bigger than myself | 5 |
| Enjoys recognition for achievement | Hard work . . . but great lifestyle | 3 |
| Well paid . . . to reflect effort and contribution | 5 |
| Motivated by achievement . . . rewards reflect achievement | 3 |
| Control | Like to control things, be in control of things | 2 |

*Note*. *n* = number of participants who used the word or phrase.

Compensation and Job Security. All participants stated that compensation was important, and all agreed that they were paid quite well by their organizations. Further, all participants spoke about how the compensation allowed them to care for their families, to give them opportunities and a higher standard of living. Eleven of the 12 had worked for the same organization for eight years or more, achieving progressively more responsibilities that were rewarded with bonuses and stock options. As they were all in the private sector, they were all aware that there was no certainty to continued employment, but given the firm belief that each of them was a strong skill fit for the role and that their organizations were performing well, I do not believe these 11 thought their positions were at risk. (The twelfth was in a new role, with a new organization and things had started rough right from the beginning. Thus, I believe this participant was already stressed about certainty.) The shocked reactions of those who were terminated, as well as t resigned but conflicted attitudes of those who felt they needed to take early retirement, reinforced, to me, that they had all believed their future with their respective organizations was almost certain prior to the bullying.

Fairness. It was interesting that all of the participants in this study worked for large, regional, or global organizations that had achieved at least one award as a Best Companies to Work For. This suggests that the organizations the participants worked for valued their reputation for attracting and retaining preferred employees and therefore provided environments that, from an HR perspective, were quite progressive The participants in this study, in describing their work circumstances, often made reference to organizational policy that was designed to encourage professional, ethical, fair, and productive behaviour, but they could also provide evidence in the ways in which people were behaving counter to it without sanction. Often the misalignment was described as ‘unfair’. Half of the participants spoke at some length about the abuse of performance reviews in their organization which they found to be not only unfair, but unethical.

Dysfunctional conflict in the workplace creates issues for all workers. All of the participants reported examples of dysfunctional conflict in the workplace (either observed or experienced), with some participants experiencing a higher frequency than others. However, not all considered the dysfunctional behaviour they experienced or observed as bullying. When asked whether they, themselves, were being bullied, or if bullying was occurring in their work environment, 10 of the 12 agreed that it occurred in the environment, but only five felt it was occurring to them. The other five described environments where bullying behaviours were part of the background, an environment of normalized incivility and apathy, not quite reaching an acute stage, but interfering with the ability to get work done with and through others.

Two of the participants stated bullying was not occurring in their environment but agreed to be interviewed about working virtually. In the interviews, both indicated that from time to time, some conflict behaviours appeared to be disproportional to the initial issue. When asked if they considered these examples of behaviour dysfunctional, they agree it was out of character for their work group. Even so, they did not see those behaviours as bullying, but rather as personality clashes or political posturing. However, while discussing generic difficulties in working virtually and some of the conflict that arises, they too, probably unknowingly, described some examples of conflict that could be characterized as bullying behaviours as found in the NAQ-R. Neither individual agreed to complete the NAQ-R, so there is no way to know whether either participant was actually experiencing bullying but was unaware it was bullying. Given that both did describe a few instances of bullying behaviours in their narratives, I decided to include their narratives for analysis even as I have no data for the NAQ-R comparisons.

Lack of preparation and training. New virtual workers appear to have to be resourceful to get started. When asked about how they were prepared for working virtually (either preparing themselves, or how the organization prepared them), all stated that they received minimal corporate support and pretty much figured it out for themselves. For those who worked from home, there were logistical considerations. Three who had worked from home more than 10 years ago, when virtual work was a new concept in the work world, reported there was no support at that time. They reported having to sort out the telecommunications, connectivity, storage, security, and home office equipment and furniture on their own. Some progress has been made on that front. All who worked from home more recently reported that organizations were more prepared with policies, programs, contacts, and processes to assist in the physical transition from office to home office. Some of the changes virtual workers highlighted included standing contracts and arrangements with telecommunications providers, flexible furniture allowances, and office equipment that was robust but sized for home use.

However, it appears little progress has been made in preparing workers for how to work virtually. Neither the home- or office-based virtual workers were provided with much specific training on nuances with virtual work and integration with other virtual workers and collocated teams, nor was there assistance in developing a support network or providing a mentor. This lack of preparation may be due to an organizational lack of understanding of the differences and nuances of virtual work, as evidenced in the following quotes.

We’d been doing teleconference and webconferences already in [the collocated setting]. When we first began to use these tools, the meeting notice would come with a link to connect, and you clicked on it . . . and it worked. You were webconferencing. Then you’d learn to set that up for yourself. We used email at the office, IM [instant messaging] too. . . so, we knew how to use the tools. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

I’d been participating in virtual meetings [from time to time] for a while in the office, so there wasn’t much to train on. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

Training? No, nothing particular. I moved home over the weekend and was working on Monday. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

Well, I’d been pretty much telecommuting for a while. Didn’t make much sense to come into the office every day when the people I worked with directly weren’t there. So, I just worked from home instead. Save the commute time. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

It is possible that training and support were available to these workers (I did not contact the organizations to determine if such training and support were available); however, it is clear from the participant comments that if so, they were not directed to it as they were unaware whether training was available. With no training for these virtual workers, it is also possible that the participants’ team members were also not properly prepared to integrate this work arrangement, leaving it up to each individual to independently figure it out. Proper support may have made a significant difference in derailing some of the smaller incivilities and microaggressions that grew into more dysfunctional behaviour.

Conflict can turn from task-centered to relational and escalate quickly. When participants for this study were asked, “What kinds of conflict came up when working virtually?” all 12 reported that conflicts could be rooted in tasks, processes, and/or relationships. Task conflict tended to be rooted in different (cognitive) interpretations of tasks or objectives. Process conflict centered on differences on how to sequence tasks and activities. Further questions revealed that nine of the 12 respondents felt that although conflict centered on mostly task issues, it often turned into relational conflict when the task issue could not be resolved quickly to the mutual satisfaction of the parties. In discussing the types of conflict that tended to be escalated, participants revealed that conflict centered around the following subthemes: (a) a clash of objectives (including differing opinions on priority); (b) making decisions with insufficient data (or on the basis of perceived personal agendas), which affected others’ work or reputation; (c) issues with trust; (d) inability to execute decisions locally; (e) misalignment of cultural messages; and (f) perceived lack of professional courtesy.

A clash of objectives.The first subtheme regarding conflict was a clash of objectives, decisions, vision, or intentions—particularly in the matrix structure. Those tended to get escalated often and quickly, mostly due to their polarity, creating even more discord between larger groups who were drawn into the conflict.

It’s mostly task or process that quickly becomes relational. People won’t engage to resolve or resolve with a win–win in mind—[the] only choices are to accept, ignore, or escalate. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

Data and scorecards being used to track conflict caused conflict! Gave impression that everything was always in conflict, . . . that nothing ever went right. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

Making decisions without sufficient information or input. A second subtheme regarding conflict was people making decisions with poor or no data (or worse, with their own personal agenda). Decisions made from gut-instincts or guesses used up precious resources, trust, and goodwill, which subsequently needed to be reworked using additional resources and goodwill.

The [concept to be implemented] wasn’t something our local market needed at all, but there was an expectation that our local market would implement. We advised early on that it wasn’t useful to implement here as there was no market desire whatsoever for [the concept]. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

[Involving cost reductions], . . . this regional [financial] manager [unilaterally] decided that the cost of this particular fluid was excessive. If he would have asked me, I would have explained that the use of the fluid was directly related to the number and complexity of the wells drilled. Instead he flew up to meet with the drilling program manager and told the manager he had to cut back on fluid since it was too expensive. I wasn’t there, so I don’t know exactly what was said, but I heard the manager was told to leave the property and he wasn’t allowed to come back again. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

When [the concept to be implemented] came to us for local implementation, it’s clearly not ready for implementation. There was a lot of work to do still, and the local market was going to have to do it. That’s not what we were expecting, so there are no resources to finish it, except what we have on the ground. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

There were many challenges with the financial calendar [as] . . . reporting is coordinated between [the three global centers]. Reporting dates are hard dates, so we must work around time [and date] zones, global workdays, and if there was a national holiday [or celebration period], work might get sent that wasn’t complete for the period. They wanted to get on to the holiday, I get it, but it wasn’t right, and people were making decisions on the data so, it had to be right. That left it to [a number] of us in [the other two centrers]. We would have to figure it out, catch it up, all on hours and hours of overtime. It was exhausting . . . and frankly, disrespectful to the rest of us. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

Issues with trust. A third subtheme related to conflict was wanting to trust but not getting reassurance that one’s trust was well placed. This reinforced the issues with swift trust, which is extended in good faith until individuals demonstrate they cannot be trusted. When it appears that swift trust is not warranted, it devolves into skepticism.

I didn’t know if they got my messages or not. . . . [I] started to put read receipt on them, just to prove to myself that the messages were getting through. There was no absence manager, so I knew they weren’t away. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

It was frustrating when we were expecting [data] to be complete from [another global office] and [routinely] it wasn’t finished, had errors. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

I’m starting to think I have to go out there . . . [to] see what’s happening. I don’t really have the time, but I don’t know what’s happening. (Bravo, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

Inability to execute decisions locally. The fourth subtheme was that decisions and initiatives that could not be executed locally due to poor understanding of the local market and regulations caused tremendous tensions, as some stakeholders seemed to be unaligned to the importance of the gap. Most participants characterized this issue as a demonstration of disrespect. Not only was the local market irrelevant in overall planning, but errors in the local market did not appear to matter to the overall strategy. This situation impacted not only perceptions of challenges to status, but of relatedness (belonging to) and fairness. Participants spoke with passion and disbelief that these microaggressions were not intentional.

We explained exactly why this couldn’t possibly work here. Consumers [in this country] have no need for this product because we don’t use cheques here. The right decision would have been to limit it to [the other country]. . . . They were frustrated that there was no uptake in [our country] and [concluded] we were incompetent, . . . that we hadn’t rolled it out properly. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

Some of the initiatives were simply contrary to the prevailing tax laws in [the jurisdiction]. . . . Subtle differences from the overall strategy, maybe, but [the initiative] could not be supported locally in its current form. . . . [It] would require changes. That didn’t seem to matter. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

There were also issues in getting to a fulsome exchange of knowledge, typically because most meetings were in larger groups using video or telecom to share information, which did not allow for much interaction, particularly if the topic was of interest to only a few. This finding could be an example of unintended systemic issues that cause misalignment, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. The perception of intentionality may arise due to continuing with the practice despite evidence that it is ineffective.

Lack of aligned understanding, usually from not being able to confirm understanding or asking for clarifying questions right away. . . . Different people have different levels of information at the right time, . . . [which] makes it hard. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

People get frustrated because things just seem to take longer working virtually. It’s harder to get on the same page . . . because you usually can’t ask your questions as you think of them and get immediate feedback on whether you’re getting it or not. It’s just harder to coordinate details, schedules. I think people just lose it sometimes because they’re frustrated. (Guelph, female, 45–54 years old, Financial Services)

Misalignment of cultural messages. Another subtheme was misalignment between cultural messages. Participants agreed this issue was not intentional, but the lack of cultural alignment and the varying rigidity to cultural norms appeared to cause offence, increased ambiguity, or confusion. This was not limited to ethnicity but was observed as a clash of corporate cultures resulting from mergers and acquisitions. Although these tensions are not intentional, they challenge status, relatedness, and fairness, which may cause individuals to be condescending or less compassionate and understanding. These reactions can be perceived as microaggressions.

Certain cultures needed more reminding and coaching to get things done, . . . needed a high commitment to the task. Building commitment is important, but people will only work with you if they trust you. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

Ways of working. You had to get used to other people’s ways of working. For example, when someone says yes to a question like, “Can I get this by Wednesday?” you can’t assume the other person has agreed. Took a while to catch on to that. . . . In some cultures, they can’t say no to anyone that might be in authority, so they always say yes. In other [cultures] it means, “I heard what you said,” but that’s all. And . . . you don’t get that in writing. They’ll say it on a phone call, but not in an email. . . . That’s how you know it wasn’t “yes.” (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

Most were experienced workers . . . [also] experienced working virtually. But experience with a large, bureaucratic, steady-state [environment] is not [transferable] to a fast, nimble, and agile style needed for this project. (Bravo, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

Perceived lack of professional courtesy. A final subtheme on the topic of conflict was the perceived lack of professional courtesy. These perceptions of disrespect centered on relatedness and status. The golden rule of do unto others as you would have them do unto you is an axiom that many of the workers in this study identified with. When colleagues or supervisors made requests that appeared not to take their circumstances into account (particularly after having been told about the oversight), participants began to see the behaviour as a microaggression.

People scheduling meetings they know (or ought to know) that you can’t attend. What’s with that? What’s the motivation? What’s the message they are trying to send? Mostly it was to provide evidence that my contribution, my attendance was sought even if it really wasn’t. . . . Later, they just sent out the decision they wanted. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

Differing standards of execution. . . . Something passed on [to me] that is 70% right that needs to be more than 90% right to be useful. . . . Things passed on but barely finished for you to do your part, . . . and you don’t know what’s incorrect, so everything needs to be reviewed. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

All 12 of the participants in this study admitted that, from time to time, there were small attributions of intention towards them resulting from procedural gaps or misinterpretation of communications. They felt that certain stakeholders were offended when they were unintentionally missed in an ongoing stream of communication and therefore had formed an inaccurate view of the reason. All participants shared stories of how these otherwise minor issues tended to be escalated in the organizational hierarchy, coming back through the participant’s own chain of command. All participants admitted that initially they were nervous about these escalations but realized soon into their tenure that they were an unavoidable occupational hazard. These escalations carry a risk to reputation (and therefore status), as the reason they are being escalated is either an implication of wrong-doing or noncompliance. Sometimes the root is a perceived personal affront to someone. These escalations always take dedicated time and effort by several organizational levels to unwind and sort out, and as there can be shifting allegiances, virtual workers are not always sure what the outcome will be.

My in-country boss told me I had to apologize, even though I was in the right. I hadn’t been disrespectful. I carefully, [tactfully and diplomatically] questioned the direction of the strategy. We should be able to do that as leaders in our organization. We’re asked, encouraged to speak up about [things that affect the success of the organization]. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

It got escalated. Suddenly, no one is talking to me . . . [or] taking my calls. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

Home-based virtual workers donate extra time gained to working more as a protective measure against organizational invisibility. One of the benefits both virtual and collocated workers see in virtual work is that it is a way to improve work–life balance, in particular because it reduces or eliminates the dreaded commute to and from work. In theory, it should allow workers to work the same number of hours while still allowing them to have a bit more personal time to sleep in or exercise at the beginning of the day and/or take care of personal errands at the end of the day. Therefore, it came as a bit of a surprise that none of the home-based participants reported using that additional time for purely personal benefit. Of the eight workers who were based out of their home, all of them stated that they started work at about the same time they would have left their home for the office, and tended to end their virtual day at about the same time as they used to come home from the office.

This observation seemed curious because all the workers in this study were paid a salary rather than an hourly wage, meaning that the additional hours did not attract additional pay. The commute times ranged from 30 min to 90 minutes each way, so over a week that could accumulate an additional five to 15 hours of personal time donated in productivity to the organization. Although this contribution could be explained as impression management, the participants spoke of something deeper, as though they understood that this work arrangement had the extra time commitment in mind. Participants’ remarks suggested they simply accepted that virtual work was a practical way to commit more to the organization while still permitting a reasonable work–life balance, and they took it in stride. For example:

I get to take my coffee with me from the kitchen, just the way I like it. I usually have breakfast with [my spouse]. When [my spouse] leaves, I walk down to my office, and I’m there! (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

I usually warm up dinner at about 4:00 pm and then work until about 6:00 pm when [my spouse] gets home. . . . When [our child] is ready for the bus, we can walk down, . . . and I’m at the bus stop [at the end of the day]. (Charlie, female, 55-65 years old, Project Management)

I and my staff usually start our day about 6:00 am because the [regional office in a time zone that is ahead] opens about that time, so we’re [in sync]. . . . It means that we’re finished about 2:00 pm, but I usually work until about 3:30 or 4:00. It’s still earlier in the day than I used to come home, and I really like that. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

I give extra time to help make the early and late meetings, but I may take some time during the day to run some errands. People get the wrong idea if they can’t get hold of you. . . . They think you’re [loafing], but they don’t see all the other hours I make myself available. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

If I’m up for the 5:00 am meeting, in theory we should be working to, what, 1:30 or 2:00 pm? People will complain if they can’t get hold of me. Well, I’m used to working to 5:00, so, if I stop at 5:00, then I’m already home, . . . better than when I worked in the office. No one thinks about . . . how many hours I work. Thankfully, not every morning starts at 5:00 am. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health & Safety)

Even though virtual workers who were home-based appreciated the increased flexibility of time, and justified working additional hours as a professional courtesy to others outside their time zone, there was an undertone that they needed to be seen as always available. Six of the participants, who were all home-based workers, spoke about the necessity to be available so that colleagues and supervisors did not come to the conclusion that they were loafing. This theme seemed to come up often. I also believe it is linked to the significant concern regarding image management.

## Interview Results for Research Question 1

The first research question in this study investigated what kinds of bullying behaviours would be found in the virtual workplace and how they would be experienced or observed by virtual workers. The participants were asked to describe their experiences and observations of dysfunctional conflict—in particular, workplace bullying—in connection with their virtual work. Participants shared examples through their narratives and were asked about other potential bullying behaviours they may have experienced or observed as listed in the NAQ-R.

Table 7 shows the results of the NAQ-R bullying behaviours that were reported by participants, displayed by the NAQ-R categories of high, transitioning, and low. An NAQ-R score over 44 points is considered high and indicates the individual is likely a victim of workplace bullying. A score below 33 points is considered low and suggests the worker is unlikely the target of bullying. Transitioning NAQ-scores are in the mid-range, between 33 and 44 points, where the frequency and/or range of bullying behaviours articulated are insufficient to conclude that bullying is occurring on an ongoing basis, but are sufficiently elevated to conclude that an absence of bullying in the environment is unlikely. A transitioning score could also be a sign that bullying is changing, either by starting to emerge or by abating. Although there is an X in Table 7 if any participant in the category reported the behaviour as occurring, it is interesting that four behaviours were consistent across all categories: the withholding of information which affects performance; being ignored or excluded (whether intentionally or not); intimidating behaviour, such as escalating simple conflict; and having opinions or views ignored.

The five themes pulled from the examples in the narratives revealed that bullying in this context was manifested as (a) managerial or subject matter expert abuse of power; (b) actions that made it difficult for individuals to do their work, or do their work well, including undermining by other collocated or virtual groups or workers; (c) being taken advantage of; (d) political pressure to conform; and (e) transfer of risk or accountability. The following subsections provide insight into how these bullying strategies were presented in a virtual context.

Table 7  
*NAQ-R Bullying Behaviours as Reported by Participants*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| NAQ-R bullying behavior | NAQ-R category | | | |
| High | Transitioning | Low | DNS |
| Someone withholding information which affects your performance | X | X | X | X |
| Being ordered to do work below your level of competence | X |  |  |  |
| Having key areas of responsibility removed | X |  |  |  |
| Being ignored or excluded | X | X | X | X |
| Target of spontaneous anger, including ALL CAPS in email | X | X |  |  |
| Intimidating behaviour, such as escalating simple conflict | X | X | X | X |
| Being ignored or facing hostile reactions | X | X |  |  |
| Persistent criticism of your work and effort | X |  |  |  |
| Having your opinions or views ignored | X | X | X | X |
| Given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines | X | X | X |  |
| Having allegations made against you | X | X |  |  |
| Excessive monitoring of your work | X | X |  |  |
| Being exposed to an unmanageable workload | X |  |  |  |

*Note*. DNS = did not score.

Theme 1: Managerial abuse of power. Nine of the participants recalled situations where there was an abuse of power by supervisors or other managers. Of these nine, three of the participants reported to one supervisor alone for all aspects of their work and work environments. The other six were effectively in matrix organizations, and they reported abuse of power by their own supervisor, the dotted-line relationship, or both.

I, politely and respectfully, challenged an approach in a teleconference. We’re all seasoned professionals, and the objective is to be better for our market, to be more effective, more efficient for the shareholders. I raised the issue that I couldn’t deliver my part if I couldn’t keep the resources I had and needed to extend the agreement. Not long after . . . my autonomy and my resources were reduced. There was no other way to explain what happened because the two were clearly linked. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

Of the nine participants who were in matrixed leadership situations, only three remained with their organizations. Four were terminated and two took early retirement. The following are some of the observations that participants shared.

The in-country supervisor did nothing. Nothing. Just made it out like I had done this to myself, and somehow managed to shame [the in-country manager] and [our country] in the process. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

The supervisor commiserated with me . . . [and] understood why I was mad. When I asked what we do next, it was clear there was no “we.” (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

The six participants who scored high or transitioning on the NAQ-R reported feeling pressure from one of the two authorities, whereas the other provided little or no support in addressing the pressure. In only one circumstance did the participant report that the direct, in-country supervisor was actively engaged in protecting the target when the bullying was escalating. Two of the participants reported that the direct, in-country supervisor was an enabler.

For one participant, whose direct supervisor was out-of-country, the supervisor appeared to be wholly disengaged. Even after the bullying was openly discussed in detail during a visit to the worker’s location, and the supervisor was then aware of the dysfunction and stress the situation was causing, the supervisor did not follow up. Shortly thereafter, after returning to her own head office, the supervisor communicated a decision to relocate the work from the virtual office location to another country.

Other examples of managerial abuse of power were linked to the abuse of the performance review process. Four participants also spoke of perceived managerial abuse in terms of restructuring. One observed that only one role was restructured (the participant’s): It was moved to a larger centre, where the incumbent of the new role became a home-based worker. Another participant’s role was restructured with two other workers in similar circumstances (but in other business units), and the individuals who replaced them were attached to the regional office—collocated workers who were permitted to telecommute from home several times during the week. The last participant was restructured with no replacement that the individual was aware of, and the participant believed this outcome was due to the prejudice with which the action was taken—there was really no plan, just a desire to have the incumbent out. These situations occurred in three different organizations, in totally unrelated business units.

Table 8 shows the relationship between the assigned work location and the participant’s career status. Of the eight home-based workers, two retired and two were terminated. Of the four virtual workers in an office setting, three were terminated.

Table 8  
*Assigned Work Location and Current Career Status*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Assigned work location | Still with organization | Terminated due to restructuring | Retired early | Total |
| Home-based | 4 | 2 | 2 | 8 |
| Office-setting | 1 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 2 | 12 |

Using the performance review process as an abuse of power. A difficult and traumatizing performance review was recalled, unbidden, by seven of the 12 research participants who were either terminated by the organization or took early retirement. Two individuals who remained with their organizations recalled observing other individuals who were subsequently terminated going through similar stress.

One of the disquieting findings of this study was the similarity of and consistency in using performance reviews to embarrass, intimidate, and limit options for bullied workers. One participant, who was terminated by the organization, reported a single poor review, which the participant perceived as contrived. This same participant was told shortly thereafter that the organization had decided to go in a different direction, despite having put two years of effort into setting up the satellite office, resulting in a new satellite team being brought together in India. It is interesting to note that despite all the issues, the participant was not interviewed by the organization regarding any advice or recommendations about being the manager of a satellite office that might have benefitted the organization in setting up the new team. The following recollections from participants demonstrate how these reviews can be abused.

I’ve always had really great performance reviews. You know what I mean? I’m a good worker, and I work hard for [the company]. [The supervisor] gave me a poor review. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

It was terrible. I had years of really great reviews—even since they changed the form and the way we get assessed. . . . all my [previous] supervisors had great things to say. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

It was mostly pretty vague, except for the parts about what I didn’t do right. . . . [The supervisor] had to dig. For sure. Small things, but written that way, against [a lack of] specific good things, . . . it looked very bad. Were the small things true? Yes, but they were very small, back at the beginning of the year when I seemed to have trouble fitting into the group, and that’s all [the supervisor] focused on. . . . I think that’s what the [at-a-distance collocated team] gave [the supervisor] to write because [the supervisor] had no idea what my work was like, what I really contributed. When I asked about some more recent examples, . . . [the supervisor] seemed . . . well, let’s just say unprepared. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

The terrible performance review is in and of itself devastating to workers, yet the bully can use it to enlist others in advancing the bullying agenda, ensuring the bully’s narrative becomes the dominant narrative with important others. The following is an observation that was shared by a participant who had worked in two different virtual roles with the same company. This situation occurred with the first virtual role.

One of my supervisors used to send my performance reviews to [my spouse]. Yeah, . . . [my spouse]. His motivation? There was [work] that my boss wanted to be done, which I didn’t agree with [and constantly explained why this would be wrong for the organization]. [My spouse] kept asking me about [the outstanding work identified in the performance review] and wanted to know how this was linked to my annual bonus. (Identity withheld)

The seven participants who shared stories of malicious reviews were in different disciplines and job roles. They were in different industries and organizations. This observation suggests that manipulating the performance process in this way may be widely used as an unethical management practice. This seems to be a chilling confirmation that the stinging performance review is used as a way of legitimizing the negative, degrading comments or justifications that the bully uses to destabilize the target.

Three of the bullied participants in this study felt that the only act of defiance available to them was their refusal to sign the performance review document. Though none stated it directly, I believed the participants hoped this refusal would raise a flag in the performance review process and perhaps bring additional objective organizational resources into the equation. The lack of a signature should have been the gateway to alerting the organization to the fact that the worker was in distress. No one came for any of the three participants. All the participants felt it was important that I, as the interviewer, know that, as far as they knew, HR did not come back to question why the document was unsigned. The lack of organizational support effectively reinforced the bully’s message that the participants were alone and helpless.

Malicious reviews used in comparative analyses. Participants experienced further trauma when their contribution and performance were discussed and compared to others in subsequent managerial discussions. Some larger companies have used an internal ranking process to compare employee contributions across a wider group of workers to sort workers into ranking bands to help distribute rewards. Eight of the participants worked for multinational corporations that employed some sort of ranking process. Workers are categorized into certain pools of commonality (salary bands, job families, or professional pools, for example), and then each individual is compared to others in this pool by subject matter experts, usually other supervisors or managers and HR personnel. Two of the participants worried that this process caused them to acquire a stigma, a perception by others, such as future supervisors, that they were weaker against others in the pool.

The scores resulting from the ranking process can be very powerful. Six of the participants shared that these results can be used to determine the distribution of bonuses, the allocation of company shares, or the identification of potential candidates for advancement. The eight participants described processes that used the scores to affect a relative weighting of contribution to overall corporate goals. If the score is low, it signals that the individual did not contribute as much to the overall objectives (and therefore would attract fewer rewards) relative to other members of the team or ranking pool. A higher score attracts a significantly larger share of the rewards. Aside from affecting the share of the current spoils, these ranking values have an impact on an employee’s future earnings and career options. The ratings become a way to compare individuals for advancement opportunities, including potential favourable lateral transfers or special project roles. Within the participant group, seven individuals, all who either retired early or were terminated by their organization due to organizational restructuring, reported ratings that were uncharacteristically low in the last period before they left their organizations. The rating impacted bonuses in all cases, stock options in some, and the ability to apply for promotions or lateral transfers.

The [ranking outcome] was [low], and I knew what was coming. I’d seen it before with others. First the ranking falls, and [soon after] the individual is gone. You’d think HR would see the pattern and look into it? Maybe ask me about it? No one asked. . . . My ranking is so low. It’s never been that low. I was shocked but also [embarrassed]. It’s discussed in the [pools]. People know. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

[The supervisor] convinced them this is my performance now, . . . this is how people see me now. That’s the lens they will look through in considering me. . . . There’s a question mark . . . that I’m different now. How can I counter that? (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

I saw the rating. . . . I knew, right then, it was over. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

Theme 2: Actions making it difficult for the target to contribute, including undermining by other collocated and virtual staff. Another bullying strategy, as discovered through the interviews, is to make it hard or impossible for targets to do their work or contribute to the team, particularly when work is highly interdependent. The objective can be intentional, such as keeping the target from becoming part of the team or discrediting the target’s contribution, and thereby limiting their achievement or influence. It can also be unintentional by simply not caring enough to properly onboard the virtual worker or by not assisting in solving local challenges. Participants shared narratives that included the following subthemes about their colleagues’ or supervisors’ actions: (a) unwilling to exchange information or give critical insight into the information; (b) failing to interact with the targets (via appointments, email, telephone, or other media); (c) knowingly passing on incomplete, inaccurate, or stale-dated information; (d) not providing access to tools (or similar) that others readily have available that are critical to workers effectively doing their jobs; and (e) restricting access or making it cumbersome to access data or information.

Some of the virtual workers appear not to have been properly resourced for their work. In two situations, their home environment was not developed in anticipation of having dedicated home office space. Sometimes it was not having the appropriate technology or applications necessary to properly contribute to and interact with the larger group. This lack of resources in their virtual office is particularly frustrating and disappointing for workers who had access to sophisticated and superior technology and support services (such as stationery supplies) in the office setting as part of their jobs prior to becoming a virtual worker. Sometimes the issues were small but annoying things. Participants mentioned having to arrange for and pick up toner and paper, and having to process a greater number of small charges on the company credit card (including reconciliations and receipt submittals) every month. Participants felt a sense of unfairness in that these were additional burdens in their roles that their collocated counterparts did not experience.

Supervisors did not appear to be helpful. When the participants in this study asked for technological resources they were missing, that other offices had access to (such as videoconferencing or the ability to call outbound), supervisors denied the request citing cost. Not addressing these issues effectively sent a message that virtual workers were not as important as (or equal to) other staff. This message was particularly hard to understand for the workers in this study who were employed by profitable, large, global companies, and who had had access to the same tools previously. The following are two participant experiences where the technology offered was a key barrier to effective participation with their work team, which became a point of significant conflict. Both of these examples come from participants who worked in satellite office situations for very large, very profitable, global organizations.

It seemed that every other office had the technology to do a webconference except our [local office], which made it really difficult to work with [the global office]. We had inbound phone numbers so customers and head office could call us for teleconferences, but we couldn’t [initiate] teleconferences. When we needed webconference, which wasn’t allowed very often, we’d have to [rent it] from some other organization. I was told it was too expensive. We could have used Skype. . . . I don’t think that’s too expensive, is it? Kids use it. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

When I asked about getting the [webconference technology] for ourselves, because it would have been really useful in reducing the miscommunication, . . . I was told it was too expensive. . . . The cost of miscommunication must have been much higher. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

Although the participants felt frustrated by these resourcing challenges, they appeared to be genuinely shocked and surprised by the ambivalence, skepticism, and hostility directed towards them by mostly collocated colleagues that the virtual workers relied on to facilitate interdependent tasks. In the examples shared by the participants, it seemed that the essence of the issues causing conflict centered on coworkers resisting the idea of virtual workers on the team. It was not so much the particular individual but the concept of virtual workers that the collocated colleagues appeared to take exception with. The other workers appeared to give their virtual counterparts little support, and in some cases little dignity, by refusing to acknowledge their repeated requests for assistance. The following are statements from the participants about their colleagues’ cool welcome.

People in [the collocated office location] asked to work from home. The commute to the head office is very long for many people because this is [a world class city] and traffic is terrible. The office is in the middle of the city! Management said no. I think this is one of the reasons we have a lot of turnover. So . . . people are jealous of my situation, and I think some of them resent me, like I have something they should be also entitled to. Like it’s favourtism or something. I am several time zones away, . . . [so] virtual work is the only option. Sometimes I’d love to go to the office to sort things out! It’s not my fault, but it sure is my problem. (Charlie, female, 55–65 years old, Project Management)

[The colleagues] basically weren’t interested in what I was offering. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

[The regional office] was very competitive and wouldn’t send or offer any information that I needed. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

The [regional office] is very competitive and kind of focused on their own initiatives. (Foxtrot, male, 45-54 years old, Health and Safety)

Seven of the participants shared that the cool welcome caused them such discomfort, even anxiety, that they began to direct their own efforts to find a group to provide value to so that they could meet their primary obligation of contributing to the organization effectively.

It became clear, right from the beginning, that they saw very little value in myself being part of the team. . . . So, I reached out to dealers in [another continent] who get very little support and were looking for any guidance for their market. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

There was very little interest in my help to support their due diligence. So, I started to travel there, to help with the audits and such. They really responded to that. . . . I do a lot more travelling now. (Foxtrot, male, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

The ‘cool welcome’ also included disrupting participants’ attempts at developing critical social capital. The following are examples participants shared that demonstrated how coworkers blocked the participants attempts to build social capital.

In the end, everything is a relationship business, isn’t it? The work we do is [interdependent], but people won’t get back to you, won’t accept your meeting invites, won’t respond to email. . . . That was disheartening. It was intentional. That hurt. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

[Colleagues] were kind of territorial, . . . and adding the unchecked [autonomy and competition], . . . everyone is hunting for their share of projects, particularly projects that get you noticed. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

I wouldn’t be told about the meetings until just a little time before [the meeting started], and I already had [other] meetings scheduled. I’m pretty sure they knew that. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

I remember there was communication traffic at 2:00 am local time (that they knew I wouldn’t be able to get) about a meeting in a few hours. So . . . I didn’t attend. There was important information exchanged. They did this on purpose so that I would have less intel than everyone else. . . . I was out of the loop, with [old information] having to catch up the next day. I’m sure that didn’t make me appear connected, . . . capable. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

The [other regional office] was very, very competitive and weren’t interested in [accepting] any outside perspective. They were only interested in what worked in their own area, even though they were responsible for [the region] . . . because their region was so large it only had to work there to get acclaimed. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

Participants in this study also shared observations of virtual workers and collocated peers undermining each other either by behaving unprofessionally or allowing the technology to amplify their frustration.

We have this regular [end-of-day] webconference so we can know the progress everyone has made on this critical project. . . . Not everyone shows up, not everyone is ready, people are late or have to leave early, . . . people jump off [the conference] and come back on. Some of the team use [a mobile version], and it doesn’t announce who is participating, so sometimes I don’t know if they are there or not. . . . It makes it very hard for me to do my work. (Bravo, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

At first . . . people were not working so well together—they wouldn’t make themselves available for virtual meetings or give us information that we needed to do our jobs. They just wouldn’t acknowledge us at all. When we complained to management, they just [told the manager they] didn’t get the notification. It would have been easy enough to check, but we [didn’t want to hurt the relationship] and just decided to start with a clean slate, even though we know they [lied]. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

It was hard getting accurate and timely information out of [two other remote offices]. The work we do, it has to be right, you know? [Management] relies on our reporting to make decisions. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

The [head office workers] would all like to work from home. Some have very long commutes. I know they’ve asked for it, but management has said no. I think the fact that I [work virtually] doesn’t sit well with them, and that’s why sometimes they aren’t helpful. (Charlie, female, 55-65 years old, Project Management)

I heard [the global head office staff] were jealous of us. I couldn’t understand why, at first. We had this small, terrible office, and they had this really first-class office. I think that maybe they wanted to work from home, but they weren’t allowed to. So, they would ask if we were working as hard as they were. Kind of suggesting we didn’t work all day. When I needed extra staff, we had to fill out time surveys to prove it. . . . I think they thought we were [loafing]. The time surveys added extra time to our already overburdened schedules, and [the local staff] were angry about it. I felt my boss didn’t trust me, and I couldn’t understand why. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

Participants spoke openly about their colleagues’ poor perception of virtual workers, particularly home based workers. Half of the participants mentioned that at least some of their coworkers appeared to be openly skeptical that they (the participants) were actually working all day at their home offices, suggesting that the workers were engaging in social loafing. Participants who directly received these types of comments felt colleagues assumed they were fitting work around personal activities (such as running errands, childcare, for example), rather than working as dedicated professionals, even as those colleagues had no prior knowledge on which to base the assumptions. Not being able to reach colleagues immediately appeared to reinforce those assumptions. All participants felt they needed to maintain a reputation of being easily available to assist others, thereby demonstrating their commitment to the team, and their value to the organization. All the participants reported putting in additional hours in the early morning or at night to connect with colleagues through virtual meetings, as well as ensuring the corporate cell phone was always close to hand as proof that they were committed to the team and hard workers).

**Theme 3: Being taken advantage of.** One of the observations shared unanimously by participants was that the employer got more hours out of them as virtual workers than as collocated workers. All 12 workers stated that, in general, they were working more hours. The eight home-based workers tended to start work at about the same time that they used to leave their homes to commute and tended to finish their workday at about the time they used to be home. To put that in perspective, if they had a 45-minute commute, they would have been committing an additional 1.5 hours to work each day. Because all of the respondents were salaried workers, this additional time was provided at no cost to the organization.

This approach was practical for workers with colleagues in other time zones (four participants had regular interactions with colleagues who were eight and 12 hours ahead). The shift in hours permitted better, real-time interactions with colleagues, which was an advantage to the organization on two fronts: the level of coordination between workers was increased, thereby increasing the productivity of the team, and because workers donated this extra time, there was no additional cost to the organization. Although the participants seemed to accept this added availability was a part of virtual working, they objected to donations of time and effort becoming an expectation from other colleagues who did not (or would not) contribute extra time themselves to lessen the burden for others. Hence, the expectation was perceived as an abuse given that a participant in one jurisdiction was routinely putting in 10- to 12-hour days, whereas virtual and collocated workers in another jurisdiction would need to work only eight hours a day to achieve the team results, even as all the workers were receiving the same compensation for their differential efforts.

I would shift my work hours to accommodate my colleagues both in [Europe] and [Asia-Oceana], . . . but they never accommodated me. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

I drew the line at meetings before 5:00 am. I just won’t do them anymore. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

I’ll get up for 5:00 am meetings, but not anything before. (Harry, male, 45–54 years of age, Marketing)

I’ll shift my day to get the early calls from [Europe] and the later calls from [Asia]. I usually won’t take calls earlier than 5:00 am. Evening calls before 11:00, sure. The expectation [by remote colleagues] is that you’re on the desk all day too, which is a bit much to ask. Sometimes they think you’re not working if they can’t reach you right away. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

Another observation that virtual workers cited as an abuse was coveting virtual workers’ resources. Five participants recalled situations where colleagues attempted to influence them in an attempt to direct or divert their resources toward the colleagues’ interests even if there was little or no value for the virtual worker. Virtual workers understand that there are always tensions regarding resources, and they often work to find solutions that are mutually beneficial. However, colleagues who appeared to be content to steal resources also demonstrated they could not be trusted.

If you had resources they could have access to, they would be interested in securing that, . . . [but] requests for information [from them] were slow to be fulfilled, if at all. You knew it wasn’t relationship building. They just wanted what you could bring. (Harry, male, 45–55 years old, Marketing)

Participants were asked about their work history and all appeared to have been rising in responsibility in their large, complex organizations. Most had some experience working with other global departments prior to taking on their virtual roles, so they had some connections and an understanding of the global scene. Even though many came to their virtual roles as a result of organizational restructuring, or a merger or acquisition, they were promoted or transferred into their current roles either by acclamation due to their reputations in their organizations or by a competitive process. With this as background, it is not surprising that the participants were a bit taken aback when many found themselves having to reestablish their reputations, and value to the organization, in their virtual roles. All 12 participants reported taking it in stride, rationalizing that as they were working with new individuals in new teams, that it was simply a bedding down period. However, they all relayed they were not prepared for the initial incivility, ethnocentricity, or hostility they faced when the new supervisor and colleagues did not appear to be as equally enthusiastic and valuing of their virtual presence.

Meetings would be called late in their day, which of course I wouldn’t get notification of because I was asleep. The meeting would happen at, say, 2:00 am, which I wouldn’t attend because I was asleep. By the time I got up in the morning, things have changed. If they had sent an email, and I checked it first thing, at least I wouldn’t be working on something that was a total waste. If the minutes of the meeting didn’t get out right away, or they forgot, I’d find out after I’d sent out my piece and people would think (maybe) I was still advocating for something when, in fact, I didn’t even know it had changed. A total waste of my time . . . and theirs because we had to be realigned. Again. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

[My portfolio] wasn’t getting any attention, and people weren’t getting back to me. . . . I don’t have the data, so I can’t do my reporting. . . . They aren’t doing their due diligence. I started to travel there, to talk to them face to face, and . . . it made a huge difference. (Foxtrot, 45-54 years old, Health and Safety)

Sometimes, conflict escalates quickly. You try to work it out, . . . talk it out with them. You just have to make sure you did your part right. (Guelph, female, 45–54 years old, Financial Services)

[Overseas office] wasn’t interested in what was happening [locally]. We never reviewed [my jurisdiction], and I was told at least once that [my jurisdiction] wasn’t interesting for anyone else because [it] was way too small to be of value for anyone else’s time. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

I used to hate the teleconferences. . . . They usually forgot I was there. . . . The teleconferences were a way for them to be able to say, truthfully, that [our group] was engaged to participate. They never asked for an idea, an opinion, or a response. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

I’ll shift my day so I can be there for my European colleagues in the early morning if they need me, and then I’ll make myself available for evening calls with [Asia-Oceania]. That way we can all keep in touch. I balance it with doing some personal errands during the day. But some of my colleagues get upset if they can’t reach me on the first ring during the day—they’ve told others that I’m [loafing]. But they never shift schedules to accommodate me. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health & Safety)

The [regional office] was responsible for the strategy . . . but they didn’t do much past the concept, . . . the idea. The package didn’t have any meat to it, and so we always had a lot of work to do just to get it to execution. If the solution didn’t work outside [the jurisdiction belonging to the larger regional office], then they didn’t care. . . . It was your poor execution, your incompetence that was the root cause. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

They’ll look out for each other. [Ethnic Group A] looks out for [Ethnic Group A]. [Ethnic Group B] looks out for [Ethnic Group B]. So, if you’re not [Ethnic Group A] or [Ethnic Group B], you’re no one. They look out for great work, or resources, or authority [for themselves alone]. They’ll go over your head if you have something they want, so that their group benefits. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

When workers from different parts of the organization come together, there can be frustrations because people do not appear to be aligning to expected norms. The problem is that each group is aligning to the local expected norms, but this is not apparent to the other party. As such, misinterpretations occur.

When our colleagues in [Asia] say yes, they are going to [do something], you can’t really be sure what that means. Culturally, they won’t say no, but they don’t really tell you what the yes means. That they understand? That they’ve agreed? (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

Here, virtual workers try to be accommodating, . . . shifting schedules to work with overseas colleagues. That’s never the case for our [European-based] colleagues. They don’t take calls early or at the end of their day, . . . [citing] work–life balance. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

Theme 4: Political pressure to conform. Participants reported that political pressure was made tangible through the removal of authorities and resources, which decreased their organizational power. The tendency to rapid escalation and handling at inappropriate levels of the organization (relative to the issue) when miscommunication occurs suggests political interference might happen more often in virtual settings. Weak supervisors appear to exacerbate the problems, enabling the bullying.

[The in-country manager], who survived by going along with everything global, did not go to bat for me. I was left alone to figure it out . . . After I [did what he wanted], I received an email that the authority and budget would be restored. I knew then that it was real. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

The supervisor was known to be poorly skilled. He didn’t understand what we did, and he was afraid to stand up to his peers. He was more concerned about what his future looked like. We didn’t invite him to meetings if we didn’t have to. . . . I guess we were kind of bullying him, too. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

Five participants indicated that political pressure also came in the form of threats, subtle and overt, to move their work to another location.

Someone from [the offshore head office] said that the leaders were looking at [another country] to move our office to, which made no sense because they had just opened [our office]. I asked about it, and was told no, that wasn’t true. A year later it was moved, and our office was closed. . . . I was out of work. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

There was a rumour that everything was going to be consolidated in [a regional office] because they needed everything to be centralized, but no one would tell us, . . . and in the end it was. We were let go. The funny thing is, . . . those workers who replaced us? They work from home. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

Theme 5: Transfer of risk or accountability. The transfer of risk or accountability without agreement between both parties can be a source of conflict between workers. It can be used as a bullying tactic because it unfairly deflects accountability and discredits individuals who are not the cause of the issue but leaves them open to undeserved negative consequences. According to participant comments, getting clarity on the transfer of risk is even more important to virtual workers, who are already somewhat unseen in the organization, and their delivery is often all that is important to others (colleagues and management) associated with the virtual worker’s achievement. As stated by several interviewees:

The Exec would not accept advice nor risk; . . . risk was transferred to the country representatives. The local teams were not [expected] to think but do, even if it wouldn’t work locally due to local laws . . . or conditions. If it doesn’t work? They always call out the local team. (Lima, female, 45–54 years old, Corporate)

I was worried about who was going to be left holding the bag [if the strategy didn’t work locally], . . . so I started to see what we could do to get it back on track. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

There is no cover. All the risk is transferred to you. . . . The global [expert] transfers a [poorly] developed program, which the local [workers] are required to implement. Should be simple. But no one actually took the time, at the global level, to understand the local market, and [not surprisingly] it can’t be implemented. (Alpha, male, 45–54 years old, Technology/Marketing)

## NAQ-R Results for Research Question 1

Is it bullying or something else? As stated previously, due to its duplicitous nature, workplace bullying is difficult to discern objectively. The NAQ-R was used to help identify potential bullying behaviours that participants may have experienced or observed but did not reveal in their narratives. The NAQ-R captures specific types of bullying behaviours as well as a measure of the relative frequency of these behaviours. Although generally used as a quantitative survey to measure the incidence of workplace bullying, I incorporated the tool to provide a reliable and consistent way of comparing the experiences between individuals. First, it provided a schedule of typical workplace bullying behaviours that might be observed or experienced in the workplace, so as to ensure that each interview explored a reasonably full range of potential behaviours the participants might experience or observe. Second, it provided a basis of comparison of which behaviours tended to occur most often in this context, as well as a way of distinguishing individuals who were experiencing or observing higher levels of these behaviours compared to those who may have seen or experienced only a few. Third, it provided another way of asking individuals whether they were bullied or not in a way that would not trigger a social desirability effect.

Table 9 shows the scores participants’ raw NAQ-R scores and the relative level (high, transitioning, or low) for the 10 participants who agreed to answer questions on bullying. Two wished to be interviewed only on working virtually and conflict observed or experienced in their virtual work groups. For completeness, they are included in the table. As described in the beginning of this chapter, the breakpoints for the three categories reflect the likelihood that a participant is being bullied. Scores over 44 are considered high and suggest the likelihood of the individual being bullied is also high. Scores below 33 suggest the individual is unlikely experiencing bullying. Those scores between 33 and 44 suggest that bullying behaviours are present but whether bullying is occurring or not needs to be viewed in the wider context of what is occurring in the workplace. For example, bullying behaviours may be at the pre-bullying stage where they are present in the workplace, but not yet frequent.

Table 9  
*Range of Participant NAQ-R Scores and Relative Levels*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| NAQ-R score | Relative result |
| 56 | High |
| 52 | High |
| 46 | High |
| 46 | High |
| 42 | Transitioning |
| 40 | Transitioning |
| 36 | Transitioning |
| 34 | Transitioning |
| 30 | Low |
| 26 | Low |

*Note*. Two participants did not take this survey.

Table 10 shows the actual NAQ-R results in comparison to the participants’ self-reported response as to whether they felt bullied. Two of the participants who were adamant that bullying was not occurring in conjunction with their virtual work even before the interview were interviewed only about virtual work and conflict in a virtual work setting. I did not ask them specifically if they observed or experienced bullying, as they stated they did not have any experience with it and didn’t want to answer questions on it. The other 10 of the 12 were agreeable to being asked questions on bullying and they

were asked directly whether they felt they were experiencing or observing bullying in their virtual workplace.

Table 10  
*Self-Reported Response to Perception of Bullying and Relative NAQ-R Category*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| NAQ-R result | Answer to experiencing or observing bullying | | Total |
| Yes | No |
| High | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Transitioning | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Low |  | 2 | 2 |
| DNS |  | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 5 | 7 | 12 |

*Note*. DNS = did not survey.

Looking at those with high NAQ scores, Table 10 illustrates that although three of the participants self-reported they were experiencing bullying directly, the NAQ-R results suggest that four individuals were likely being bullied. Similarly, two individuals reported they were experiencing or observing bullying, but the NAQ-R scores suggested that four participants were transitioning, and thus were in an environment where bullying behaviours were present and occurring.

Participant narratives highlighted that although there was typically a main character in the role of bully, there was often a supporting cast. Table 11 displays the types of individuals and groups who were mentioned as displaying bullying behaviours by the participants who had a high or transitioning score on the NAQ-R. For seven of these eight participants, a manager or supervisor was either the main character or an enabler. Six of the eight participants reported peers or colleagues contributing bullying behaviours. Two of the eight also had to contend with subordinates who were contributing bullying behaviours.

What was interesting was that except as an enabling role, these multiple contributors were not working in concert, but rather were displaying negative behaviours independently to further their own agendas. For example, the peers might be undermining the participant independently of the supervisor by taking away authorities or resources. Another participant had bullying peers, bullying staff, and an enabling supervisor. Although mobbing by multiple people has been reported in collocated bullying, the fact that so many of the participants seemed to be managing issues on multiple fronts might be unique to virtual work. It would seem unlikely that all these people had personalities that simply nobody liked. Perhaps this finding indicates a systemic incivility of virtual work that exists as a risk unless the supervisors or managers work overtly to ensure virtual workers are supported as they fit into the culture and team.

Table 11  
*High or Transitioning NAQ-R Scores and Perception of the Source of the Bullying*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| NAQ-R score | Perception of person(s) doing the bullying | | | | |
| Direct supervisors | Other supervisors or managers | Peers | Colleagues whom the participant must influence | Subordinates |
| High—1 | X | X |  |  |  |
| High—2 |  |  | X | X |  |
| High—3 |  | X | X |  |  |
| High—4 |  | X | X |  |  |
| Transitioning—1 |  | X |  | X |  |
| Transitioning—2 |  | X |  | X | X |
| Transitioning—3 | X |  |  |  | X |
| Transitioning—4 | X |  |  |  |  |

Table 12 shows the relationship between the NAQ-R categories by the highest level of education attained. This inquiry was to see whether there was any observed pattern in terms of the type of virtual worker who might be targeted in the virtual context. The data appears to show there is no distinct relationship between the level of education and the NAQ category.

Table 12  
*Level of Education and Relative NAQ-R Category*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level of education | High | Transitioning | Low | DNS | Total |
| Master’s degree/ professional accreditation | 2 | 3 |  |  | 5 |
| Bachelor’s degree |  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Diploma | 2 |  | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 4 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 12 |

*Note*. DNS = did not survey.

Another consideration was whether gender played a role. Table 13 describes the relationship between gender, NAQ-R score, and highest level of education attained. Even though this study’s research sample was small, it was composed of exactly half men and half women. At the diploma level, the impacted workers were all women. This finding might reflect a higher number of women in those job roles, although this study did not investigate that aspect further. However, when focusing on the professional/master’s level, there was a balance between men and women across both high and transitioning categories in this sample. A much larger sample would be required to test whether this small sample is representative of the general population.

Table 13  
Level of Education, Relative NAQ-R Score, and Gender

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level of education | High NAQ-R score | | Transitioning  NAQ-R score | | Total |
| Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Master’s degree/ professional accreditation | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Bachelor’s degree |  |  | 1 |  | 1 |
| Diploma | 2 |  | 0 |  | 2 |
| Total | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 8 |

On early retirement and terminations. Table 14 illustrates that, for the participants in this study, the average length of time it took for bullying to be resolved by either early retirement or termination was slightly less than two years, at 21 months. Two of the participants whose NAQ-R scores suggested active and present bullying in their environment still had their bullying situations unresolved.

Table 14  
*Time to Resolve the Bullying Situation by High or Transitioning NAQ-R Scores*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Time to resolve the bullying | NAQ-R score | | Total |
| High | Transitioning |
| Two or more years | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Between 1 and 2 years | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Less than 1 year |  |  | 0 |
| Still unresolved |  | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 4 | 4 | 8 |

Table 15 shows the relationship between the time to resolve the bullying situation and the participants’ career outcomes (current career status). Where the organization elected to terminate the employee, it did so in less than 24 months. The two participants who elected to retire did so at the first opportunity for eligibility.

Table 15  
*Time to Resolve the Bullying Situation by Current Career Status*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Time to resolve the bullying | Current career status | | | Total |
| Still with the organization | Elected for early retirement | Terminated, restructured |
| Two or more years |  | 2 |  | 2 |
| Between 1 and 2 years |  |  | 4 | 4 |
| Less than 1 year |  |  |  |  |
| Still unresolved | 2 |  |  | 2 |
| Total | 2 | 2 | 4 | 8 |

Possible organizational antecedents. There were a number of observations that suggested organizational antecedents may have also contributed to the tensions and bullying. Participants identified organizational change, role conflict and ambiguity, laissez-faire leadership, changes to the organization and autonomy and aggression in business as possible organizational antecedents of dysfunctional conflict and bullying.

Organizational change. In this study, a few circumstances of small and large organizational changes could have given rise to tensions. In two cases, the participants were on teams that were in the throes of start-up, which flared frustration and with it, disrespectful behaviour. Another participant’s organization had, within the last two years, been acquired by a larger, former competitor, and the two organizations were trying to synthesize two different cultures, two organizational structures, two leadership teams, and two power environments.

Role conflict and ambiguity. Another antecedent that was a common observation was the presence of role conflict and role ambiguity, which appeared to be at the heart of the struggles for at least seven of the workers. The lack of clear direction and common deliverables, as well as a lack of clarity on the criticality of the interoperability, allowed people to interpret deliverables and create their own roles and authorities, which led to conflict with other members of the group. Workers, not knowing what they should do, either took action to create value (for themselves, the organization, or both) or refrained from taking action, thereby further confounding the role conflict and role ambiguity.

Five of the participants in this study struggled with relevancy, role conflict, and ambiguity. These participants also described absent or overbearing supervision and management that appeared to contribute to ongoing ambiguity. The poor supervision created an environment of autonomy without appropriate organizational bounds. Coupled with the lack of direction, deliverables, and management guidance, it provided the workers with the opportunity, and arguably the necessity, to create a role for themselves. This situation may have created an unintentional misalignment between the expectations of the original role (including how it fit into the overall business unit and business unit objectives) and the job they designed for themselves. It may have also created an unintentional tension between them and their peers, who may have seen them as empire builders and “in it for themselves,” as well as with their supervisors who saw them as risks and hard to supervise. One could see that some of their supervisors, who may have realized their own error in not providing better direction, may have potentially developed a negative affect toward the creative virtual worker who may have appeared to have gone rogue. With the supervisor or manager having similar unchecked autonomy, and also removed from the visibility of the organization, it is not surprising that the issues between the creative virtual worker and the frustrated manager would be resolved in ways that are inconsistent with expected organizational policy and protocols.

Laissez-faire leadership.Four of the participants complained about receiving little to no direction from their direct supervisors. Perhaps the supervisors felt direction was not required, given the high degree of autonomy that virtual work requires in terms of work schedules, balancing the commitments to various tasks and projects. However, the worker also does not receive much guidance in coordinating work with others. This tension, coupled with thin collegial relationships (weak ties), makes it difficult for groups to coordinate naturally.

For the nine participants who worked under matrixed leadership styles, laissez-faire leadership caused additional problems. Four observed that at least one of the supervisors in the matrix organization was “hands off,” and this was particularly problematic when participants needed the supervisor to advocate or stand up for them. The virtual workers initially read the supervisor’s hands-off style as a reflection of confidence in them; they were shocked and disappointed when the supervisors did nothing, reinforcing the message that the participants were not important to or valued by the supervisor.

Reshaping the organization and changing autonomy. Increased hypercompetitive comments and behaviour by their colleagues-at-a-distance were observed and reported by nine of the 12 study participants. Many organizations went through downsizing in the economic crisis in 2009, which perhaps occurred in these organizations as well. At least four of the virtual workers leveraged their own autonomy and sourced their own clients to support them when the original clients showed little interest. Assisting these clients clearly benefitted the overall organization, but it is possible that the diversion of the business unit’s resources in this way was unaligned with the managerial priority and may have caused a negative effect in their business unit.

Aggression in business.Seven of the participants mentioned that collocated workers felt some unfairness that virtual workers were permitted to work from home but that the coworkers were not permitted a similar privilege.

When workers have so little invested with one another, as happens when people do not know each other well, people feel very little concern about giving someone else a hard time. In the worst situations, when people take offense, they feel vindicated in hurting back. Those workers who feel deserving of an eye for an eye are likely to weigh the effect-danger ratio, in which they try to find a way to maximize the hurt to another while minimizing impacts to self. In an office situation, there is only so much a worker can do before the worker violates policy, so workers will resort to passive-aggressive behaviour, such as failing to acknowledge a colleague, or microaggressions, such as reminding a colleague that they have little clout in the organization. The escalation of an issue, perceived as a personal wrong, might be such an example, and there were many examples in the narratives that hinted at people perceiving an injustice in not being able to work from home themselves.

## Summary of the Findings Related to Research Question 1

The data related to the first research question appear to support that workplace bullying exists in virtual workplaces. To meet the definition of bullying as set out in the introduction, narratives needed to meet three criteria:

1. Negative, potentially escalating actions between two or more actors in the workplace;
2. A real or perceived power imbalance between the individuals; and
3. The actions are intended to be controlling, abusive, offensive, or negatively impacting a worker’s output.

The number of the behaviours reported by the participants in their narratives, as a reflection of their lived experiences in their virtual workplaces, are consistent with this definition of bullying. The behaviours described by the participants are supported by behaviours identified in the NAQ-R, which has been found to be a valid and reliable instrument for measuring bullying in the workplace (Nielsen et al., 2011). For four of the participants, the frequency of the reported behaviours was consistent with a high rating on the NAQ-R, suggesting they likely were the targets of active bullying. Another four had scores in the transitioning zone, suggesting bullying may be either abating or worsening, and as per their own narratives, they may have been the target or observing active bullying in the environment.

The participants perceived the actions to be negative and to their detriment. In a number of cases, participants recalled examples where the bullying behaviours were displayed by a level of authority higher, but also other important people, such as managers, subject matter experts, or other influencers who appeared to have more organizational clout than they did. Some of these individuals had access to resources that the participants required or desired, including the power to reward or punish by giving or taking away resources. Even in respect of colleagues, the participants did not feel there was a level playing field, as colleagues in regional or global centers appeared to have more leverage with the management, or they engaged in negative actions that appeared invisible to management. When participants complained about their colleagues’ actions, the participants were met with cool attention.

In terms of escalation, for those in the highest NAQ-R categories, escalation included a range of actions, such as removing authority or decision-making, removing access to resources, using local supervisors to reinforce the bully’s message, creating biased performance reviews, alleging an intention to offend (culturally), and time-shifting key meetings to undesirable or unworkable time slots.

Participants in this study reported that bullying manifested itself in the following ways: managerial abuse; poor support by supervisors, leaving workers open to abuse by others; undermining by colleagues; being taken advantage of by colleagues; political pressure to conform; and others transferring organizational risk to workers. These themes strongly suggest that the actions were intended to be controlling, abusive, or negatively impacting the worker’s output.

Bullying appears to be resolved by termination, either by the organization or by the worker. When resolved by company-initiated termination, it appears to occur relatively quickly, on average in less than two years.

## Results for Research Question 2

The second line of inquiry was related to the stress that flows from bullying in the workplace: Do virtual workers who are exposed to workplace bullying experience high levels of stress and, if yes, what are the work, health, and social impacts of that stress? This question was designed to understand how individuals experience stress related to bullying, to explore the range of harm that results from it, and to ascertain what the long-term outcomes were for individuals, if any.

Physiological and psychological impacts of stress. Participants tended to describe the effects of the stress in their narratives without prompting. Participants would elaborate on the situation and say, for example, “I felt anxious after that,” “I had a lot of trouble sleeping,” or “I felt like throwing up.” To gauge the frequency, I would follow up with, “Did that happen often, or once in a while?” If the participant answered, “Often,” or something akin to that, I would ask more about it to understand if it was something they were worried about and seeking help for. Where the participant offered up a small range of symptoms, I would probe to see if there were additional symptoms the participant might have experienced that did not come immediately to mind. I might ask, for example, “Did you ever feel body aches and pains that you couldn’t explain?” or “Did you ever feel depressed or really sad?” If the participants articulated some positive response, I encouraged them to elaborate. In this way, I completed an inventory of the types of physiological and psychological impacts of stress for each participant.

Sick days. Seven respondents were asked if virtual workers take days off, or if they themselves had taken sick days, particularly with the mounting stress. All seven responded that they had not taken a day off for sickness but worked through it in their own social isolation. When asked if virtual workers knew they could take a sick day, they all said they could certainly do it, but did not see how it was relevant. They were already socially isolated from coworkers who might be at risk from contagion, and as long as they met the deliverables, they could amend their schedule to rest, if necessary.

The inventory of stress-related symptoms. All 12 participants were asked about stress they associated with their virtual role. Table 16 represents the range of stress symptom reported, organized by NAQ-R category. The participants reported a range of stress symptoms (see Table 16), and the breadth of the range appeared to reflect a relationship with the NAQ-R category.

In smallest range was reflected by two participants who did not answer questions on bullying (DNS), and two who reporting observing bullying around them. Two of the 4 participants with low/DNS scores described occasional occurrences of poor sleep, feeling disappointed, or being let down by some of their coworkers, and one reported feeling isolated or alone. One of the participants reported feeling some impact to self-confidence, some anxiety, and some desire for fewer social interactions, but I understood these symptoms as being linked to the criticality of the work the individual was engaged in rather than due exclusively to virtual works they were prepared to share.

Those in the transitioning category reported some additional physical stress-related symptoms, in particular, poor energy, gastrointestinal issues, and aches and pains. This group also reported symptoms of potential psychological distress, such as depression, doubts about competency and self-confidence

The group in the ’high’ category reported the widest range of symptoms, including both psychological and physical, and also the highest frequency across symptoms. Additionally, we see the use of medication to control a chronic problem, and reporting instances of high risk behaviour to relieve the psychological pressure.

Table 16  
*Participant-Reported Physical and Psychological Symptoms by Relative NAQ-R Category*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reported symptoms | NAQ-R category | | | |
| High | Transitioning | Low/ DNS | Total |
| Poor or no sleep | 4 | 4 | 2 | 10 |
| Change in moods | 4 | 3 | 3 | 9 |
| Feeling alone or isolated | 4 | 3 | 1 | 8 |
| Depression | 4 | 3 |  | 7 |
| Impact to self-confidence | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 |
| Poor concentration | 4 | 3 |  | 7 |
| Aches and pains, including tension headaches, muscle aches | 3 | 3 |  | 6 |
| Doubting own competence, including mental competence | 4 | 2 |  | 6 |
| No energy | 3 | 3 |  | 6 |
| Anxiety | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Social distancing | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Gastrointestinal issues | 2 | 2 |  | 4 |
| Change in attitude toward risk (higher risk activity) | 2 |  |  | 2 |
| Medications required for chronic health conditions | 1 |  |  | 1 |

*Note*. High *n* = 4; Transitioning *n* = 4; Low *n* = 2.

None of the participants revealed being unable to perform their duties, lacking control over their behaviour or having suicidal ideation. However, it is not difficult to imagine that even if the participants felt these effects, these potentially dysfunctional or destructive thoughts would have been too intimate to reveal in the interview. Therefore, these impacts cannot be ruled out completely.

One of the participants who scored high on the NAQ-R also had other stressors that are likely reflected in the higher stress scores. The participant stated that while experiencing bullying, the participant was also struggling to cope with personal stress resulting from significant health concerns involving loved ones. The participant observed that it was difficult to separate the stress symptoms related to virtual work and bullying from the stress and symptoms that were related to the personal issue.

Stress associated with virtual work. When asked about the stress pertaining to virtual work, the narratives produced four subthemes:

1. Home-based workers reported less stress than virtual workers in office settings due to the flexibility in addressing personal and family needs during the day.
2. Supervisors who were home-based reported less stress than supervisors who were virtual workers but collocated in office settings with their subordinates.
3. All workers reported stress related to their virtual roles. The most often cited stressors were connected with time-shifting; heightened organizational uncertainty (where did they fit in?); conflicting matrix obligations with supervisors or managers who were at a distance, not local; the intensification of work; uncertainty about the expectations of work; and image management.
4. Desensitization was seen as an accepted coping strategy.

Virtual work may be less stressful when done away from the office. Four virtual workers were located in traditional collocated settings (two were supervisors). Eight of the 12 participants who worked from a home office spoke of the stress-reducing advantage of working from home. The advantages most often mentioned by the participants were as follows:

* Fewer distractions from coworkers and general background noise;
* Saving money by not having to go out for lunches and coffee;
* Saving money and time in commuting (parking and bus);
* Not having to go to the office on inclement days;
* Having some additional flexibility and autonomy in their days (having lunch with a friend, receiving household repair people, going to see their children for events during school hours); and
* Not having to dress up in formal business attire every day.

Five of the eight home-based participants shared how much they valued the flexibility that working at home brings. Two observed how nice it was to work on the deck with a cold drink on sunny days and in front of a fireplace with a cup of coffee on snowy days. All five observed they could also work in the evening if the mood struck, or take a walk whenever they wanted to, even going so far as to take a conference call on their cellphone during the walk if necessary. All five felt this feature was good for their productivity as well as their mental health.

There were also some unanticipated surprises about working virtually. One participant relayed how virtual workers do not have IT departments in their locales and therefore must provide their own technical support while connected to other virtual helpdesk workers in another part of the world. Another participant observed that the dedicated home office needs cleaning and restocking, and as there is no custodial service or administrative support, home office workers need to attend to their space, sometimes having to make emergency runs to the store to get ink, paper, or a storage device. Three people talked about how virtual work encouraged unintentional dieting. They recalled having such intense focus on their task that they lost track of time. As there were no routine cues, such as people leaving for lunch, they had no indication of how much time had passed or where they were in their day. However, another participant remarked that strong self-discipline was required not to wander down the few meters to the kitchen for treats.

Two participants were located in a traditional collocated office setting. They were virtual workers, but not supervisors. They described their situations as working side-by-side with others in the same organization, but with whom they did not share tasks or organizational links (such as a supervisor). They were simply afforded the space. These workers thought it would have been beneficial to be in a home office, but they also enjoyed the social aspects of meeting other colleagues for coffee, lunch, important information sessions, or celebratory occasions.

Supervisors who were home-based reported less stress than supervisors who were virtual workers but collocated with their staff. There were four supervisors among the participants: Two were home-based, and two were virtual workers who were collocated with the staff for whom they were responsible. The latter two were in a very small regional office (in the database, they are listed as being in split locations). The home-based supervisors were responsible for workers who were a mixture of virtual workers, workers travelling so often as to be near virtual, or workers who were based at a location at a distance from their team leads.

The collated supervisors managed staff in a traditional collocated environment with traditional work hours, in a primarily face-to-face fashion. These workers maintained their collocated setting stresses and added the stresses that came with virtual work. Eventually both received permission to move to a home-based office, but not before experiencing symptoms related to chronic stress. Both reported struggling to influence at-a-distance peers and to gain cooperation with international stakeholders. One of these supervisors had a high NAQ-R score, as well as a broad range of stress symptoms. The other was in the transitioning category. Both were terminated from their roles.

Stressors associated with virtual work. All of the participants reported stress they felt was uniquely due to aspects of virtual work, which included (a) intensification of work, (b) uncertainty on progress and recalibration of expectations, (c) image management, and (d) desensitization as a protective strategy. Each of these symptoms is explored below.

Intensification of work. All of the workers mentioned working longer hours, but seven also mentioned working more intensely, which was a function of the fact that they had very few interruptions during the day. Although this environment was tremendous for progress, participants observed that it was also draining. Supervisors who worked in collocated settings with their staff did not report intensity due to focus, but rather the expectation of higher intensity that came with the number of complex and detailed tasks they were expected to do with respect to both their virtual and supervisory tasks. Virtual workers with collocated staff observed an inability to complete activities.

Uncertainty on the expectations of work. Five of the participants talked about having to manage their own worries about whether others were delivering on their parts of the tasks, and more than occasionally having to recalibrate their expectations, perhaps even having to do more work to close the gap. This seemed to be a particular issue for those on financial calendars, as the annual rhythm of unsynchronized national holidays, for example, seemed to consistently impact reliability of the deliverables.

Image management. Although none of the participants used the expression “image management,” all the home-based workers spoke of concerns that their counterparts, particularly colleagues who were working in collocated settings, were often skeptical that the virtual workers were, in fact, actually working at home. Virtual workers seemed to be the recipients of regular microaggressions focused on unfair assumptions about loafing, which turned into a concern that to prove they were working, they always had to be available when colleagues reached out. This always-on phenomenon was more prominent with younger virtual workers; the three most seasoned home-based workers, while still leaving the phones on during their waking hours, felt confident enough not to have to return every call right away.

Desensitization as a protective strategy.Participants who had significant experience in working virtually (especially those who had had experience with two or more virtual roles) suggested that as workers gained confidence and experience, they realized that the escalation of issues, ambiguous ways of working, and coolness of colleagues were outcomes they had to take in stride. Seven of the workers stated that they simply did not react to things the way they used to. They appeared to have developed a sort of ambivalence to see if an issue would become more serious. Most likely the workers were becoming desensitized.

The frequency of reported stress symptoms indicates the potential to harm. The frequency of the symptoms is the other dimension of stress, and as the frequency of stress increases, it gives an indication of the potential to harm. The more often the stress is experienced, the more likely there will be significant harm.

To get a relative measure of the stress individuals were facing, the interview was designed to probe specifically for frequency. It captured the responses in three categories: occasionally, more often than occasionally, or worried. The interpretation of the terms *occasionally* or *more often than occasionally* was left to the participant, but typically participants selected the first category if it happened only a few times, perhaps sporadically, and tended to choose the second category if the symptom was occurring more frequently but not regularly. Participants who reported a concern, or who had reached out to a health professional to manage the symptom, would be considered worried. For example, one of the participants spoke about finding herself very tired more often than previously. She spoke about how it took time to get her thoughts to settle down before falling asleep, and therefore she slept less. When I asked if it was something that she might discuss with a health professional, she felt it was still a manageable symptom. In this instance, it was captured under the ‘more often’ category. I captured the participant’s response as *worried* if the respondent said things such as, “It’s never going to go away,” “I hardly sleep well anymore,” or “I’m thinking of going to see someone about it.”

The four participants who scored highest on the NAQ-R reported the widest range of physical and psychological symptoms of stress, as well as the highest frequency of those symptoms, which suggested that these workers were experiencing high stress. The participants who scored highest on the NAQ-R observed that the stress was chronic and unrelenting, because the worry and the fear did not dissipate but grew as events unfolded. Participants reported feeling uneasiness and a sense of foreboding, and then, as events escalated, the stress began to morph as well. The participants found that the feeling started to permeate their day. They did not enjoy the workplace as much, did not want to be with others, and found it harder to concentrate on their work. They found themselves tearful and anxious, or depressed and spent.

Participants described many of the symptoms as either increasingly recurring or persistingfor several months or so. Two of the participants were particularly affected. One of them required medication to deal with a chronic health issue, which came about as the stress on the job increased. The health condition was ongoing at the time of the interview, and the participant suggested it could become a lifelong condition. Another was resisting the draw to substance abuse that the individual had successfully refrained from for many years prior.

Stress related to workplace bullying. Tables 17, 18, and 19 display the frequency of reported stress symptoms by NAQ-R category (high, transitioning, and low, respectively). Three findings emerged from the narratives related to workplace bullying:

1. Workers with the highest NAQ-R scores reported the highest range and/or highest frequency of stress-related symptoms. The reverse was true for those with low NAQ-R scores.
2. Three of the four participants reporting the highest stress (and highest NAQ-R scores) were actively managing physiological and psychological issues with healthcare providers as they recognized the impacts to themselves, their relationships, and their professional image.
3. Harm, particularly psychological harm, lingered even after termination or retirement. Participants struggled with their emotions in recounting their narratives.

Table 17 categorizes the frequency of stress symptoms reported by participants who scored high on the NAQ-R. Not surprisingly, those with higher NAQ-R scores had a higher frequency of symptoms, and more were in the worried category. Table 18 presents the symptoms by frequency for participants who scored in the transitioning NAQ-R category. None of the participants in this group appeared to be worried about the symptoms, but a few were reporting some health issues that could become chronic. Table 19 focuses on participants who scored in the lowest NAQ-R category and who had the fewest symptoms.

One participant, who scored in the lowest category of the NAQ-R, was heading up a major project at the time of the interview. Given that the participant was experiencing some very significant stress related to the start-up of the project, a part of the stress this participant reported is likely linked to that situation. This project stress was unique to this participant; no other participants reported such a major change in their work related to this survey. There is no way to break out the project-related stress from the total stress reported by that individual. As such, some of the scores in Table 19 may be a little higher as a result of this participant. However, as the participant on the project does not represent all the scores in Table 19, the observations in the table represent all the participants with low NAQ-R scores who reported stress symptoms.

Table 17  
*Frequency of Symptoms Reported by Participants with High NAQ-R Scores*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reported symptoms | Frequency of symptoms | | |
| Occasionally | More often | Worried |
| Depression |  | 2 | 2 |
| Anxiety |  | 3 | 1 |
| Social distancing |  | 1 |  |
| Physical aches and pains, including tension headaches, muscle aches |  | 2 | 1 |
| Gastrointestinal issues weight gain/loss |  | 2 | 1 |
| Medications required for chronic health |  |  | 1 |
| Impact to self confidence |  |  | 4 |
| Doubting own competence, including mental competence | 1 | 3 |  |
| No energy |  | 1 | 2 |
| Change in attitude of risk | 2 |  |  |
| Concentration |  | 4 |  |
| Poor/no sleep |  | 1 | 3 |
| Feeling alone/isolated |  | 4 |  |
| Paranoia |  | 1 |  |
| Change in moods |  | 4 | 1 |
| Total | 3 | 28 | 16 |

Table 18  
*Frequency of Symptoms Reported by Participants With Transitioning NAQ-R Scores*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reported symptoms | Frequency of symptoms | | |
| Occasionally | More often | Worried |
| Depression | 1 | 2 |  |
| Anxiety |  | 1 |  |
| Social distancing | 1 | 1 |  |
| Physical aches and pains, including tension headaches, muscle aches | 3 |  |  |
| Gastrointestinal issues weight gain/loss | 2 |  |  |
| Medications required for chronic health |  |  |  |
| Impact to self confidence | 1 | 1 |  |
| Doubting own competence, including mental competence | 2 |  |  |
| No energy | 1 | 2 |  |
| Change in attitude of risk |  |  |  |
| Concentration | 3 |  |  |
| Poor/no sleep | 2 | 2 |  |
| Feeling alone/isolated | 3 |  |  |
| Paranoia |  |  |  |
| Change in moods | 1 | 2 |  |
| Total | 20 | 11 | 0 |

Table 19  
*Frequency of Symptoms Reported by Participants With Low NAQ-R Scores*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reported symptoms | Frequency of symptoms | | |
| Occasionally | More often | Worried |
| Depression |  |  |  |
| Anxiety | 1 |  |  |
| Social distancing |  | 1 |  |
| Physical aches and pains, including tension headaches, muscle aches | 1 |  |  |
| Gastrointestinal issues. weight gain/loss |  | 1 |  |
| Medications required for chronic health |  |  |  |
| Impact to self confidence | 1 |  |  |
| Doubting own competence, including mental competence |  |  |  |
| No energy |  |  |  |
| Change in attitude of risk |  |  |  |
| Concentration |  |  |  |
| Poor/no sleep |  | 2 |  |
| Feeling alone/isolated |  | 1 |  |
| Paranoia |  |  |  |
| Change in moods | 2 |  |  |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 0 |

Nothing is probably more stressful to a worker than the prospect of being unemployed. Table 20 shows the participants’ working locations relative to how they scored in terms of the NAQ-R categories. Those who had the highest scores were not all home-based, and not all home-based participants scored high.

Table 20  
*Participants’ NAQ-R Category Compared to Working Location*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| NAQ-R category | Working location | | | Total |
| Home | Split | Collocated |
| High | 3 | 1 |  | 4 |
| Transitioning | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Low | 2 |  |  | 2 |
| DNS | 1 |  | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 2 | 2 | 12 |

*Note*. Split = collocated with staff in an office setting but working virtually with own colleagues/supervisors; DNS = did not score.

Table 21 displays the current career status of participants compared to their working location. Notice that none of the participants in the split category remained more than two years on the job. In contrast, those who were working virtually but collocated with other business units were still with their organizations. Only three of the home-based workers remained with their organization. Two of the home-based workers retired early and three were terminated from their roles, with their organizations citing organizational structuring as the reason. Five of the home-based workers scored in the high or transitioning NAQ-R categories.

Table 21  
*Current Career Status Compared to Participant’s Working Location*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Current career status | Working location | | | Total |
| Home | Split | Collocated |
| Still with the organization | 3 |  | 2 | 5 |
| Retired early | 2 |  |  | 2 |
| Terminated, organizational changes | 3 | 2 |  | 5 |
| Total | 8 | 2 | 2 | 12 |

*Note*. Split = located at a home office or a collocated with staff in an office setting but working virtually with own colleagues/supervisors.

The decisions regarding the company-initiated terminations occurred in less than two years. For three of the five participants in this category, the terminations occurred after a single, documented poor performance review. All three participants spoke at length about the acute stress the performance review caused, but also the ongoing worry about what that action might be leading to. All participants who were terminated by the company reported that there was no attempt to transfer them or detail a performance improvement plan, which confirmed to them that their organizations were preparing for separation. Although the number of people in the split environment is small, it is sobering that they scored highest on the NAQ-R and neither of them remains in a virtual role.

Outcomes: On leaving and the intention to leave. To get a sense of the outcomes of bullying in this context, respondents were asked if they were still working in their virtual role, and if not, whether they chose to leave voluntarily. If the participant did not leave voluntarily, the participant was asked about the circumstances of termination; for example, was the termination for cause without a severance payment, or was it without cause with a severance payment. Lastly, if the participant was terminated without cause, I asked about what justification the organization gave.

All five participants in this study who were still with their organizations were asked about their intention to leave. The purpose of the question was to see if those who were experiencing or observing lower levels of bullying were also preparing their own exit strategy, not due to bullying but to disenchantment with the organization or with virtual work. Below are some of the participants’ comments:

Leaving? No, not really. I want to improve things. (Foxtrot, male, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

I wouldn’t leave this; I wanted it. I wanted to see if I could do this wonderful project. I wanted to be outside my comfort zone and learn how to manage something [like this]. (Bravo, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

I like the flexibility in the job, and that would be difficult to replace. (Charlie, female, 55–65 years old, Project Management)

Why retire early?

Participants who retired were asked about their decision to retire early. One of the early retirees had a high NAQ-R score, and the other was in the transitioning group. The following comments are from those who retired early.

I didn’t want to retire early—it’s a huge impact to the pension, but I just couldn’t stay any more. . . . If you are experiencing [negative behaviours], there’s not much you can do, really. You can keep track of things, so there is a record, but mostly, just make sure you have a good war chest, just so you have a viable exit strategy. If you work in this environment, you know it’s coming . . . just not when. (Harry, male, 45–54 years old, Marketing)

I retired early. At a discount. I think that says everything. (Echo, female, 45–54 years old, Health and Safety)

Company-initiated terminations. The five individuals who were terminated by their respective organizations, citing organizational restructuring, were given comparatively generous severances. Respondents offered that the payments did not equate to the loss in earnings towards pension, nor did it offer much of a cushion as it would be difficult to find a job with similar pay and benefits (four had earned five weeks or more vacation, for example), particularly in areas where the economy had slowed. When the participants were given an opportunity to share their thoughts on their situation, they offered the following comments:

I wanted to stay. I had enough stress in my personal circumstances. I just wanted to keep working—to work towards my retirement savings so I could have a good life in a few years. But . . . I was let go, . . . and I don’t have enough retirement savings to retire yet. It was hard to replace the money. . . . Plus, I’m really not that confident, . . . and I always worried about whether I could find another role. Now . . . I’m out. And . . . what do I do now? (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

As a virtual worker, who is your advocate? I wanted to change the situation, not be released. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

I came to this job because I was previously unemployed. I didn’t want to be unemployed again. Now I have to start over. (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

I wanted to make it at least to the first retirement window. But I didn’t. And . . . my job was so specialized, that there aren’t any locally. So, I had to find something else, quickly. Something that would potentially return the same money . . . with more [certainty], . . . more control in my hands. I have [a dependent] and I’m trying to plan seriously for retirement. I had to get [certified in another type of work] entirely, and now I’m trying to establish myself there. It’s really, really hard. But I depend on myself, now, and that’s better. I control what happens. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

I was really used to the lifestyle, you know? Making great money, and I was left alone—had a lot of autonomy . . . and the projects were amazing. I solved a lot of issues, made a lot of things happen. My family benefitted tremendously. I just wanted to be able to do what I was good at in [a system] that wasn’t . . . so bad like it was. I was terminated, but, of course, with a big cheque. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

The effects of bullying linger after the situation is resolved. For those who retired or were terminated, although the bullying itself came to an end, the effects appear to have lingered, and the participants themselves reported concerns that these issues would become enduring stressors.

It destroyed my self-confidence. Even now, a couple of years later, I’m worried when I look at a job. Can I do it? I will turn away from roles thinking I’m not good enough. I have this sinking feeling, this fear, that maybe . . . my boss was right. Will they know that I can’t do it? . . . I’ve been gone from the environment for two years now, and I still don’t feel like doing anything. Maybe I’m grieving. . . . I don’t want to start anything new—I have this fear of failure, like I can’t abide any confirmation that I’m stupid. You know, in a safe environment, children will try, but without safety they will sit in the corner. That’s me. (Juliet, female, 55–65 years old, Financial Services)

My in-country supervisor worked hard to make sure I left with a good severance—he knew how difficult they had made it for me. He felt it was all he could do to lessen some of the sting. I understand he only lasted six months after me. . . . I have to work my network again, . . . and it may be damaged. (Indie, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

Yes, it’s very stressful. You can see me on Skype. I’ve lost 30 kilograms. I’d planned to lose some weight, of course, but it’s just so stressful. I think about it all the time. Working lots of extra hours to get it stable, to make it successful. I don’t get a good rest these days; . . . it’s always running in my head. I don’t spend as much time with my family because I need to devote a little more time [to the initiative]. That causes problems at home because I can’t be as flexible. Right now, I have a lot more responsibility but the same pay. This position has more at risk—stock options and bonus—that I won’t see for several years but could be very important for our future. That puts a lot of strain on my relationship with my family right now. It worries me. (Bravo, male, 45–54 years old, Project Management)

I can’t have it be unsuccessful. Not again. I have to move forward now, but it [scares] me. (Kila, female, 45–54 years old, Marketing/HR)

I was replaced, by another virtual office, in a cheaper economy. How does that make me feel? How would it make you feel? (Delta, male, 55–65 years old, Procurement)

## Summary of the Findings Related to Research Question 2

Although all participants reported some symptoms of chronic stress, which might be associated with working virtually, those participants who had the highest levels of reported bullying also reported the highest number and greatest frequency of physiological and psychological symptoms related to chronic stress. Those with the highest NAQ-R scores tended to state that they were worried about the effects on their work and personal lives, and they were actively seeking treatment for at least some of the symptoms. Those who had lower NAQ-R scores had the least reported symptoms and frequency of symptoms. However, even those with low scores reported stress related to working virtually

Although many of the participants in this study are no longer with their organizations, whether through early retirement or restructuring terminations, it appears that the harm has continued to linger in the form of impaired self-esteem and -confidence, relived psychological trauma, and the lasting effects of chronic stress on the body.

## Chapter Summary

The findings from this study appear to provide sufficient qualitative evidence to affirm that bullying is experienced in the virtual workplace, as attested by virtual workers, and that virtual workers can be harmed by it just as collocated workers are.

In terms of understanding how bullying is manifested, the data appear to confirm four outcomes. First, bullying tends to come from multiple sources, such as direct supervisors, managers, and colleagues (both collocated and virtual). Second, imbalances in power tend to come from individuals with real authority as well as those with perceived power, such as colleagues with influence, colleagues key to processes, or influential subject matter experts. Third, the manifestations most often cited by participants were negative actions linked to managerial abuse, poor support by supervisors leaving workers open to abuse by others, undermining by colleagues, being taken advantage of by colleagues, political pressure to conform, and others transferring organizational risk to workers. These manifestations meet the third criterion of the definition of bullying, which is that the intentions are controlling, abusive, or have a negative impact on a worker’s output. Finally, fourth, there appears to be almost no observers in this type of workplace by objective others (unless part of a virtual meeting or copied on electronic communication). It is unlikely that others, whether colleagues, other supervisors, or other managers, have insight into what is occurring or the magnitude of what is occurring.

The harm identified through the participants’ narratives suggests that bullying in this context can also lead to the chronic stress that has been reported in significant and severe workplace bullying studies involving collocated workers. Those workers who had the highest NAQ-R scores also reported the largest number and frequency of stress symptoms, including sleeplessness, anxiety, bouts of depression, nervousness, headaches, and gastrointestinal issues.

One observation that follows from the lack of apparent observers to the bullying is that, unlike in collocated settings where a worker’s deterioration might be noticed by other colleagues or supervisors, a bullied worker’s plight would be invisible to others, unless the worker tells others about what is occurring. The inherent isolation leaves workers to suffer alone and manage their own resiliency.

There appears to be a convergence around aspects of virtual work that may increase the likelihood of experiencing (and exhibiting) bullying behaviours in this context. These factors may create some additional antecedents that are not typically found in collocated workplaces. For example, poor preparation for the integration of collocated and virtual colleagues, the fear of outsourcing by collocated colleagues, and the tensions between local and headquarter interests may create elevated risks of incivility and bullying.

The propensity reported by all the participants to escalate the relativity of issues disproportional to the conflict creates an accepted level of intimidation. Repeated escalations that turn out to be nothing important cause workers to become desensitized to escalations. This puts workers at risk of being characterized as indifferent to important issues, and perhaps being viewed as a poor team player.

Impression management appears to be perhaps more important for virtual workers than for collocated workers, as virtual workers consider their reputation as proof of their value to management, their colleagues, and the organization. Virtual workers in this study cited genuine concerns with being invisible to important others and processes to further their career. Virtual workers appear to donate extra time to work and particularly to being almost always accessible to colleagues and supervisors.

Lastly, workers with global organizational connections to facilitate interdependent work appear to have additional stress and opportunities for unintended offense pertaining to cultural interpolation (including the layering of corporate cultures on national cultures) and misalignment and miscommunication resulting from time-shifting.

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# Chapter 5. Discussion

The findings reported in the previous chapter appear to substantiate that workplace bullying is experienced and observed by virtual workers and is manifested in many ways. The participants in this study who reported experiencing or observing many bullying behaviours in the workplace (both in the number of distinct behaviours as well as the frequency of those behaviours) also tended to have the highest NAQ-R scores. The workers who reported the highest scores on the NAQ-R also appeared to suffer a wider range and frequency of symptoms typically associated with chronic, long-term stress. These two relationships have been shown to be consistent with the chronic workplace bullying stress reported by victims of collocated workplace bullying in other studies (Hogh et al., 2011; Tehrani, 2004).

This chapter further develops the initial themes identified in the previous chapter. In particular, this chapter bifurcates the findings that are consistent with collocated bullying research and findings which appear to be new.

## Findings That Are Consistent with the Research on Collocated Workplace Bullying

The following six themes, emerging from the participant data, are consistent with research on collocated teams identified in the literature review in Chapter 2:

1. Some bullied workers may not know that they are being bullied, or they may not want others to know that they are being bullied. As such, when asked, they will answer no.
2. Bullying tends to be resolved by transfer, termination, or resignation.
3. There are organizational antecedents that increase the risk of bullying in the workplace. They include organizational changes, role conflict and ambiguity, laissez-faire leadership, reshaping of the organization and changes to autonomy, colliding cultures, and aggression in business factors.
4. Older participants may have an elevated risk of bullying.
5. Performance reviews can be abused to create a contrived organizational view of workers.
6. Those who experience and/or observe bullying in workplace settings tend to suffer chronic stress.

These findings underscore the fact that some aspects of workplace bullying are common to different arrangements of work.

## Findings That Are Divergent from Existing Workplace Bullying Research

Three broad themes represented differences for virtual workers than have been found in existing research in the collocated context. First, the bullying roles and structure of the roles may be different. Second, low-level background incivility found in virtual work may mask or give tacit acceptance of some bullying behaviours. Third, workers may be at an elevated risk for harm due to the inherent isolation and limited organizational view. A study with a much larger sample of virtual workers would be required to draw any conclusions.

Theme 1: The bullying roles and structure of the roles may be different. There were three observations that appeared to be atypical relative to research on collocated teams.

1. Virtual workers are more likely to experience multiple sources of incivility and bullying;
2. The multiple perpetrators did not appear to have the same agenda; and
3. There are few, if any, witnesses to the bullying because of the poor line of sight by other members of the team to what is occurring.

Multiple sources of incivility and bullying. Of the eight participants who had high and transitioning scores on the NAQ-R, all eight reported the source of the incivility and bullying behaviours was not a single person, but more than one. Namie’s (2017) survey, which was discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), highlighted that although bullying by multiple individuals did occur, it was not the majority. For example,

* Five out of eight (63%) participants reported bullying by multiple same-rank perpetrators compared to 9% in Namie’s (2017) survey;
* Seven out of eight (88%) participants reported bullying by a single or multiple higher rank perpetrator(s) compared to 57% in Namie’s (2017) survey; and
* Two out of eight (25%) participants reported bullying by multiple higher and lower ranked perpetrators, compared to 7% in Namie’s (2017) survey.

Multiple perpetrators with different agendas. The eight participants reported that the multiple perpetrators did not necessarily act in concert with each other, as might be found in mobbing, but rather appeared to have separate and unique agendas. Some perpetrators desired more control or compliance, some considered the virtual worker a threat to their own jobs, whereas others sought to minimize any potential influence on the direction of work. It is not clear if the bullies were aware that they were targeting the same individual.

There are few, if any, witnesses to the bullying. The participants mentioned that from time to time they experienced or observed bullying behaviour in the context of a larger meeting, such as a teleconference or webconference. However, typically the behaviour in these events would be characterized as rudeness to other objective observers. For example, failing to acknowledge or actively include those on the phone, making someone wait an unreasonable amount of time for the meeting to start, cancelling a meeting at the last minute, or telling someone in a webconference that their opinion is not important may be microaggressions that occur with some regularity, and so observers may not pay much attention to it. The more aggressive and targeted behaviour reported by participants (i.e., having budgets removed, clients reassigned, authorities declined) tended to happen one on one (a telephone call, for example) and not in the purview of anyone else, or the evidence captured in an email. Participants reported that they were not sure who knew about the behaviours or decisions. There was a collective recognition that including a wider audience through simple blind carbon copy on an email was easy to do and the target would be none the wiser.

This finding has two implications. The first is that, unlike in collocated settings, actual bystanders (witnesses) may not be integral to the dynamics. Further, research in collocated settings has shown that the social power of bystanders can sway whether the bully is successful or not. The absence of this social power may make bystanders irrelevant in the context of virtual work. Perhaps, in a setting where technology plays such an integral role in communication, the mere possibility that others could easily be advised by way of forwarding the communication, or blind copying is sufficient to cause a bystander effect. For the target, whether there are actual bystanders or simply a looming possibility there may be others who know, the result is the same. If the target believes there are others who could help, the target might enlist them; but as the target does not know if they will help or not, the target may not be willing to perhaps further reputational damage by making the bullying behaviour widely known. If others know, and they are silent, the others are giving assent by doing nothing, potentially endorsing the bully’s behaviour.

The second implication is that bystanders in collocated settings have more information about the circumstances on which to base a judgement or conclude a position either with or against the target. In a collocated setting, colleagues observe a number of interactions between the target and the bully, including the timing, the body language, and the reactions. Virtual workers have far fewer interactions with each other, let alone interactions with all the actors and therefore have far less reliable information on which to build a perspective.

Theme 2: Low-level background incivility may mask or give tacit acceptance of some bullying behaviours. Three observations occurred frequently in participants’ narratives and demonstrated that incivility (including bullying behaviours that were not directed towards a target so much as generalized), at some level, is simply accepted as the norm in the virtual work environment:

1. Robust trust is difficult to develop. When coupled with desensitization, trust may be undermined further, allowing bullying behaviours to be tacitly accepted.
2. Limited options for problem-solving may facilitate intimidating behaviour.
3. Colleagues who do not support virtual workers may be displaying a variant of disinhibition effect.

These characteristics provide fertile ground for intentional bullying. Additional research would be required to determine if these are antecedents unique to virtual work.

Robust trust is difficult to develop. As described in the literature review (Chapter 2), robust trust appears to be particularly difficult to develop among and between virtual workers. When coupled with desensitization towards incivility and drama, it may encourage poor organizational behaviour, such as disengagement, disproportional perceived offense, passive-aggressive behaviour, apathy, ostracization, and attributions as accepted behaviours in the workplace (Seu, 2003).

Although participants did share examples of some strong relationships, in general, their narratives described an environment in which it was difficult to know whom one could trust entirely. Part of this circumstance was linked to the challenges of using mediated technology and the issues with cadence in time-shifting; however, it also came down to the fact that, for the most part, colleagues knew each other only as an entity, meaning they knew each other only through the performance of their duties. Suzuki et al. (2010) reported that workers’ mistrust of coworkers and the lack of reciprocity were associated with a higher likelihood of chronic stress and poor health among Japanese virtual workers.

Some of the participants, understanding the value of social relationships, provided examples of how they tried to reach out and get to know people so that they would have some social capital to draw on. Research on social media (see Chapter 2) shows that individuals learn that those who are experienced in relationships over technology tend to be cautious, wary even. Participants shared that not knowing the people they were interacting with at a distance was a bit risky. In an organizational setting where there can be consequences to revealing too much to the wrong person, experienced virtual workers shared they were doubly careful.

The desensitization that some participants spoke of creates additional, if unintended, incivility. Desensitization occurs when an individual’s reaction to a stimulus is reduced as a result of repeated exposure (Seu, 2003). Research has shown that desensitization can be a defense mechanism to cope with chronic negative circumstances (Seu, 2003). Studies also show that individuals who are exposed to violence and aggression become desensitized to the suffering of others and are less moved to assist those who need help (Bushman & Anderson, 2009). An analogy would be training oneself to disregard the moaning and crying of patients in an emergency triage centre. The patients are not in any less agony or distress, and one may miss important cues that identify a patient as more acute than the rest. Desensitization may be an accepted coping mechanism in virtual work, but it also unintentionally sets a bar that accepts a certain lack of psychological safety for workers. Although this bar is not the same for every work environment (certainly there are virtual workers who blossom in their environments), the organizations these participants worked for, by merit of their Best Places to Work awards, are perhaps some of the organizations that do virtual work best.

Limited options for problem-solving may facilitate intimidating behaviour.Participants reported that virtual work tends to limit options for informal problem-solving and therefore tends toward problem escalation, transforming task and process conflicts into more difficult relational, and potentially emotionally charged, conflicts. In environments with weak ties between individuals, coupled with poor line of sight to intentions, it may be more difficult to solve problems between the original parties to the issue. Studies on virtual teams have shown that task and interpersonal conflict have a strong and positive relationship with poor performance, particularly when tasks are complex (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). More recent research on virtual workers shows that task conflict tends to quickly become relational conflict, and that conflict is escalated more often and more quickly than in collocated workplaces (Brenner, 2013; Filippova & Cho, 2016; Kankanhalli et al., 2006; Petersen, 2014).

Typically, in a collocated setting, the parties might reach out to colleagues to get their perspectives, to see if there is another solution that might be viable. The colleagues might even be able to calm the individuals down by providing a perspective they had not considered. The parties may also take it to their respective supervisors to strategize a plan or to ask for the supervisor’s help in advocating for the worker with the supervisor’s peer. Typically, the supervisor knows the peer and can reasonably gauge whether the issue is sufficiently important to use precious social capital to address. On this basis, the supervisor might suggest a different strategy, such as reaching out to other colleagues to build a coalition.

The examples presented by the participants suggested that in the virtual context, there are two problems with this approach. First, the colleagues have very little line of sight to each other or the circumstances, and therefore may not be able to provide any relevant perspective because all they know is whatever the complainant is telling them (they have no other view on the situation). Second, people do not know each other as well, and social capital takes time and effort to build. As such, when the supervisor or colleague is asked to assist, they escalate a situation because there are few options to draw on. If the supervisor knows about poor behaviour and escalates, at least there is a record that the supervisor addressed it immediately. If the supervisor does nothing, and it later turns out to be of significance, the supervisor risks personal consequences for not doing anything.

Workers in this study spoke of avoiding conflict if possible (such as trying to avoid interacting with the individual), but the strategy was effective only for a short period of time. Half of the participants relayed stories of how they discovered parallel processes to get around people who were unhelpful or intransigent. Although those workarounds did provide a pathway for work, they did not solve the issue. Had the other individual come to that knowledge, it might have created a worse situation.

Some participants reported they had another colleague from whom to seek guidance, but it was not generally effective. This strategy requires other trusted relationships who understand enough about the conflict and the individuals involved to give useful advice. Given that a number of the situations that participants described were associated with their onboarding, the workers had not yet developed other trusted relationships to work through. For those who experienced bullying later in their tenure as virtual workers, the relationships with others were often thin. Asking another colleague about how to manage a relationship with someone else that the worker does not know well is tricky, as it is unlikely that colleagues will have a lot of useful insight to share. This is particularly true if the bully does not bully others in the group, as others will not see the bully’s behaviours in the same way as the target is experiencing.

Colleagues who do not support virtual workers may be displaying a variant of disinhibition effect.The disinhibition effect is a phenomenon described in the literature review (Chapter 2) as a lack of empathy and civil restraint in communicating with someone across mediated technology. Participants shared many examples of communication (or lack thereof) that demonstrated passive-aggression or disrespect. In a collocated setting, these behaviours (such as failing to return calls, attend a meeting, respond to emails, or forward important information) would be seen as rude and unprofessional, and would likely be the subject of workplace discipline. In a virtual context, such behaviour is difficult to observe casually. Unless there is a complaint, no one is wise to the behaviour. Further, human interaction with technology is not infallible, and therefore, at least for a time, one can legitimately excuse or accept some of the behaviour, making the complainant look foolish.

Nielsen et al. (2008) revealed the importance of a sense of affinity and support by colleagues in the workplace as a protective mechanism for workers. The absence of that mechanism has poor outcomes. Nine of the participants spoke of feeling some apprehension from other team members, and this was characterized by the participants as a sense of being unwelcome when they joined their new team. The most oft-cited reasons reported by the participants seemed to fall into three camps: (a) the worker was perceived as a potential threat of off-shoring to collocated workers; (b) the worker was considered privileged to get what other workers wanted and were unable to get; and (c) the worker felt rejected by the ethnocentrism of the larger centres, which created barriers to building trust and being relevant.

The threat of being moved off-shore was a real concern of workers living in high-cost environments. The improvements in computer processing, networking, and telecommunications, coupled with skilled labour with flexible language capacity in most parts of the world, allow organizations to have a greater capability to move work, without impacting quality, efficiency, or effectiveness, to more cost-effective environments (Cronin, Catchpowle, & Hall, 2004). The cost improvements are advantageous for the shareholders, yet the loss of worker positions is clearly a disadvantage for the affected workers (and perhaps the local economy). When a role becomes virtual, the exact location of the worker is irrelevant. Therefore, as much as many collocated workers would like to work from home, as soon as the capability is proven, the role could be done from anywhere in the world. As such, collocated workers can see virtual workers as a credible threat and therefore may be skeptical of the intentions behind an organizational redesign of this nature.

Although management may be adding virtual workers to provide critical skill sets without the cost of relocation, or reducing the costs of more expensive office space, the workers may be concerned that it is simply an experiment to off-shore. This may be particularly true with cross-border or cross-national teams. Five of the participants reported that from the beginning, their at-a-distance team members appeared to be sizing up what the participants would bring as value to individual workers. It did not appear to be immediately apparent to them. When it was clear that they were not bringing additional budget or other resources (perhaps additional workers), there seemed to be little interest in working with the virtual workers. This was more so between counterparts who were on the same continent but working in neighbouring countries. It was interesting to note that in the situations where workers were restructured, participants stated they were replaced by collocated workers who became virtual workers that were part of the cohort in the larger country.

Another way to undermine off-shoring is to ensure that virtual workers cannot prove relevancy and effectiveness (Carmel & Tija, 2005). The five participants who became new virtual workers observed that they struggled to fit into their work group and felt unwelcome and unvalued. Knowing how critical it was to be seen as relevant, they looked for ways to create value in their organizations. They effectively changed key parts of their job to become relevant. They began working more closely with parts of their interdependent chain, who responded well to their contributions, and less so with those who were apathetic or hostile to them.

Although these strategies potentially created value for their organizations, arguably it was not what the role was created to do or how it was expected to function. This strategy may have been interpreted by others as self-serving, perhaps even as cherry picking the favourable deliverables for themselves without others being aware, behaving in ways that would not ordinarily be tolerated in a collocated setting. Even if the benefit was not exclusively to the worker but to the organization as a whole, the behaviour might be viewed as serving the organization rather than the team, reinforcing that the worker may not have a strong allegiance to the team.

Additionally, some of the reactions from other workers that the participants described tended to sound like envy. Phrases such as “Others had asked to work from home but weren’t permitted to, and they didn’t like that I could work from home” and “If I didn’t answer the phone right away they thought I wasn’t working” showed that virtual workers knew their counterparts felt they were treated more advantageously than those in the collocated office setting. Virtual workers are seen as having more autonomy, an opportunity for better work–life balance, no commute frustration or cost, favourable personal surroundings, and perhaps an economic advantage of drawing a higher salary while living in a lower-cost environment. People who do not work virtually do not see the other side of the work arrangement (higher uncertainty, communication difficulties, isolation, longer hours, and higher intensity, for example). As such, people who are denied a similar work arrangement may feel slighted and are looking for the justification in allowing another worker to work from home. With such negative effects, it is unlikely the colleague will feel loyalty, connection, or compassion with the virtual worker.

Theme 3: Workers may be at an elevated risk of harm due to isolation and limited organizational view. Mann and Holdsworth (2003) and Suzuki, et al. (2010) reported that virtual workers face new stressors, including increased mental health risks, as compared to collocated workers. Four observations came up often in the participant narratives pertaining to potential elevated risk, particularly from those with high and transitioning NAQ-R scores:

1. Impression management is important to virtual workers, which may make them more vulnerable to threats to identity.
2. Isolated virtual workers may become unintentionally misaligned with the norms and expectations of the formal corporate culture.
3. Workers who are struggling with the physical and psychological effects of bullying tend to suffer alone, due to the inherent isolation.
4. Home-based virtual workers who feel traumatized by their workplace live in their workplace.

Impression management is important to virtual workers. Impression management is intricately linked to identity. While, impression management is likely important to all workers, it is especially important to virtual workers because there is a real concern of being out of sight, out of mind. All participants spoke about this challenge and described different initiatives to ensure that their good work was being recognized by important others so that they would not be forgotten in future opportunities for advancement. One of the themes that kept recurring with participants who were bullied was how their sense of identity was tested. Although negative impacts to identity occurs with collocated targets as well, given the heightened importance of maintaining a favourable impression to virtual workers, is especially acute. Phrases that resonated with identity and value, such as “who they were,” “what their value was,” and “the impacts to self-confidence,” kept coming up. Their words echoed the concept of self-efficacy, defined as the sense of confidence that individuals feel in exerting control over their own motivation, behaviour, and social environment (Bandura, 1999, 2002).

However, participants also highlighted an almost compulsive need to present online. This observation is consistent with work by Barsness et al. (2005), who reported that virtual workers make sure to stay online, not only for their own impression management, but for organizational survival. In fact, over half of the participants in the current study shared that they were aware that other colleagues would conclude they were loafing if the colleagues could not immediately reach them on the phone or through text and email. This finding is consistent with research by F. Chen et al. (2014) and Kidwell (2010) that coworkers do question what virtual workers contribute and whether the contribution is proportional to the effort they themselves are required to give. In effect, the coworkers are questioning whether the virtual coworker gives value. The fact that the workers with high NAQ-R scores were attending late evening and very early morning teleconferences and webconferences underscores both their deep understanding of the importance of impression management as well as their risk of not being connected and informed. As such, the workers who scored in the high and transitioning categories on the NAQ-R, though they became increasingly impacted by the bullying, continued to show up at work to keep up appearances. As such, virtual workers may be at a higher risk for bullying as their organizational reputation matters so very much.

Virtual workers may become unintentionally misaligned with the corporate culture. Virtual workers, particularly those who are not in an office setting or are collocated in a small regional office, may not regularly practice the organizational culture with their teammates, and therefore there are even fewer cues in their daily working lives to reinforce it (Daim et al., 2012). Gaffes in displaying behaviour that is inconsistent with the corporate culture may come across as intentional (experienced workers should know better) and therefore cause unintentional relational issues with colleagues and supervisors. This may be especially pronounced if the local national culture is not aligned with the corporate culture (Weber, Shenkar, & Raveh, 1996). This may become a problem if members of the dominant culture do not understand there is no overt desire not to comply and interact with the virtual worker as if the behaviour is intentional. Organizations such as Yahoo and IBM have brought virtual workers back into the head office environment due to a concern with the evaporating corporate culture (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998).

All the participants who worked globally spoke of tensions that built up between individuals as a result of misattributed intentions linked to variations in displaying cultural norms. This set up a sort of us-versus-them dynamic, which appeared to permit each group to depersonalize the other, viewing them as less competent, less committed, and parochial.

However, as satellite environments become smaller and are at more of a distance from the main hub of the culture, the local organizational culture becomes diffused. First, there are simply fewer people to demonstrate and reinforce it. One of the participants stated that even in his home office, he made sure to put on a suit every day when he was working to remind himself of the professional standard expected at the head office.

Second, the organizational culture itself becomes susceptible to other influences such as regional business or national culture. A virtual worker, removed from other colleagues, is in a self-regulated work environment, removed from the day-to-day reminders of the organizational culture. That person may begin to dress more casually, because there is no practical requirement to be dressed more formally. If the company culture requires virtual workers to present themselves in more formal attire for web conferences, the workers might wear shorts below (which is not seen on camera) with a shirt and tie above to meet that requirement. A virtual worker who engages other workers via phone or email may never wear more formal workwear again. Over time, the dress code is simply not reinforced in the day-to-day organizational practices.

Workers who are struggling with the physical and psychological effects of bullying tend to suffer alone. For virtual workers, the relationship between the interpersonal dynamics and the resulting health impairment is not so clear for colleagues or others who might help a bullied virtual worker. For those virtual workers collocated in an office setting, it is possible that others may observe the decline, but with no line of sight to the origin, the observers cannot make the connection to bullying in the workplace. Workers who are supervisors and virtual workers working in a collocated environment will likely not share their virtual issues with collocated staff, which may cause the collocated workers to come to the wrong conclusion that they, themselves, are the cause of the stress.

For home-based virtual workers, aside from family and friends, it is unlikely that any colleagues or supervisors would be aware of the decline given that they rarely, if ever, observe each other. Even family and friends may not notice the initial, more subtle changes, and as the harm progresses, they may come to the conclusion that the issues are work related but have been unaware that the chronic stress is related to bullying until the individual chooses to share that information.

Home-based virtual workers who feel traumatized by their workplace live in their workplace. Increasing absenteeism, particularly connected with employees who have demonstrated little absenteeism in the past, has been reported in workplace bullying literature as a symptom that may suggest workplace bullying is occurring. Literature suggests that as targeted individuals feel increasingly unwell and unsafe, they stay away from the workplace (Kivimäki et al., 2000).

Being absent from work without the employer’s knowledge would not be difficult to accomplish as a virtual worker, particularly if the supervisor rarely checks in. Seven of the participants were asked if they had taken days off as virtual workers, either due to the high stress or other illness. None of the participants reported missing days at work, and this finding is consistent with work by Dalton and Meesch (1990, as cited in Kelliher & Anderson, 2010) that virtual workers tend not to miss work. This appears to be a point of departure from collocated bullying research.

It would seem, then, that presenteeism might be a symptom that virtual workers experience with the stress of bullying. Presenteeism describes the condition where workers are physically present at work but at least some, if not a significant amount, of their energy is devoted to pain/symptom or emotional/psychological management while they are trying to be productive (Dew, Keefe, & Small, 2005; Johns, 2010). This observation of virtual workers is consistent with findings by Aronsson, Gustafsson, and Dallner (2000) that some bullied workers, afraid that they may be terminated over absenteeism, come to work but are unable to be productive. They carry on as long as they can at work and then go home for respite.

However, virtual workers are already both at work and at home. People who are unwell would typically go home to escape workplace stresses, but for those who work from home, their home is not an entirely safe place anymore. The in-home office is an ongoing reminder that the affairs of the office continue without them, and that if one is not contributing effectively, one could be replaced. This finding raises the question of whether people who work from home can escape their workplace stress at all.

## Chapter Summary

The themes discussed in this chapter are based on the data findings revealed in the previous chapter. The themes are gathered into two broad categories: findings that are consistent with existing bullying research that involved collocated workers, and findings that appear to be new. This research demonstrates that some aspects of workplace bullying are consistent across workplaces, regardless of the environment the bullying takes place in. There are also some aspects of bullying in a virtual workplace that appear to be divergent or absent from existing workplace bullying research and may be unique to virtual workers. The themes explored in this chapter reinforce that both research questions were answered in the affirmative: (a) Bullying does occur in the virtual workplace setting and is manifested in a variety of ways, and (b) virtual workers also suffer chronic stress from bullying that leads to physical and psychological harm.

In the first broad category, six themes showed a convergence with existing workplace bullying literature:

1. Some bullied workers may not know that they are being bullied, or they may not want others to know that they are being bullied. As such, when asked, they will answer no.
2. Bullying tends to be resolved by transfer, termination, or resignation.
3. There are organizational antecedents that increase the risk of bullying in the workplace. They include organizational changes, role conflict and ambiguity, laissez-faire leadership, reshaping of the organization and changes to autonomy, colliding cultures, and aggression in business factors.
4. Older participants may have an elevated risk of bullying.
5. Performance reviews can be abused to create a contrived organizational view of workers.
6. Those who experience and/or observe bullying in workplace settings tend to suffer chronic stress.

In the second group of broad categories, three themes did not appear to converge with existing bullying research and may demonstrate that workplace bullying for virtual workers may be different. The themes were as follows:

1. The bullying roles and structure of the roles may be different in the virtual context. There appears to be a propensity towards multiple perpetrators and few, if any, bystanders, which has implications for the role that bystanders play.
2. A low-level background of incivility may mask or give tacit acceptance of some bullying behaviours, which in turn provides a more fertile ground for bullying to occur. A low level of trust coupled with desensitization appeared to allow poor behaviours such as rapid escalation and the disinhibition effect.
3. Workers may be at an elevated risk for harm due to the inherent isolation and limited organizational view. The necessity to maintain one’s organizational image caused additional workplace stress through additional work intensity. Workers tended to drift from the organizational culture, and the lack of adherence to behaviour could be viewed as intentional. Additionally, workers who struggled with chronic stress tended to have to manage alone. This factor was particularly hard on those who were home-based as they also lived in their workplace.

Further study will be necessary to see if these findings are representative of the wider community of virtual workers, but they do support that bullying in a virtual context has nuances that are likely not found in collocated circumstances.

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# Chapter 6. Conclusion and Contribution to the Body of Academic Knowledge

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that workplace bullying does occur in virtual workplaces and that affected workers do experience the chronic stress and harm that has been associated with physical and psychological harm in collocated workers. It also reveals that there is likely a higher level of baseline stress in working virtually that may cause workers to become desensitized to some of the conflict and dysfunctional behaviours. The tensions resulting from a perceived unfairness when some workers can work from home and others cannot, the coolness of coworkers, the lack of support from supervisors, the complexities of meeting the needs of two leaders under a matrix leadership style, as well as being invisible in the organization all create multiple opportunities for disrespectful, bullying behaviours to occur. The desensitization puts virtual workers at a disadvantage in terms of missing cues to prebullying behaviours. Additionally, some of the characteristics that organizations look for in a successful virtual worker, such as the ability to work independently, to be resourceful and self-sufficient, and to understand how to network in an organization, may work to their disadvantage when their efforts are not in alignment with their team. Conversely, their apolitical orientation, coupled with the ever-present need for impression management, as well as their orientation towards respect for rules and ethics, may culminate to be exploitable vulnerabilities when a bully has his or her sights on them.

The study revealed similarities to findings in studies of workplace bullying in collocated settings. Organizational antecedents such as mergers and acquisitions, colliding corporate and national cultures, role confusion, poor supervision, and lack of alignment were also featured in the participants’ narratives. The bullying tended to be resolved by transfer, termination, or resignation, and tended to go on for about two years. The performance review process was abused by supervisors and/or managers, perhaps in partial justification for termination, although in this study all participants who were terminated were advised it was due to organizational restructuring. Lastly, those who appeared to suffer the worst described symptoms consistent with chronic stress. Those who suffered chronic stress due to bullying and were no longer with their organizations; they reported that the psychological and some of the physiological effects persisted. Anxiety, depression, poor confidence, and low self-esteem appeared to linger long after the bullying was resolved.

There were also some findings that appear to differ from research on bullying in collocated settings. The incidence of bullying from multiple sources may be higher than in collocated settings, and the multiple sources appear to be acting independently, not in a coordinated fashion. The role of the bystander does not appear to be material; rather, bystanders appear to be absent or peripheral. Low trust, desensitization, and the focus on image management to ensure visibility within the organization could create a soft target that makes destabilization of virtual workers easier. Colleagues who view virtual workers as harbingers to offshoring exhibit a variant of the disinhibition effect. Lastly, virtual workers who are harmed by workplace bullying tend to suffer alone, isolated, and, in the case of home-based workers, trapped in their homes with reminders of their dysfunctional workplace.

## Contribution of This Research to the Body of Academic Knowledge

This research contributes important new information about the challenges for virtual workers who have experienced workplace bullying. This study demonstrates, through the lived experience of virtual workers, that bullying does occur. It also illuminates that bullying may also be different than in collocated settings. This knowledge is useful to academics, governments, and organizations in understanding that practices and education pertaining to the phenomenon that have been developed for collocated settings may be insufficient or inappropriate for virtual work settings. It also highlights that as many virtual workers tend to be located across state/provincial or national boundaries, issues of varying local legal and occupational health standards may make it challenging for workers and organizations to properly and consistently provide a psychologically safe place for workers. This finding has implications for organizations who employ virtual workers, and governments who have virtual workers in their jurisdiction (and are therefore covered by prevailing occupational health and safety, and, human rights legislation

This research also demonstrated an innovative use of the University of Bergen’s (2018) NAQ-R in qualitative research to help articulate experienced bullying behaviours and severity, which, due to the sensitive and emotional nature of the topic, are sometimes difficult to extract from narratives on workplace bullying. In particular, it may help the researchers identify participants whose narratives suggest that bullying is occurring, but who may be unwilling to recognize cognitively that what has occurred to them is bullying.

In terms of the contribution to organizations, this research should help inform organizations about the real risks to physical and psychological safety for virtual workers who experience bullying. It could also highlight areas of development for HR professionals and management in supporting, supervising, and developing valued virtual staff.

## Limitations of the Research

As this was an exploratory study, there are limitations to the generalizability of the research. First, these interviews represent the perspectives of only a small group (*N* = 12) of virtual workers. The small sample size, although offering valuable data, may have limited the findings of the research. Additionally, this research looked only at specific virtual workers; in particular, those who worked more than 50% of their time virtually while part of an interdependent team, located at least 100 km away from a supervisor or colleagues. The observations and perspectives of the individuals regarding their own experiences and conclusions have not been corroborated with the perspectives of anyone else on their respective teams. I did not seek to validate the participants’ conclusions but rather to capture their observations, their experiences working virtually, and their stress relative to what they believed to be bullying.

Second, the participants in this study did not represent a diverse range of individuals in terms of race, age, gender, marital status, or family status. No participants considered themselves of mixed race, for example, nor did any identify as LGBTQ2. The participants were all within about 10 years of age and were in the last chapters of their careers. Ten of the 12 participants were located within 1,000 km of the U.S.–Canada border. Only two participants were from outside North America, so the results may be reflective of North American workers rather than global workers.

Last, the study participants were exclusively from private sector organizations. Most of the organizations were large, multinational enterprises. There was a significant representation from the energy sector, and therefore findings may not be representative of other industries, nonprofit institutions, or public-sector organizations. Also, no participants were covered by a collective agreement which may have changed the dynamics of bullying through the addition of union representatives advocating for the target, bully or both

## Opportunities for Further Study

This study indicates many opportunities for further study and I highlight three opportunities here. The first is further investigation into the environmental antecedents that appear to be unique to virtual work that may create a fertile ground for bullying, particularly escalation, disinhibition, and desensitization. , Another opportunity is to go deeper into the novel aspects of bullying in the virtual context which seem inconsistent with collocated bullying. It would be useful to explore why bullying is different in the two environments, but is still successful in accomplishing it’s goal of destabilization. This may provide further insight into bullying in general and how to prevent the dysfunctional conflict that leads to harm. Lastly, research into the home-based workers who live in their traumatizing work environment would provide insight as to how to support workers who are suffering alone.

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**Appendix A: Ethics Review Board Approval**



**CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL**

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The AUREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

**Ethics File No**.: **23082**

**Principal Investigator**:  
Mrs. Peggy Flanigan, Graduate Student  
Faculty of Business\Doctorate in Business Administration  
  
**Supervisor**:  
Dr. Kay Devine (Supervisor)

**Project Title**:   
Understanding the Workplace Bullying Experience of Virtual Workers

**Effective Date:** August 09, 2018

**Expiry Date**: August 08, 2019

**Restrictions:**

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.  
  
Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

**Approved by:** Hussein Al-Zyoud, Chair

**Date:** August 9, 2018

Faculty of Business, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board   
University Research Services, Research Centre  
1 University Drive, Athabasca, AB, Canada T9S 3A3  
E-mail [rebsec@athabascau.ca](mailto:rebsec@athabascau.ca) Telephone: 780.675.6718

**Appendix B: Proposed Interview Questions**

Thank you for sharing your experience of working virtually. I have a number of questions that I’d like to go through with you to help me understand your own experience. If you don’t feel comfortable answering any question in this survey you may tell me so and we’ll move on to the next question. Also, if you would like to withdraw from the interview at any time, please let me know and I will end our discussion. All of your responses are voluntary, and your identity will never be revealed.

To ensure that I get down your words exactly as you told them to me, I’d like to record our conversation. The purpose of the recording is simply to help me record our exchange while I listen carefully to your recollection and reflection. No one else, other than a confidential transcriptionist and my research supervisor will have access to anything you tell me. Also, all recordings will be disposed of following the research, and in accordance with the Athabasca University ethics procedures. Are you comfortable with me recording this interview?

1. **Tell me about yourself**

I’d like to begin by learning more about you as a person.

* 1. Let’s begin with you telling me about yourself. When people ask you, what do you tell people about yourself?
  2. Which of these age brackets would you fall in? (provide age bands)
  3. What gender do you identify with?
  4. What race do you identify with? (pick list)
  5. Did you pursue education past high school? If so, what area of education did you pursue? (\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_) What’s the highest education level you attained? (pick list)
  6. Tell me about your work history—where did you start until your most recent? How long do you intend to work?
  7. What’s your motivation for working?
  8. Tell me about your virtual work. Where are your coworkers and supervisor located? What are your perceptions of them? Are they invested and engaged in the work you are all doing together? Are they engaged almost exclusively for the task or do they spend time building relationships with you? Have you developed strong relationships with your virtual coworkers?

1. **On Being a Virtual Worker**

“I’d like you to think of

* 1. What kinds of jobs have you done as a virtual/remote/distributed worker?
  2. What is different about a virtual worker than a collocated worker—
     1. Are there different attributes that would make a person successful in a virtual job?
     2. Are there attributes that would make a person unsuccessful in a virtual job?
  3. What is the best thing about working virtually?
  4. What is the most challenging? What is the most frustrating about working virtually? The most disappointing?

1. **Conflicts, Negative Behaviours and Workplace Bullying**
   1. What kinds of conflict comes up when working virtually?
   2. What is the impact of the conflict on you? Your organization?
   3. How is conflict typically solved amongst you and your coworkers?
   4. What is the company policy on respect in the workplace? What does the policy say? What are the consequences for breaking this policy?
   5. What does respectful behaviour mean to you?
   6. Are people respectful to each other in your workplace? Always? How do you feel about that?
   7. I’d like you to take a few moments to look at the Negative Acts Questionnaire with you. I’d like you to think of your virtual coworkers and yourself, and I’d like to you to identify any of the following behaviours that either you, yourself have experienced or that you have observed in your virtual work context. I’ll ask you about a particular behaviour, and I’d like you to tell me if you saw or experienced it in your work situation, and if so, did it happen a lot (like every week), or once in a while.
   8. Who do you see as responsible for most of these negative behaviours?
   9. Are the negative behaviours directed towards a single person, a number of people or kind of everyone?
   10. What do you think about workplace bullying?
   11. How do you understand the concept of bullying in the workplace? Do you think it’s real?
   12. Do you think you’d recognize it if it happened to you or a coworker?
   13. Do you think it happens often in the workplace? Does it happen often in your organization?
   14. If it happened to you or a coworker, what would you do?
   15. Do you think there is bullying happening now in your virtual workplace?
   16. Are you experiencing bullying in your virtual workplace? Tell me about it.
2. **On Stress and Intention to Leave**
   1. Taking you back to the Negative Acts Questionnaire, these can’t have been very comfortable to experience. Tell me what it was like to work with these behaviours occurring.
   2. Did you find it stressful? How stressful? Did the stress affect your life? Your health? Your friends and family? Your job? Your career? Describe the effects and what you felt about that.
   3. Did you think about leaving the job? Leaving the organization?
   4. How difficult would it be to leave?
   5. Why didn’t (haven’t) you leave (left)?
3. **Health Implications**
   1. I’m wondering what other kind of impacts you, personally, experience as a result of the stress. Do you notice a change in your habits, your health, or your connections to your social network?
   2. I’m going to ask you about some specific health questions. I want you to think about stress resulting from the negative acts you identified, and I want you to answer in the following way: not at all, sometimes, more than half the days, pretty much always.
      1. Do you (did you) have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep or sleeping too much (like you never get enough sleep)?
      2. Do you (did you) have little energy or feel tired a lot?
      3. Do you (did you) have a poor appetite or were you overeating?
      4. Feeling headaches, muscle aches or other pain that can’t be explained by any other acute or chronic condition?
      5. Feeling down, depressed or hopeless?
      6. Having trouble concentrating on things, such as participating in a teleconference, reading a short article or watching TV?
      7. Feeling bad about yourself, like you were a failure? Letting yourself down? Letting down others whose opinions you care(d) about?
      8. Feel little interest or pleasure in doing things or attending events?
      9. Being fidgety, restless or nervous? Panic attacks? Or the opposite—moving or speaking more slowly than normal, such that other people would have noticed?
      10. Feeling like you wanted to hurt yourself, or that you couldn’t see yourself in the future? Did you ever feel like you would be better off dead? Or, alternatively, did you want to hurt others, feeling like others would be better dead?
      11. <IF many of these are answered as more than half the time or more . . . .> You seem to have a lot of these experiences. What do you think about that?
4. **Coping**
   1. How do you typically deal with the stress?
   2. Is your approach to dealing with stress resulting from the negative behaviours different? (Probe for positive, negative and ineffective coping if not offered.)
      1. Do (Did) you try to do more, focus more, more hours, step up your standards or production level?
      2. Do (Did) you find yourself trying some higher risk outlets—drinking, careless activities?
      3. Do (Did) you distract yourself with TV, Internet?
      4. Do (Did) you find yourself avoiding work or certain people?
      5. Do (Did) you feel like giving up?
5. **Anything Else You’d Like to Add?**
   1. Is there anything else about this topic that you’d like to tell me that you haven’t had a chance to yet?
   2. What would you tell someone who is working virtually and thinks they might be experiencing the kinds of negative behaviours we’ve been discussing?

Thank you so very much for sharing your time and your reflections with me. If you have any questions or thoughts about this interview, you have my contact information and please feel free to contact me. Also, if this interview has caused any additional stress, or created a negative reaction, here are some resources you can contact to get help. [Provide a list of mental health resources.]

**Appendix C: Letter of Consent**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

**UNDERSTANDING THE WORKPLACE BULLYING**

**EXPERIENCE OF VIRTUAL WORKERS**

**Send to** (email address)

**I, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ have read this information and informed consent letter, and I am satisfied that I understand the nature of this study and any potential risks that I may be undertaking by volunteering for this survey. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time, right up until the data has been entered into the database, and/or to not answer any specific question during the interview.**

**Please contact me at\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(email) or \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (phone number) to arrange an interview time.**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**(signature) (date)**

**Appendix D: The Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R)**

**Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R)**

The following behaviours are often seen as examples of negative behaviour in the workplace*.* How often have you been subjected to the following negative acts at work?

*Please circle the number that best corresponds with your experience over the last six months:*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |  |
| Never | Now and then | Often | Regularly |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1) Someone withholding information which affects your performance | 1 2 3 4 |
| 2) Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work | 1 2 3 4 |
| 3) Being ordered to do work below your level of competence | 1 2 3 4 |
| 4) Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks | 1 2 3 4 |
| 5) Spreading of gossip and rumours about you | 1 2 3 4 |
| 6) Being ignored or excluded | 1 2 3 4 |
| 7) Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person (i.e. habits and background), your attitudes or your private life | 1 2 3 4 |
| 8) Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger (or rage) including “ALL CAPS” in email correspondence | 1 2 3 4 |
| 9) Intimidating behaviour, such as escalating simple conflicts | 1 2 3 4 |
| 10) Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job | 1 2 3 4 |
| 11) Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes | 1 2 3 4 |
| 12) Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction | 1 2 3 4 |
| 13) Persistent criticism of your work and effort | 1 2 3 4 |
| 14) Having your opinions and views ignored | 1 2 3 4 |
| 15) Subject of jokes or innuendos | 1 2 3 4 |
| 16) Being given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines | 1 2 3 4 |
| 17) Having allegations made against you | 1 2 3 4 |
| 18) Excessive monitoring of your work | 1 2 3 4 |
| 19) Pressure not to claim something which by right you are entitled to (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses) | 1 2 3 4 |
| 20) Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm | 1 2 3 4 |
| 21) Being exposed to an unmanageable workload | 1 2 3 4 |
| 22) Threats of violence | 1 2 3 4 |
| 23) Have you been bullied at work? | 1 2 3 4 |

**NAQ-R** – Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised

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**Appendix E: Letter of Information/Informed Consent**

**LETTER OF INFORMATION / INFORMED CONSENT**

Understanding the Workplace Bullying Experience of Virtual Workers

**June 01, 2018**

**Principal Investigator (Researcher):** **Supervisor:**

Peggy Flanigan Dr. Kay Devine,

664 Scimitar Bay NW Athabasca University

Calgary, AB

Athabasca University,

Doctor of Business Admin program

(email address)

(telephone number) (cell)

Dear Potential Participant,

**Regarding: Understanding the Workplace**

**Bullying Experience of Virtual Workers**

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “Understanding the Workplace Bullying Experience of Virtual Workers.” This study forms the basis of a University doctoral level research project.

The information presented in this letter should inform you of what this research is about and provide clarity on what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. It also describes your right to withdraw from the project. This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718 or by e-mail to [rebsec@athabascau.ca](mailto:rebsec@athabascau.ca).

In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research project, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits, as well as what participation requires of you, to be able to make an informed decision. Take time to read this carefully as it is important that you understand the information given to you. Please contact the principal investigator, Peggy Flanigan, if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you take part in this research. If you choose not to take part, or if you decide to withdraw from the research there will be no negative consequences for you now, or in the future.

**Introduction**

My name is Peggy Flanigan and I am a student in the Doctor of Business Administration program at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about workplace bullying with participants who are working or have worked as a virtual worker. Participants for this study must be adults (over 18 years of age), have at least two years of work experience as a virtual worker, and be able to participate in an interview in English.

Virtual workers are also known as remote workers, distributed workers, nomadic workers, or geographically disbursed workers. For this study, a virtual worker is defined as an individual, who:

* + - **Works at a distance** from their coworkers (i.e., staff, supervisors, colleagues) and therefore rarely works together with them in the same location (collocated);
    - **Works interdependently other workers**, which means that their work requires coordination between them while completing tasks concurrently or in a serial fashion; and
    - **Coordinates, collaborates and communicates with the other workers using technology**, which could include telephone/teleconference, fax, email, video conferencing, instant messaging or any other computer medium to accomplish the tasks.

This study is meant to meet two objectives: capture evidence of bullying behaviours experienced or observed by virtual workers, as well as to discover the effects on and impacts to virtual workers. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Kay Devine of the Faculty of Business at Athabasca University.

**Why are you being invited to take part in this research project?**

You are being invited to participate in this project because the researcher believes you may meet the participant criteria for the study:

* You are at least 18 years of age:
* You have the relevant virtual work experience for this project (a minimum of approximately two years working this way);
* You may have experienced or observed workplace bullying in this virtual context; and,
* You can participate in an interview in English.

**What is the purpose of this research project?**

The purpose of this research is to confirm and understand the experience of dysfunctional conflict, such as bullying in a virtual workplace setting, and to understand the effects and impacts of stress resulting from these dysfunctional and negative behaviours (such as bullying) on virtual workers.

**What will you be asked to do?**

Participants in this study will be asked to engage in an interview expected to be between 90 minutes to 2 hours in length.

The interview will ask you about

* + - basic information regarding yourself for statistical purposes
    - your job and your experience as a virtual worker
    - policies and practices in your organization in regard to bullying
    - negative behaviours you may have experienced or observed, including some indication on frequency and duration;
    - observations about your own stress that might result from these behaviours
    - observations about have this stress may have affected you
    - observations about how you cope with this kind of stress

**What are the risks and benefits?**

The study will ask participants to recall situations from their work life. Given the nature of the topics, it is possible that participants may experience some of the emotions and uncomfortable feelings that are associated with recalling past events. The participant is free to decline to answer any question that relates to an experience that is uncomfortable for the participant to share.

As the participants control what is shared, the participants control the risk to themselves. Participants are not required to share any information that the participant does not wish to share, and there are no negative consequences to any participant who does not wish to share. The participant only needs to state that the question is uncomfortable and that the participant wishes to go onto the next question. The participant may also state they wish to skip the question in the moment and come back to it later, if the participant so desires.

**Do you have to take part in this project?**

Involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You are not required to take part in this project and no person, including the researcher, shall insist your participation under duress. Further, the participant is free to withdraw at any time during the interview or immediately after. There are no consequences to any participant for withdrawing. However, participants will be made aware at the start of the interview, that once the data has been coded to the database, and mixed into others’ responses (and therefore difficult to isolate), the participant’s information for the study cannot be withdrawn.

**How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?**

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants’ information and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. As per university policy, all information must be held confidential, except when legislation or a professional code of conduct requires that it be reported.

Once the details from the interview are coded into the database they becomes and remain as part of the database for analyses. All the information in the database is entirely private and confidential (names are removed and replaced with identifiers). In accordance with University Ethics Policy, all notes and recordings collected will be retained for 24 months after the conclusion of the study to allow for fact checking by the University, if required. After the 24 months, all notes, transcriptions, and recordings will be removed, shredded or otherwise destroyed.

If, however, during this study, the researcher believes, or comes to believe, that the participant intends to harm him/herself or others, the researcher is obligated to seek appropriate assistance, and in doing so, may breach confidentiality for the health and safety of the participant or others.

**How will my anonymity be protected?**

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity; you will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission. Any direct quotations will be credited to an identifier, unless the principal researcher contacts you directly and receives your overt permission to use your name in this way.

With respect to the database itself, individual names will be replaced with identifiers. Only the researcher will have a table that links the individual names with the identifiers, and that table will not be part of the database. Limited referential information, for example, gender, age category, work experience, country of residence, industry and business sector will be requested of participants in order to do some basic comparative analysis. This information is used primarily to understand if there are systemic relationships between groups and responses that might warrant further investigation.

**How will the data collected be stored?**

Data for this study will be captured in multiple ways: the researcher’s notebook, an electronic recording, and later, in transcription. Notes, recordings and transcriptions will be stored on the researcher’s computer device (laptop). The resulting database and analytical application will also be resident on the researcher’s laptop.

All media and materials will be kept locked in the researcher’s office. Access to this information will be limited to the researcher and a coding assistant, as well as the researcher’s supervisor who will review the work from time to time to give counsel to progress the study. The laptop where the database is stored will use appropriate firewall, passwords and encryption passwords as appropriate.

After the final research paper is reviewed by the University committee, data that is linked to specific individuals (such as interview notes) will be held for 24 months in case factual information needs to be confirmed. If any further research based on this type of information is contemplated, the researcher would require specific and expressed permission and authority from the participant to use the research for any other study. Data that is not linked to specific individuals (for example, survey data) may be reviewed again for future studies.

**Who will receive the results of the research project?**

Participants will be offered a summary of the findings from the principal researcher at the end of the survey and a complimentary copy of the final research project. Summaries will be on the researcher’s website. Detailed copies can be obtained by contacting Athabasca University’s Library

The expectation is that the results will be disseminated more widely to progress research on this area. At the basic level additional copies of this paper will be available in the following fashion:

* The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library’s Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available;
* Summaries of this research will be used for conferences and seminars to help advance the phenomenon of workplace bullying, and workplace bullying and virtual workplaces; and,
* Results may also be incorporated into articles for publication in journals.

**Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?**

Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me, (the principal investigator) by e-mail at [email address], or at [telephone number], or you can contact my supervisor by email at [[email address]](mailto:k@fb.athabasca.ca).

If you are ready to participate in this project, please submit a copy of the signed last page to me at [email address] to show your expressed consent.

Thank you for considering participation in this research.

Regards,

*Peggy Flanigan*

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at [rebsec@athabascau.ca](mailto:rebsec@athabascau.ca)

or by telephone at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718.