

A Darker Side of Human Information Behavior in the Workplace: a Call for Research on Workplace Bullying Information Behavior

Diane H. Sonnenwald

School of Information and Communication Studies,

University College Dublin, Ireland

E-mail:: diane.sonnenwald@ucd.ie

Previous Research

Previous research in human information behavior and the workplace has focused on how individuals, groups and organizations can more effectively share information in order to achieve complex goals. This has resulted in theories and models illuminating human information behavior as well as recommendations for best practices and new technology.

For example, the information horizon theory and research method (Sonnenwald, 1998; Sonnenwald et al., 2003) elucidates the roles of social networks, situations and contexts in information behavior, the importance of understanding information behavior as a process, and the concept of an “information horizon” that constrains and enables information seeking behavior. The theory posits that human information behavior is shaped by and shapes individuals, social networks, situations and contexts. An individual, within a particular situation and context, may encounter an information need; the situation and context help determine the information need. Social networks also provide a lens that facilitates the identification and exploration of information needs. Furthermore, the individual, social network, situation and context help determine the information resources available to satisfy the need. The theory highlights the value of exploring relationships among information resources, the proactive nature of information resources, and the impact of contexts and situations on the information seeking process. A research methodology based on the theory has been developed.

The information horizon research methodology consists of an interview during which a study participant is asked to provide a visual and verbal articulation of their information horizon in a particular context. That is, each study participant is asked to draw a map of his or her information horizons showing all information resources, including people, they typically access when seeking

information within a specific context. Each study participant is also asked to describe the information resources and explain their importance and role in the information seeking process. Techniques to analysis these data are drawn from social network and graph theory. The results are then further analyzed to illuminate information behavior in that context and to make recommendations for practices and technology based on this illumination.

Other research I've conducted has focused on evaluating the potential impact of future technology on work practices in order to inform computer science research and development and to illuminate information sharing practices not previously explored. This research utilizes mixed methods in an approach we call "visioning studies". An early visioning study included the design and investigation of the potential of a collaborative version of a specialized scientific instrument called the nanoManipulator, which was a 3D haptic interface to an atomic force microscope (Sonnenwald et al., 2003). Our research showed that it is not always necessary to have face-to-face interaction before doing collaborative work across geographic distances successfully.

A more recent visioning study focused on exploring the potential of 3D telepresence technology to support collaboration between paramedics in the field and physicians at medical centers (Sonnenwald et al., 2008; Sonnenwald et al., 2014). In addition to recommendations regarding technology research and development, an unexpected, but statistically significant, result was the negative impact state-of-the-art videoconferencing between paramedics and physician during emergency health care situations has on paramedics' self-efficacy and their future performance.

Throughout the information horizon and visioning studies research, my motivation has been to uncover challenges with respect to information sharing in work contexts and to propose solutions to these challenges such that individuals, groups and organizations could function more effectively, enabling new scientific and technical discoveries to be made, or new medical practices that improve healthcare outcomes. Information sharing was always perceived from a beneficial, enlightenment perspective; that is, information sharing was viewed as an important, beneficial goal.

However, it is important to recognize that there can be a darker side of human information behavior, in particular, information sharing, in the workplace that merits our attention. This behavior is commonly known as workplace bullying.

A Darker Side: Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is defined as "conduct that cannot be objectively justified by a reasonable code of conduct, and whose likely or actual cumulative effect is to threaten, undermine, constrain,

humiliate or harm another person or their property, reputation, self-esteem, self-confidence or ability to perform.” (bullyonline.org, 2016). It is “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons...It is abusive conduct” (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2015). Workplace bullying has been called a “silent epidemic” (The Guardian, 2014). In a recent survey (Grenny & Maxfield, 2014), 96% of the respondents reported experiencing bullying at work.

Workplace bullying causes stress-related diseases and health complications such as strokes and heart attacks, colitis, and chronic fatigue syndrome in victims (Tehrani, 2012). Workplace bullying also causes financial harm when victims need to transfer or quit to stop the abuse. Organizations also incur financial harm when they must recruit and train new employees or when the organization is a non-profit, the organization must recruit and train volunteers

Human information behavior plays a key role in workplace bullying. In workplace bullying situations, information is manipulated and/or withheld to bully employees and co-workers. Examples include not sharing information about work policies, job or task requirements, and career options (bullyonline.org, 2016). Other examples include initiating and repeating gossip that damages a person’s reputation, and detrimental misrepresentation of a person’s efforts and contributions (bullyonlineorg, 2016). Hasler, Ruthvan and Buchanan (2014) found that in online newsgroups, posts about bullying focused on seeking information about ways to end bullying and mental health issues, or focused on information sharing, describing a bullying situation so the victim could move on.

Given the extent of workplace bullying and its negative impact on victims and organizations, I suggest that we extend our research agenda focusing on information behavior in the workplace to include workplace bullying. We could apply our current knowledge about information behavior when investigating workplace bullying to help illuminate workplace bullying human information behavior practices. We could design new tools and practices to help combat workplace bullying and support its victims and improve organizational work practices. We could develop specific international recommendations regarding possible actions a researcher should consider when encountering workplace bullying when conducting research within an organization.

Research Methods to Investigate Workplace Bullying

New research approaches, or extensions to the approaches we typically employ, may be required to effectively investigate workplace bullying. Victims of workplace bullying may articulate their stories during confidential interviews; however, a victim may not know about all of the

harmful information behaviors performed and the motivations behind the behaviors. It is unrealistic to expect individuals doing the bullying to openly discuss their bullying behaviors even during confidential interviews. In addition, longitudinal studies may identify new ways workplace bullying impacts victims and organizations as well as the efficacy of interventions (Tehrani, 2012). Thus a larger number of interviews and interviews conducted over a longer period of time than typically occurs in studies of information behavior may be required. The larger number of interviews would, ideally, provide a more complete perspective of bullying information behavior and ways to assist the victim and organization.

Conducting interviews with co-workers who observed, but did not perform, the bullying information behavior may also provide further insights regarding the information behavior associated with workplace bullying. Still another approach to be explored is interviewing young adults who have either been victims of bullying or who have been identified as individuals who have bullied peers, e.g., in school. Even though the bullying occurred in the context of school, instead of the workplace, there may be shared behaviors between the two contexts. If interviews with young adult victims and interviews with adult workplace victims provide common data points, then interviews with young adults who have bullied peers may be applicable to workplace bullying. Furthermore, the literature regarding young adult bullying information behavior, e.g., Bowler, Knobel and Mattern (2014), can inform workplace bullying information behavior research.

A Call to Action

A search in all volumes of the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*, *Information Research* and *Library and Information Science Research (LISR)* using terms, such as bully, bullies or bullying, yielded no research focusing on workplace bullying information behavior. A search in the 2011-2015 proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) also yielded no papers or panels focusing on workplace bullying. It is time to apply, and subsequently extend, our human information behavior theories and research methods to address, and include, workplace bullying information behavior.

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