

How to address workplace toxicity in a virtual setting

By Evelina Nedlund | Employee Benefit News | October 29, 2020



During COVID-19, workplace harassment has moved from the physical office into the virtual world, leaving employees vulnerable to uninvited and unwanted attacks on Zoom and Slack.

Pre-pandemic SHRM research found that 1 in 4 American workers dread going to work during. A toxic work environment not only impacts employee well-being, but a company's bottom line: U.S. companies lost \$223 billion over a five-period due to culture-caused turnover, according to SHRM estimates.

Workplace toxicity is "anything outside of the individual that harms their perception of their experience of the work environment," says Amy Quarton, professor and associate instructor of organizational leadership at Maryville University. This can include micromanagement, mean comments, racism, harassment, aggressive behaviours and microaggressions.

“Workplace toxicity is going to affect the individual, the group and the organization,” Quarton says. “It’s going to affect [an employee’s] psychological well-being, their perceptions of reality and their attitudes about their job and manager. It will also impact how productive they are, if they are on time, or if they are taking off more days than normal.”

A toxic work environment can also have a long-term impact on our physiological state and health, says Quarton.

“An employee who works in a toxic environment for 20 years may actually develop heart disease as a result of that chronic stress over decades,” she says. “Psychologically, behaviorally and physiologically — all of those things are going on when a human is experiencing this stressful environment.”

Employees who are dealing with a difficult work situation may be more easily overlooked and lack social support when working remotely. It may be harder to reach out to supervisors with concerns, leaving employees feeling isolated and burned out, Quarton says.

“At work when we’re face-to-face we can take a break and talk to our friend about what we’re struggling with,” she says. “In the virtual environment, people are feeling alone and isolated. It’s their responsibility to take care of any issues that they’re experiencing.”

Employers may also be confused as to how to help employees address and identify signs of workplace toxicity while remote. Quarton says if an employer already has practices and policies put in place to protect employees against workplace harassment, chances are they can extend those policies into the virtual environment.

Still, most employers will likely need a different strategy to make sure that they are holding people accountable for their toxic behaviors in the virtual world. Employers should ask employees to share their thoughts about the work environment and their manager, using an anonymous outlet or feedback tools such as Reflektive or Impraise. Then, HR managers can identify the areas that need to be addressed, and provide additional training and coaching to managers or other employees.

“When you get the employees involved in addressing workplace toxicity, you are going to learn about all kinds of things that you didn’t know existed,” she says. “You can’t solve all of the problems, but you get a perspective that you wouldn’t otherwise get if you just relied on gossip or your own observations of emails or things that are happening on the video conferencing calls. You need to measure it.”

An additional challenge is when toxicity is coming from a manager, as it’s difficult to hold upper management accountable if they treat people unfairly or say mean things.

“In the virtual work environment that is really, really difficult because the manager’s supervisor cannot see the manager, so it’s already difficult enough when we’re working remotely to measure performance” Quarton says.

Addressing workplace toxicity is not only “the right thing to do,” but it can prevent negative impacts on turnover and productivity. Employees with the most knowledge and skills are not likely to put up with a toxic work environment for long if there are other options available.

“Workplace toxicity affects everyone and everything, from job performance to job satisfaction to an employee’s commitment to the organization,” Quarton says. “It contributes to job stress and

turnover as it leads people to search for other work. All of those things are going to be extremely expensive in the long run. So right now, with 2020 metrics, employers may not see much of an issue, but assuming things improve and people can go back to work, my prediction is that the top talent will be the first to leave.”