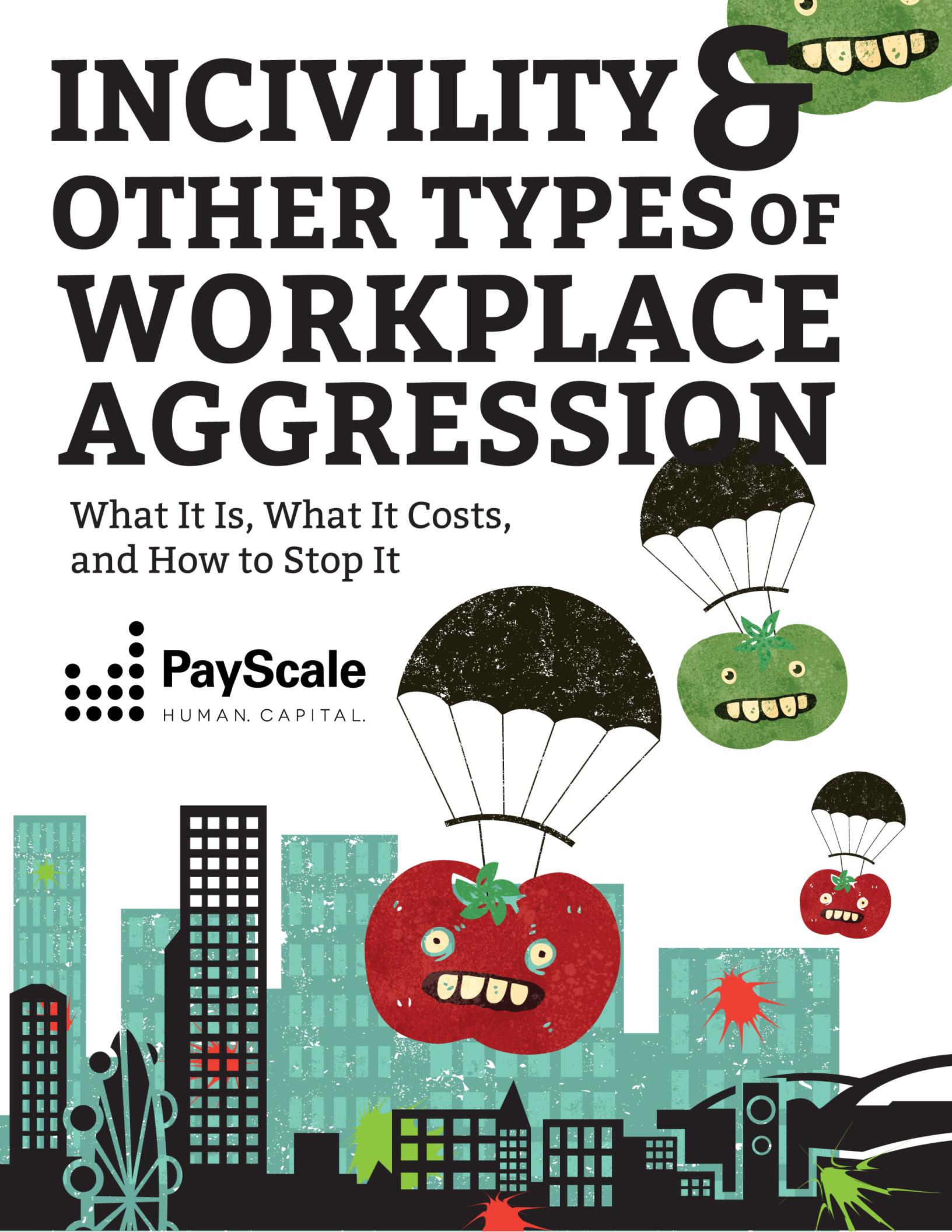


INCIVILITY & OTHER TYPES of WORKPLACE AGGRESSION

What It Is, What It Costs,
and How to Stop It



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It's a weekday morning, and Shannon is dreading going to the office ... again. Like a lot of workers, Shannon doesn't so much hate the job as she hates her boss. Well, maybe "hate" is too strong of a word, but Shannon is definitely having a hard time with Diane, her new manager.

Shannon began reporting to Diane six months ago after being promoted, and now, instead of looking forward to the start of the work day, Shannon just wants to stay in bed.

Diane is argumentative. Whenever Shannon questions procedures or offers a suggestion, Diane immediately begins explaining why Shannon's input is off point. Shannon is new to this particular job but has 10 years with the company and 15 years of work experience. She thinks her opinion should count for something, but apparently Diane disagrees.

And that wouldn't be so bad, except the reasons Diane gives for disagreeing with Shannon usually don't make any sense. It's like she'll say anything, no matter how absurd, to win. As a result, Shannon rarely offers her thoughts about anything anymore, but that's not even the worst of it.

Diane gives inconsistent instructions, but Shannon won't ask questions to clarify because of Diane's temper. Also, Diane is deceptive. Shannon has witnessed her lying to other managers and even customers to get what she wants. Finally, Diane is unpredictable. One day she's sweet as pie. The next she's sarcastic, snarling, and threatening to fire Shannon.

Shannon used to love this company and her work, but not now. She's stressed and anxious and has begun looking for another job. So far she hasn't had any luck.

At least Shannon has sick days. After thinking about facing work today, she decides to take one.

Incivility in the Workplace: The Tip of the Iceberg?

One study estimates that between 75 and 100 percent of American workers have experienced some instance of incivility on the job. In another article, the authors present research indicating that nearly 98 percent of employees have experienced incivility at work.

In “What is Workplace Incivility, Why Should We Care, and What Should We Do?,” author Mike Sliter, citing Andersson and Pearson (*Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace*, Academy of Management Review, 1999, 24:267-85), defines incivility as “a low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect and courtesy.”

Incivility includes such things as not refilling the coffee pot, stealing coworkers’ food from the refrigerator, and sending edgy email messages that straddle the line between barely professional and noticeably rude.

The costs of incivility (including decreased creativity, decreased morale, customer disdain—customers *do not* like overhearing coworkers mistreat each other—and time spent mending damages to relationships) are significant.

These costs aren’t merely interpersonal, however. Any astute leader knows that every human cost has a financial cost (including a cost to both direct and indirect compensation), as well.

In “The Price of Incivility,” authors Porath and Pearson cite a study conducted by Accountemps that claims “managers and executives at Fortune 1,000 firms spend 13 percent of their work time—the equivalent of seven weeks a year—mending employee relationships and otherwise dealing with the aftermath of incivility.”

To keep the math simple, let’s say an executive makes \$100,000 a year (a pretty modest estimate for an executive). That’s \$13,000 down the drain. And let’s face it. Executives are probably not as likely to deal with the effects of incivility head on than lower-level employees who have less power, and therefore, more chance of becoming a target.

Porath and Pearson also found that of those who've experienced incivility:

48% intentionally decreased their work effort

47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work

38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work

80% lost work time worrying about the incident

63% lost work time avoiding the offender

66% said their performance declined

78% said their commitment to the organization declined

12% said they left their job because of the uncivil treatment

25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers

By way of comparison, a 1999 article titled “[Etiquette Crisis at Work](#),” quotes statistics from a study conducted by Pearson, then at the Kenan-Flagler Business School, that revealed the following about the recipients of incivility:

28% lost work time avoiding the instigator

53% lost work time worrying about the incident

37% believe their commitment to the company declined

22% decreased efforts at work

10% decreased the amount of time spent at work

46% contemplated changing jobs

12% actually did change jobs

Again, these actions have financial costs. [One expert](#) estimates that workplace bullying (which is only *one* form of incivility—albeit a serious one) costs American businesses \$250 million annually.

A comparison of the two lists also shows the costs have increased in the past decade or so, and this from a time when incivility was considered by some to be a “crisis.” Still, incidents of incivility (and worse) continue to rise.

Stress and Workplace Incivility: A Vicious Cycle

Ironically, stress is often cited as a root cause of workplace incivility. When workers are stressed, they're more likely to lash out or engage in thoughtless, inconsiderate behavior.

Of course, incivility creates stress too, and the result is a vicious loop of cause and effect that can make for a very uncomfortable work environment employees manage through increased absenteeism and decreased engagement.

Still, incivility is on the low end of the workplace aggression spectrum. Imagine then, the costs to organizations when employees engage in full-on aggression, such as that which occurs during bullying or mobbing.

Aggression Defined

In *Character Disturbance: The Phenomenon of Our Age*, George Simon, Jr., PhD, writes “Human aggression is the forceful energy we all expend to survive, prosper, and secure the things we want and need.”

Dr. Simon makes the point that while human aggression and violence aren’t one and the same, many people with aggressive personalities maintain a “me against the world” mentality and “often pit themselves against others and society’s major rules and authority figures.” (p. 96)

In business, we often think of aggression as a good thing. We idealize aggressive employees as proactive, bold, and driven—these are the people who get stuff done and aren’t easily discouraged by failure (or indeed, will barely acknowledge failure).

And while it’s true that businesses need people who are willing to work hard at meeting goals, the reality of the ruthless, “go get ‘em” employee may be less positive than we’d like to believe, especially for those aggressive personalities who think too highly of themselves while displaying entirely too little hesitation about trampling on others’ rights and feelings.

For example, consider the manager who routinely berates and humiliates (often in public) his direct reports. This manager makes fun of his subordinates' opinions, blames them for his own failings, and capriciously displays bouts of good will or his bad temper. As a result, employees stay on the defensive, not knowing which manager will show up on a daily basis. Far from being a good thing, this manager's behavior creates strife, confusion, and stress among team members and leads to increased absenteeism, decreased productivity, and increased turnover.

Reactive Versus Predatory Aggression

When an individual feels threatened, she may respond with aggression designed to protect her from harm. Psychologists call this "reactive aggression." Reactive aggression is motived by fear, and the individual displaying reactive aggression isn't looking for a fight. In fact, it's safe to say she'd rather not fight, but she also has a need to defend herself.

Predatory aggression, however, is different. Predatory aggression is motivated by desire, not fear. In the workplace, predatory aggression most often is fueled by a desire to dominate and control others.

Other types of aggression include *covert aggression* (subtle or hidden attempts to control and dominate); *overt aggression* (open attempts to "win," dominate, or control); *active aggression* (getting what you want by actively doing things to victimize others); and *passive aggression* (trying to avoid things you don't want by resisting cooperating with others).

There's no place for any of this in healthy organizations.

Workplace Aggression and Company Culture

Regardless of individual proclivities, aggression can't thrive in a workplace where the culture doesn't support it. That's a fact.

In the *Harvard Business Review* article mentioned earlier, Porath and Pearson describe how a fed-up employee finally reported his manager—"a volatile bully who insulted his direct reports, belittled their efforts, and blamed them for things over which they had no control" — to HR. The manager refused to apologize for the clearly bad behavior and was soon thereafter named "District Manager of the Year."

This is a perfect example of workplace aggression that has been sanctioned and rewarded by the employer. Without the sanctions and the rewards, it's unlikely the bully boss would continue in this vein.

But even companies that appear to be doing the right thing could really be doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons.

In "[The High Cost \(and Best Cures\) for Dysfunctional Company Culture](#)," Cheryl Conner makes the point that employee health and organizational health are connected.

Some companies, recognizing the connection, provide stress management education for their employees. However, as Conner points out, these organizations are in the minority, and far too many offer the education "to help their employees get better at tolerating unacceptable work loads, misaligned work-life balance, or a dysfunctional corporate climate."

In other words, companies offer stress management in response to the avoidable problems their own cultures create.

According to Business Psychologist and Corporate Culture Architect Dr. David Gruder, implementing a stress management program under these circumstances is actually harmful. Conner quotes Gruder as saying, "When stress management programs are provided as a substitute for repairing a dysfunctional corporate climate, the programs are not helpful—in fact, they are a further form of abuse."

Gruder continues: "The best stress management program is only as useful as a company's culture is healthy ... stress management programs begin with corporate culture, and can only provide the benefits they're capable of providing when they build upon that solid foundation."

Why Won't More Companies do More About Workplace Aggression?

In that 1999 article referenced earlier, Pearson suggests that workplaces have a difficult time exorcising bad behavior for three main reasons: (1) many instances of aggression go unreported; (2) instigators are savvy enough to refrain from behaving poorly in the presence of higher ups all the while taking care to kiss up; and (3) even when incidents are reported, management is not equipped to handle the situation well, for example, promoting abusive employees into someone else's department.

Yet another reason may have to do with the very nature of human psychology—most of us are unwilling to ascribe bad motives to others, no matter how egregious the behavior. And unfortunately, that unwillingness can prevent us from seeing (and dealing with) malicious acts no matter how severely they may be poisoning the work environment.

But perhaps the most common reason is simply this—many in leadership positions are not yet convinced workplace aggression is a problem in need of a solution.

It could be that leaders perceive too much gain from ruthlessness or that they simply don't feel responsible for resolving what they believe to be more of an “interpersonal conflict” than a business issue.

Whatever the reason, most workplaces are doing far too little about the big problem of workplace aggression, despite the fact that by all reports, incidents of aggressions, including bullying and mobbing, are increasing.

Workplace Bullying and Mobbing

If “small” acts of incivility are on the low end of the spectrum of workplace aggression, there’s no question that bullying and mobbing are on the high end.

And while one could argue that neglecting to refill the coffee pot isn’t a malicious act intended to harm a particular individual, one cannot, with any sincerity, say the same about bullying and mobbing.

Bullying Versus Mobbing

The [Workplace Bullying Institute](#) defines bullying as “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators.”

Bullying is abusive conduct meant to threaten, humiliate, or intimidate, and it interferes with work. Bullying is instigated by the bully and is perpetuated against a target whom the bully wishes to control.

Bullying is NOT:

- A “personality conflict”
- “Tough management”
- Harmless
- Something the target and the bully can both “own”

A bully intends to harm his or her target. [Most bullies are men](#) (69 percent), and most targets are women (60 percent), but both men and women bully and are targets. [One survey](#) estimates that 45 percent of targets experience health-related stress problems.

Workplace mobbing is like bullying on steroids. When a worker is mobbed, he’s targeted for removal from the organization, and he’ll be abused and maligned until he’s gone. Worse, mobbing generally involves the approval of key leadership within the organization. Whistleblowers can expect to be (and many times are) mobbed.

The negative affects of both bullying and mobbing are compounded by what psychologists call the “bystander effect.” Individuals acting in accordance with the bystander effect witness others in need

but won't respond. In the case of workplace abuse, "bystanders" may be too afraid to speak out and/or convince themselves that action is unnecessary.

"Diffusion of responsibility" is another sociological phenomenon that makes workplace bullying difficult to manage. Diffusion of responsibility is when people in groups lose the ability to realize they're accountable for their individual actions.

Bullying and mobbing, which seek to rob a target of his dignity, sense of self, and self-respect are the ultimate acts of workplace aggression and rival physical violence in their destructiveness.

How to Stop Workplace Aggression in its Tracks

Workplace aggression is very real and very harmful to both individuals and organizations. However, solutions exist for employers who choose to seek them, and employers are the ones who must do the seeking.

The Workplace Bullying Institute put it this way: "The ultimate solution fixes responsibility for both the cause and cure squarely on the shoulders of senior management and executives. They put people in harm's way and they can provide safety by undoing the culture which may have inadvertently allowed bullying to flourish."

So, what must employers do?

See and Believe

Workplace aggression does not occur in a vacuum, and it doesn't occur without leaving evidence.

If you begin to receive multiple complaints about a manager, listen. If one department has higher levels of absenteeism, medical leaves, and turnover than all the rest, investigate. Don't assume that everyone has benign motives. They don't. Question managerial actions. For example, what business purpose is served when a manager, having provided no prior warning, suddenly decides to place an employee on probation? What business good is served when a manager berates an employee at a public meeting?

Model Good Behavior

Leadership that wishes to eradicate aggression from the workplace must model the behavior it wishes to see. Managers, in particular, will take their cues from senior leadership. If senior leadership exhibits aggressive, abusive behavior, so will managers, especially those inclined to approach interpersonal relationships with an intent to dominate. On the other hand, if leadership models respectful behavior, even those managers with aggressive tendencies will tend to fall in line, because it's in their interests to do so.

Punish and Reward Appropriately

When employees engage in aggressive behavior, sanction appropriately. When managers demonstrate respectful behavior (which is better for sustained team building anyway), reward appropriately. Again, aggression can't thrive in a culture that doesn't support it.

Normalize Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of interpersonal interactions. Not everyone wants the same things or sees things the same way. Organizations that view conflict as "bad" and therefore to be avoided at all costs are ripe for gossip, back stabbing, and all other manner of unproductive ways to resolve problems. Know that aggressive personalities will take advantage of organizational opacity to engage in abusive behavior while hiding their true motives.

Get the Word Out and Speak Out

Leaders must let it be known that respectful behavior is expected, and disrespectful behavior will be challenged, rooted out, and in extreme cases, punished.

Start As You Mean to Go On

Go to any job-related site on the internet, and you're liable to read something about how rude recruiters are and how frustrated job seekers are with the rude behavior.

Make sure the recruiters who represent your organization understand the importance of treating candidates well and with dignity. Also, take pains to ensure your onboarding process makes clear to new hires that yours is a respectful workplace where people are treated fairly and humanely.

SUMMARY

Bullying and other forms of workplace aggression is a huge problem that costs companies huge money in both direct payroll costs (absenteeism and **presenteeism** are but two of these) as well as in indirect costs related to decreased productivity and increased use of medical, disability, and employee assistance plans. In the most severe cases, employers also will incur increased unemployment compensation rates, costs related to increased turnover, costs related to severance payments, and legal fees and judgments.

That said, solutions to the problem are well documented and not terribly difficult for employers motivated to treat employees well.

Bullying is a factor that will increase turnover in your company.

Learn more about employee turnover with this informative whitepaper from PayScale:

Turnover, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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