

Original scientific paper

ENHANCING WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT BY ADDRESSING MOBBING: IMPACTS ON MOTIVATION AND PRODUCTIVITY

Jana Ilieva¹
Aleksandra Stoilkovska
Aco Todosovski

Abstract

In recent years, workplace mobbing has become a major global issue, resulting in detrimental organizational behaviors. This phenomenon creates significant obstacles to productivity, competitive edge, and the long-term sustainability of organizations. Addressing mobbing is crucial for maintaining a healthy work environment. Therefore, this paper presents a research study aimed at demonstrating the link between preventing and managing workplace mobbing and its effects on employee motivation and productivity. Workplace bullying, or mobbing, is indeed a prevalent issue in contemporary organizations. To bridge these negative consequences and aid in the management and reduction of mobbing's harmful impacts, this study sought to develop a model that addresses both the causes and effects of mobbing within organizations. The research focuses specifically on the prevention of mobbing in educational institutions. The findings support the general hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between preventing and handling workplace mobbing and the levels of employee motivation and productivity.

Keywords: mobbing, causes, motivation, productivity, law

JEL classification: K31, J5

INTRODUCTION

Mobbing in the workplace is not a recent development; it has been a persistent issue throughout human history, often stemming from individuals' ambitions for power and control. For some authors it is the most pressing and urgent problem which employees, managers, and executives of most businesses can face in their day-to-day activities (Mujtaba and Senathip 2020) thus is distinctly associated with the work environment. Mobbing is a phenomenon that occurs in the organizational context and consists in hostile actions, aggression (verbal, physical, sexual), professional discredit, contempt, isolation etc. (Cornoiu and Gyorgy 2013).

During this process, a power imbalance between the perpetrator(s) and target develops or worsens, such that the target finds it difficult to defend themselves (Einarsen et al.2020)

Employers often perpetrate mobbing by infringing upon employees' rights. The key distinction between mobbing and prolonged disciplinary measures lies in the motives behind the perpetrator's actions. Mobbing occurs when there is a deliberate violation of laws or regulations aimed at distressing the employee, leading to behavior that deviates

¹ **Jana Ilieva, Ph.D.; Aleksandra Stoilkovska, Ph.D.**, Full Professor, University of Skopje; **Aco Todosovski, MSc.**, Robotika Ltd., Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

from their job description, creating a hostile work environment, or prompting the employee to resign. In contrast, other instances of unlawful behavior by the employer within the employment relationship do not necessarily constitute mobbing in the sense of targeted mistreatment towards an individual or group of employees, but rather represent violations of standard employment laws.

In the academic discourse, various interpretations of mobbing are prevalent depending on the author. Fundamentally, mobbing entails a deliberate negative impact on an employee's mental well-being. The terminology surrounding this phenomenon varies across different regions and cultures. While the term "mobbing" is commonly utilized in Sweden, Germany, and Italy, countries in the English-speaking world often refer to similar behaviors as "bullying," with "work abuse" being predominant in the United States. Numerous terms are employed in an attempt to capture the essence of "mobbing," including psychological abuse, maltreatment, oppression, moral degradation, and ethical harassment.

Leymann offers an extensive characterization of mobbing, introducing the term in the late 1970s to denote a distinct form of aggressive conduct. He identified its defining characteristics, documented its health implications, and established a clinic dedicated to supporting individuals affected by mobbing. He gave the following definition of mobbing: "Psychical terror or mobbing in working life means hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual. There are also cases where such mobbing is mutual until one of the participants becomes the underdog. These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least for six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery" (Leymann 1990).

In a European tradition the definition posed by Einarsen et al. is probably the most widespread:

"Bullying at work means harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, the bullying behavior has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict." (Rodander and Blombereg 2019)

It's crucial to understand that mobbing is a progressively escalating assault that unfolds in four distinct stages. *First stage*: indirect, almost unnoticeable aggression, the victim is blamed in various situations and humiliated. (Vveinhardt and Streimikiene 2016). *Second stage*: as the victim is already accused, there is an excuse for direct aggression: public ridicule, humiliation, isolation, threat to use physical force. *Third stage*: direct physical attack, the victim is presented as mentally ill (the victim is made to lose control and cannot tackle emotions). *Fourth stage*: victims' voluntary redundancy or firing or, in the most extreme cases, suicide.⁴

² ibid

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

Harald Ege, a notable researcher of mobbing, has introduced the concept of a cultural dimension to the phenomenon. His studies in Italy led him to recognize this cultural aspect and revise the existing model to better fit the Italian context, ultimately proposing a six-phase model. The significance of cultural factors is emphasized in various organizational theories and intervention strategies. This aligns with the perspectives of scientists from the Tavistock Institute and American experts in organizational development, who also stress the importance of culture. Cornoiua and Gyorgya discuss the following Phases of the mobbing process – six phases Italian model according to Ege: (Cornoiu and Gyorgy 2013).

Zero Stage: Psychological Conflict

Identified and validated in Italy but unfamiliar in North European culture, this pre-stage involves a psychological conflict. At this point, there is no intent to harm; rather, the focus is on standing out and feeling superior to others.

First Stage: Conflict Directed

In this stage, the conflict becomes focused on a specific individual who is identified as the victim. The aggressor's goal shifts from achieving personal success to undermining and removing the targeted individual. This conflict extends beyond the workplace and into personal matters.

Second Stage: The appearance of Mobbing

At this stage, the victim starts to experience discomfort, anxiety, and anger due to the attacks. While these do not yet result in psychosomatic symptoms or illness, the victim's relationships with colleagues deteriorate, causing confusion and distress.

Third Stage: The First Psychosomatic Symptoms

The victim begins to develop health issues, which may persist for extended periods. Common symptoms include feelings of insecurity, insomnia, and digestive problems.

Fourth Stage: Errors and abuses in human resource management

Mobbing becomes publicly recognized, often exacerbated by mismanagement or errors in judgment by HR staff. The victim's frequent illnesses lead to suspicion among colleagues, and the situation worsens.

Fifth Stage: worsening of the individual psychophysical condition

The victim reaches a state of despair and hopelessness. Depression, whether mild or severe, sets in, requiring psychotropic treatments and psychotherapy. However, improvement is difficult as the work-related issues continue and intensify.

Sixth Stage: Exclusion from Work

In the final stage, the victim of mobbing is ultimately excluded from their workplace. This can occur through resignation, dismissal, early retirement, or in extreme cases, tragic outcomes such as suicide, the development of obsessive mania, or violence towards the aggressor. This stage is a direct result of the preceding phase, where severe depression drives the individual to seek an escape, whether by leaving the job voluntarily or being forced out. In the most dire scenarios, the relentless pressure of mobbing can lead to catastrophic actions.

Over the past few decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of studies conducted across European nations addressing the issue of workplace bullying, commonly referred to as mobbing. These studies aim to gain insight into various aspects of the phenomenon at both national and individual employment levels. They seek to identify patterns of mobbing behavior, understand the demographics of victims,

including factors such as age, type of workplace, duration of employment, and level of qualifications.

The collaboration between the International Labour Organization (ILO), Lloyd's Register Foundation⁵, and Gallup represents a pioneering effort aimed at offering a comprehensive global perspective on individuals' encounters with violence and harassment in the workplace. This survey marks the inaugural endeavor to systematically assess people's firsthand experiences of workplace violence and harassment on a global scale.

Among those who reported experiencing violence and harassment in the workplace, approximately one-third (31.8%) disclosed encountering more than one form, with 6.3% indicating they had faced all three forms during their employment tenure. The data revealed that a significant proportion, nearly one in ten (8.5% or 277 million individuals), of the global workforce had encountered physical violence and harassment during their professional careers. Interestingly, men were more likely than women to report experiencing physical violence and harassment. Psychological violence and harassment emerged as the most prevalent form, reported by both men and women alike. Nearly one in five individuals in employment (17.9% or 583 million people) disclosed experiencing psychological violence and harassment during their working lives.⁶

The outcomes of this survey offer an initial glimpse into the extent and recurrence of violence and harassment within work environments. They provide valuable insights into the primary manifestations of such misconduct, including physical, psychological, and sexual forms, as well as shedding light on the significant obstacles that hinder individuals from openly discussing these issues.

1. FROM CHAOS TO CLARITY: EXPLORING MOBBING'S EFFECTS

While there have been many studies examining moderating factors that worsen or mitigate bullying's effects, the field lacks a common theoretical framework to integrate and explain these diverse moderators. (Farly et. al. 2023). In light of the increasing number of studies on the consequences of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018), there is a critical need for an updated synthesis of its daily and longer-term outcomes as well as the related mechanisms in order to obtain an overarching view of our current knowledge of the detrimental effects workplace bullying can have on the targets of this form of mistreatment. (Boundrias et. al. 2021)

Compared to other forms of mistreatment, such as incivility, abusive supervision, and social undermining which all may represent single incidences, workplace bullying refers to a form of systematic and prolonged exposure that gradually pushes the target into a helpless situation with less and less ability to avert or stop the negative behaviours (Einarsen et al. 2020).

Being exposed to bullying is associated with a range of negative effects, including sleep problems (Nielsen et al., Citation2020), impaired health (Boudrias et al.,

⁵ 1 Lloyd's Register Foundation World Risk Poll 2021, available at:

https://wrp.lrfoundation.org.uk/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwpNuyBhCuARIsANJqL9O7g7Jr-ovQhpceSKSF_m5Vc4edELQNQFEgFKe_1EYDuXP77j0mDGMaAkftEALw_wcB

⁶ Ibid

Citation2021; Verkuil et al., Citation2015), reduced work ability (Nielsen et al., Citation2016), and risk of suicide (Leach et al. 2017).

Similar to other forms of workplace abuse, mobbing can have deeply harmful and potentially destructive consequences. The severity and nature of these consequences depend on the intensity and duration of the mobbing, as well as the individual characteristics of the victims. Taking into account the abovementioned, we may typically observe these effects on two levels:

Personal Consequences:

Individuals subjected to mobbing often suffer from severe psychological and emotional distress. Common outcomes include anxiety, depression, and a decline in self-esteem. Physical health issues such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and a weakened immune system are also prevalent among victims. Prolonged exposure to mobbing can lead to chronic conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other long-term mental health problems. These personal consequences extend beyond the workplace, affecting victims' personal and social lives, ultimately reducing their overall life satisfaction and well-being (Zapf et al., 1996; Sansone & Sansone, 2015).

Organizational Consequences:

Mobbing significantly impacts organizational dynamics and performance. It leads to reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions among employees. The organizational consequences of workplace mobbing are profound and multifaceted. Recent research highlights several critical impacts:

1. **Reduced Productivity and Efficiency:** Mobbing creates a toxic work environment that hampers employee morale and motivation, leading to decreased productivity and efficiency (Escartín et al., 2021).

2. **Increased Turnover and Absenteeism:** High levels of stress and dissatisfaction among employees result in higher turnover rates and increased absenteeism, which in turn raise recruitment and training costs (Cullinan et al., 2020).

3. **Legal and Reputational Risks:** Organizations may face legal challenges due to workplace mobbing, and their reputations can suffer, deterring potential talent and affecting stakeholder trust (Salin & Notelaers, 2018).

These impacts are not naïve at all. Addressing these issues requires implementing robust anti-mobbing policies and fostering a supportive and respectful workplace culture to mitigate these adverse effects (Wong & Greenwood, 2023).

The effects of mobbing extend beyond the workplace, significantly impacting victims' personal lives and social relationships. Victims often exhibit negative attitudes towards family members, including parents and children. These experiences can erode their social standing and reputation. Furthermore, mobbing disrupts personal values and ethical standards, complicating social interactions and relationships within the broader community.

Research indicates that the stress and trauma from mobbing contribute to these broader social and personal consequences. As mentioned above, individuals subjected to prolonged mobbing may suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that influence their behavior and interactions at home and in social settings. These psychological effects can manifest as irritability, withdrawal from social activities, and strained familial relationships (Zapf et al., 2020).

Moreover, the loss of social standing and reputation is a significant concern. Victims may become isolated, losing social networks and community support, which exacerbates

feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem. This social isolation can lead to further psychological distress and hinder recovery from the effects of mobbing (Einarsen et al., 2021).

Addressing mobbing comprehensively requires not only workplace interventions but also support systems that extend into victims' personal lives. Providing psychological counseling, community support, and family therapy can help mitigate the extensive personal and social consequences of mobbing (Djurkovic 2022).

2. BUILDING RESILIENCE: EFFECTIVE MEASURES AGAINST MOBING

Mobbing, emerging as a contemporary psycho-social challenge within workplaces, has prompted the inclusion of novel dimensions alongside traditional standards such as the prohibition of forced labor and ensuring fair working conditions. These contemporary dimensions encompass the prohibition of workplace discrimination, prevention of employment abuse (mobbing), and the prohibition of sexual harassment, among others.

While it is incumbent upon employers to furnish a work environment that is both healthy and safe, including one devoid of stress to avert potential health risks for employees, effective measures must be adopted to prevent, reduce, or eliminate the underlying causes of mobbing. These measures necessitate a collaborative effort involving employees and their representatives.

When mobbing infiltrates an organization, the issue often escalates, compelling the implementation of more stringent measures compared to instances where the problem is promptly identified.

Crucially, key personnel within organizations, notably management heads, play a pivotal role in mobbing prevention. Various strategies and interventions can be deployed across three fundamental levels - primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary prevention endeavors to forestall factors that could disrupt interpersonal relationships and workplace dynamics. This involves fostering a robust work culture rooted in mutual respect, disseminating information and educating employees about mobbing, fostering open communication, providing relevant training and development opportunities, and enforcing clear guidelines outlined in manuals, employment contracts, and procedures, which explicitly state repercussions for rule violations. Clarity regarding work roles, authorities, responsibilities, and fostering open communication channels are indispensable within the organization.

Secondary prevention focuses on early detection of mobbing symptoms and halting its progression through timely interventions. Mediators play a pivotal role in conflict resolution, facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties to reach mutually acceptable solutions.

Tertiary prevention is concerned with addressing the aftermath of mobbing and restoring equilibrium within the organization and the mental and physical well-being of the victim.

This synthesis encapsulates contemporary strategies for mobbing prevention and intervention within organizational contexts, aligning with recent research findings.

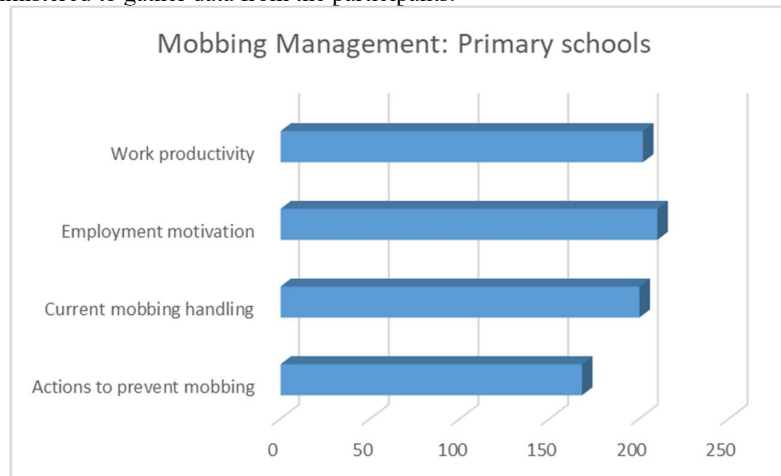
3. RESEARCH

The research focuses on investigating the correlation between addressing mobbing in the workplace and the potential enhancement of motivation and productivity. To achieve this, a theoretical framework has been formulated, encompassing all pertinent components necessary for rigorous scientific inquiry.

Mobbing is a negative phenomenon that can easily throw the employee off track and lead him to destructive behaviors, mental disorders and ultimately to leaving the workplace. Employees are the most important segment of any organization. That's why the management team must take care of the psychovisual health of the employees extremely strongly and in case of mobbing, to predict, prevent and suppress it in a timely manner, so that instead of destruction, individuals can move towards progressive initiatives in terms of motivation to increase efficiency and productivity at work. From here comes the subject of research in this thesis, which is:

Implementing strategies to prevent and address mobbing with the aim of fostering employee motivation and enhancing overall productivity.

The study was carried out within primary schools across the state's territory, with a total of 325 teachers participating as respondents, including those teaching various grades and subjects. An anonymous survey utilizing closed-ended questions was administered to gather data from the participants.



Histogram 1: Results

The research examines relevant variables pertaining to its subject matter. The independent variables include initiatives aimed at preventing mobbing and addressing ongoing instances of mobbing. These independent variables are juxtaposed with two dependent variables, namely employee motivation and organizational productivity.

Histogram number 1 provides a visual representation of the data obtained from a series of grouped questions corresponding to each variable set.

For the variable assessing the implementation of actions to prevent mobbing, employees' feedback regarding the presence of such preventative measures within the school is analyzed. Results suggest a lack of or minimal implementation of mobbing prevention initiatives within service workshops.

Regarding the variable evaluating the handling of existing mobbing cases, employees' perceptions of the employer's efforts to address ongoing mobbing incidents are considered. Findings reveal limited or insufficient measures taken by employers to address mobbing within the investigated schools.

The study delves into the impact of addressing mobbing within investigated schools on employee motivation. This exploration is conducted through analyzing employee feedback regarding whether the management of mobbing incidents contributes to increased motivation. The findings suggest that consistent handling of mobbing incidents influences employee motivation positively.

Likewise, similar outcomes are observed for the variable assessing the efficiency of the schools. Respondents indicate that addressing mobbing within these schools has a beneficial impact on organizational efficiency.

The convergence of these independent and dependent variables lends support to the hypothesis that managing mobbing incidents correlates with both employee motivation and organizational productivity.

CONCLUSION

Addressing workplace mobbing and bullying stands out as one of the foremost and immediate challenges encountered by employees, managers, and executives across various businesses in their daily operations. These pervasive issues demand prompt attention and proactive measures to ensure a conducive and respectful work environment for all stakeholders.

Because of its significance and the problems and implications it causes, it is necessary to systematically acquaint the public with all its different aspects, since mobbing can be prevented through primary prevention, i.e. information gathering, education, communication skills training, with protective legislative and organizational policy and practice.

The thesis undertook a comprehensive study validating the hypothesis linking effective mobbing management to employee motivation and work productivity within educational institutions – primary schools. Simultaneously, it has sparked inquiries into the imperative of prioritizing mobbing as a detrimental issue within all group dynamics, with particular emphasis on educational settings. The findings underscore a glaring lack of initiatives targeted at addressing and mitigating instances of mobbing. This highlights the urgency for proactive measures to tackle mobbing head-on, safeguarding the well-being and performance of individuals within school communities.

REFERENCES

- Boudrias, Valérie, Sarah-Geneviève Trépanier, and Denise Salin. 2021. A Systematic Review of Research on the Longitudinal Consequences of Workplace Bullying and The Mechanisms Involved. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* no. 56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101508>
- Cornoiu, Teodora S., Manuela Gyorgy. 2013. Mobbing in Organizations. Benefits of Identifying the Phenomenon. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 87 (1): 708–712 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.380>.

- Cullinan J., Hodgins M., Hogan V., Pursell L. 2020. The value of lost productivity from workplace bullying in Ireland. *Occupational Medicine* 70: 251–258. doi: 10.1093/occmed/kqaa067
- Djurkovic, Nikola, Darcy McCormack, Helge Hoel, and Denise Salin. 2022. Joking behaviours and bullying from the perspective of Australian human resource professionals. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 60, no. 2 381–404.
- Einarsen, S. V., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L. 2020. The Concept of Bullying and Harassment at Work. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Practice*, 3rd Edition, pp. 3–53. CRC Press.
- Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L. 2021. The concept of bullying and harassment at work: The European tradition. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and harassment in the workplace: Developments in theory, research, and practice* 3rd ed., pp. 3–39. CRC Press.
- Escartin Solanelles, Jorge & Vranjes, Ivana & Baillien, Elfi & Notelaers, Guy. 2021. Workplace Bullying and Cyberbullying Scales: An Overview. doi: 10.1007/978-981-13-0134-6_10
- Farley, Samuel, Daniella Mokhtar, Kara Ng, and Karen Niven. 2023. What Influences the Relationship between Workplace Bullying and Employee Well-Being? A Systematic Review of Moderators. *Work & Stress* 37, no. 3: 345–372. doi:10.1080/02678373.2023.2169968.
- Leach, L. S., Poyser, C., & Butterworth, P. 2017. Workplace Bullying and the Association with Suicidal Ideation/thoughts and Behavior: A Systematic Review. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 74(1), 72–79. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2016-103726>
- Leymann, Heinz. 1990. Mobbing and Psychological Terror at Workplaces. *Violence and Victims* no. 5 119–126.
- Mujtaba, Bahaudin G., and Tipakorn Senathip. 2020. Workplace Mobbing and the Role of Human Resources Management. *Business Ethics and Leadership* 4(1):17–34
- Rosander, Michael, and Stefan Blomberg. 2019. Levels of Workplace Bullying and Escalation – a New Conceptual Model Based on Cut-off Scores, Frequency and Self-Labelled Victimization. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 28 (6): 769–83. doi:10.1080/1359432X.2019.1642874.
- Salin, Denise & Notelaers, Guy. 2018. The Effects of Workplace Bullying on Witnesses: Violation of the Psychological Contract as an Explanatory Mechanism? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 31. 1-21 doi 10.1080/09585192.2018.1443964.
- Sansone RA, Sansone LA. 2015. Borderline Personality Disorder in The Medical Setting: Suggestive Behaviors, Syndromes, and Diagnoses. *Innovative Clinical Neuroscience* 12 (7-8):39– 44.
- Wong, Bernie and Kelly Greenwood. 2023. The Future of Mental Health at Work Is Safety, Community, and a Healthy Organizational Culture. *Harvard Business Review*, available at: <https://hbr.org/2023/10/the-future-of-mental-health-at-work-is-safety-community-and-a-healthy-organizational-culture>

- Vveinhardt, Jolita, and Dalia Streimikiene. 2016. Management Culture and Mobbing in a Social Organisation: Whether a Special Status Provides a Guarantee of Safety. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* 29 (1): 950–66. doi:10.1080/1331677X.2016.1198981.
- Zapf D, Dormann C, Frese M. 1996. Longitudinal Studies in Organizational Stress Research: a Review of the Literature with Reference to Methodological Issues. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 1(2):145-69. doi: 10.1037//1076-8998.1.2.145. PMID: 9547043.
- Zapf, D., Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., & Vartia, M. 2020. *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Practice*. Boca Raton: CRC Press