

Incivility in Your Inbox:

Rude Emails May Have Big Consequences for Employees and Organizations

By Stephany Below, PR Specialist

There is something about email communication that seems to make it easier for people to be impolite or say things they might not say face to face.

A rude message from a colleague here and there might feel like par for the course in the workplace or relatively trivial compared to more severe forms of mistreatment, such as harassment. However, new research shows that employees and organizations may want to pay closer attention to their email etiquette.

This ostensibly minor online mistreatment, also known as “cyber incivility,” is actually a meaningful stressor that negatively affects employees emotionally and physically for an extended period of time afterward, according to recent research by YoungAh Park (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), **Charlotte Fritz** (Portland State University), and Steve M. Jex (University of Central Florida).

“Our study shows that not only is email incivility related to high distress on the workday it occurs, but the high distress will still be visible the following workday, especially when employees are not able to detach from work during the evening,” explained Dr. Fritz, an associate professor in industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology and a faculty member within the occupational health psychology (OHP) at Portland State.

Fortunately for employees and organizations, the research also suggests that two resources at work and home—job control and detachment from work—can help relieve the stress.

This research titled, “[Daily Cyber Incivility and Distress: The Moderating Roles of Resources at Work and Home](#),” was published in the September 2018 issue of the [Journal of Management](#).

Organizations have good reason to be concerned with how employees treat one another. Disrespectful or inconsiderate behaviors and comments made by others at work have been linked to depression, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, according to the researchers.

“Incivility at work includes small acts with big impact, such as a lot of negative outcomes for employees and the organizations they work for,” Fritz added. “Unfortunately, incivility is very common in workplaces.”

The researchers note that it is imperative for organizations to be aware of the detrimental effects of cyber incivility, as this research shows the distressing effects are “persistent and strong.”

“Employees don't want to work in uncivil work environments and may react to experienced incivility with reduced engagement, increased absenteeism, and eventually may even decide to leave the organization,” Fritz explained.

In their study, the researchers' sought to investigate daily experiences of cyber incivility among employees who use email for work. Specifically, they examined individuals' relationships between cyber incivility during the workday and affective and physical distress at the end of a workday. Affective distress includes various negative emotions, such as being annoyed, anxious, or discouraged. Physical distress may include headaches, nausea, or chest pain. The researchers also included measurements of email incivility's effects on employees the following morning.

The study also examined two resources—job control and psychological detachment from work—that may mitigate effects of cyber incivility. Job control refers to the degree of freedom and autonomy an employee has over his or her tasks and conduct at work, such as their job allowing them to make a lot of decisions on their own or providing the freedom to decide how to organize their work. Psychological detachment from work during off-work time is defined as an “individual's sense of being away from the work situation.” Detachment is often described as “switching off mentally” by refraining from work-related thoughts and activities outside of work.

A total of 155 full-time employees who used email as one of their primary work-related communications and had regular work hours (no shift work) were recruited via email from a midwestern university's alumni as well as a peer nomination procedure. The researchers collected survey data over four consecutive lagged workdays from 96 of the employees.

In measuring cyber incivility, they asked participants whether they have experienced email instances where someone: said something hurtful to them through email; used emails to say negative things that he/she would not say to you face-to-face; put the participant down or was condescending in some way through emails; sent emails using a rude and discourteous tone; did not reply to an email at all; or ignored a request made through email. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with specific statements, such as “Today, someone at work said something hurtful to me through email,” and “Today, someone at work sent me emails using a rude and discourteous tone.” In their analyses, the researchers controlled for sex, age, differences in daily work demands, and variances in perceived distress between individuals.

More than a third of respondents (34%) reported receiving one to three rude emails per workday. About 2% of the participants reported receiving more than five uncivil emails per day on average.

“As no previous research assessed email or cyber incivility on a daily basis, we weren't sure how prevalent it would turn out to be,” explained Dr. YoungAh Park. “But the results weren't surprising given how much contemporary employees rely on email communication for work.”

Results showed that on days when employees experienced cyber incivility, they reported higher affective and physical distress at the end of the workday which, in turn, was associated with higher distress the next morning. In other words, employees started the following workday at a disadvantage because of distress “spilling over” from the previous day's cyber incivility. However, on days with greater evening detachment, employees were less likely to experience this distress spillover. Fritz explained that, according to these findings, those experiencing cyber incivility can reduce its negative effects by detaching from work when they are at home.

“People can detach more easily by creating boundaries between work and nonwork domains through not checking emails or taking phone calls outside of work,” Fritz explained. “They can also engage in activities that allow them to mentally let go of work, for example by doing meditation or relaxation exercises, engaging in a hobby, engaging in family activities, etc.”

In addition, job control appeared to mediate the distress of cyber incivility. Specifically, the results indicated a relationship between cyber incivility and distress at work for employees with low job control but not for those with high job control.

“Managers can allow employees to have more job control, as it was shown to buffer the daily stress of cyber incivility in the study and past research supports for the beneficial role of job control in employee well-being in general,” Park added.

Although the current study focuses on the short-term relationship between cyber incivility and distress, the researchers say experiencing these negative effects can be seen as “early warning signs” for the potential development of more serious chronic strain, such as burnout, depression, and migraines. Because email interactions are recorded, cyber incivility could be “reexperienced” by victims, making them more likely to ruminate about it after work. Thus, this study provides researchers and managers with guidance on preventing the short-term stress of cyber incivility from becoming a chronic problem that may impede employee health and performance.

While past research has focused mainly on face-to-face incivility, very little is known about the specific role of cyber incivility in employee outcomes. That is unfortunate, the researchers explain, because cyber incivility may be quite common due to the unique nature of email. For example, “norms of civility” that are followed in face-to-face meetings tend to be less explicit in computer-mediated communications, leading individuals to inadvertently say and do things online they would not do in person. Email also lacks important nonverbal and situational cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice. In addition, limited and delayed feedback in email communications often makes it difficult to resolve potential ambiguity, leading to miscommunication.

The researchers note that organizations have several options for combating cyber incivility and its potential negative effects. They can design interventions to reduce cyber incivility in the first place. This can include working to increase employee awareness regarding cyber incivility in online communication and working to make employees aware of possible misperceptions or biases in email communication. In addition, CREW training (civility, respect, and engagement at work) has been shown to decrease face-to-face incivility and job burnout among employees.

In particular, managers of virtual teams and teleworkers should pay special attention to potential cyber incivility, as the majority of work communication is done via email and group members may not know each other very well.

“Considering a heavy reliance on online work communications,” Park said. “It would behoove organizations to use preemptive approaches to cyber incivility issues, rather than reactive approaches.”