Workplace Cyberbullying: The Antecedents and Consequences

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Due to its negative consequences on targets, witnesses and organization itself, workplace cyberbullying has captured lots of media attention and triggered many discussions among practitioners. The overriding purpose of this paper is to examine cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace. More specifically, neutralization theory and rational choice theory of corporate crime are used as the theoretical foundation to build a model of antecedents of workplace cyberbullying. In addition, the negative impacts of workplace cyberbullying on victims and witnesses are also measured and discussed in our study.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, workplace, neutralization theory, rational choice theory of corporate crime.

Introduction

Because of its serious negative impacts on targets, witnesses and the organization itself, workplace bullying poses a challenge to organizations that wish to create work environments that foster employee well-being. Statistics from the 2010 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey show that 35% of the U.S. workforce report being bullied at work, while an additional 15% witness it ("2010 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey | Workplace Bullying Institute," n.d.). In the past decades, information and communication technology (ICT) has radically altered the way we communicate with each other in organizations, both for better and for worse. While ICT can improve the productivity of employees, it also provides digital alternatives for workplace bullies to target their victims (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). The recent rise of IT consumerization and BYOD (bring your own device) has further facilitated cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace. It is more difficult for IT departments to monitor and control those mobile devices and employees are more familiar with the devices and applications they bring to work and may bring with them habits that they have seen, or witnessed, in their private use (Harris, Ives, & Junglas, 2012).

Perhaps due to the complexity of this phenomenon or its relative newness, there is no agreed upon definition of workplace cyberbullying in the previous literature. Thus, we try to develop a definition of workplace cyberbullying based on the definitions of general cyberbullying and workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is defined as a situation in which an employee is systematically exposed to repeated negative treatment from supervisors (downward bullying), colleagues (horizontal bullying) or subordinates (upwards bullying) over a long period of time (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Hershcovis, 2011). In her research on workplace aggression, Hershcovis (2011) differentiated five aggression constructs: abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, social undermining, and interpersonal conflict. She further identified three distinguishing characteristics of workplace bullying: it is persistent, frequent, and entails a power imbalance (Hershcovis, 2011, p. 502). Power imbalance indicates that aggression behavior can be labeled as workplace bullying only when the bully has more power than the victim. Power can be

from either formal (e.g. higher organizational position) or informal (e.g. networks of people) sources (Branch et al., 2013).

Cyberbullying is defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). Thus, based on the definitions of cyberbullying and workplace bullying, we define workplace cyberbullying as instances where an employee is systematically exposed to repeated negative treatment from supervisors, colleagues or subordinates by electronic forms of contact over a long period of time, in a situation in which the perpetrator has more power than the target (Branch et al., 2013; Hershcovis, 2011; Smith et al., 2008). Examples include "information withheld affecting someone's performance by Email", "Insulting/offensive remarks via texting messages" and "Repeated reminders of one's errors or mistakes via Email" (Privitera & Campbell, 2009).

For the past two decades, considerable research has been conducted in the field of workplace bullying (Branch et al., 2013). While workplace cyberbullying has become a hot topic in the media and has triggered much discussion in enterprises, research into workplace cyberbullying is still nascent (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). The overriding purpose of this paper is to examine cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace. More specifically, neutralization theory and rational choice theory of corporate crime are used as the theoretical foundation to build a model of antecedents of workplace cyberbullying. In addition, the negative impacts of workplace cyberbullying on victims and witnesses are also measured and discussed in our study.

Many features of workplace cyberbullying distinguish it from traditional forms of workplace bullying. On the part of perpetrators, they may be less aware of the injury of victims caused by their cyberbullying behaviors because they do not have to see and feel the pain and fear directly from the victims (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009). On the part of victims, it is hard for them to escape the bullying because they have to receive email or text-messages for their work and cannot simply "defriend" or ignore messages from superiors, colleagues or suborindates (Slonje & Smith, 2008). In addition, some bullying behaviors may reach a much larger audience, for example, uploading an inappropriate picture of someone in social media or spreading rumors about some colleague in the company forum. Such acts are more damaging to the victims because the picture or the rumors may be observed by more employees than traditional bullying (e.g. face-to-face bullying).

This is a research in progress paper and we haven't collected our data. Thus, in the following sections, we will discuss our theoretical background, research model and methods, sequentially.

Theoretical Background

First, we address the disincentives to workplace cyberbullying. Although workplace cyberbullying behaviors are not likely to be treated as corporate crimes, they are behaviors that can produce a hostile work climate and while not illegal, may violate organizational norms and policies. Rational choice theory of corporate crime (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996) attempts to explain individual corporate crime behaviors in a rational choice framework, that is, delinquents make their decisions about whether to commit corporate crimes by weighting the perceived rewards and costs of violations (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Thus, we use these cost effects as starting points in explicating the disincentives to cyberbully in the workplace.

Rational choice theory of corporate crime

Two levels of effect are included in the rational choice theory of corporate crime. The benefits and costs directed against firms are named as firm-level effects while the benefits and costs directed against individuals are called individual-level effects. Firm-level effects are assumed to influence individual decisions to commit corporate offenses when those firm-level effects entail cost to individuals (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Thus, in a simplified model that contains only individual-level cost effects, the disincentives of individual corporate delinquent behaviors include "formal sanctions, informal sanctions, shame, and moral inhibitions" (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996, p. 556).

Formal sanctions, informal sanctions, and shame

Because corporate criminals have more stakes in their normal life, they will lose more if their delinquent behaviors are detected. Thus, they are more averse to sanction threats (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Three forms of sanction were summarized and widely employed in the area of corporate crime. Formal sanctions are defined as company policies that are against illicit behaviors and associated punishments with specific people authorized to deliver it (Straub, 1990). Informal sanctions refer to the disapproval of a delinquent behavior by managers and/or co-workers (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Shame is described as a self-imposed sanction (e.g. a feeling of embarrassment, personal dissonance) when delinquents' socially unacceptable behaviors are known by managers and/or colleagues (Siponen & Vance, 2010).

Moral inhibitions

In some cases, an employee may make the decision to not commit a crime because of his moral evaluation of such an act. More precisely, the employee may make the decision to not act not because the perceived costs outweigh the benefits of the behaviors but because he believes that it is immoral to conduct such behavior. Two crucial implications can be drawn from the description of moral inhibitions by Paternoster & Simpson (1996). First of all, moral rules are internalized. Specifically, they are not influenced by external sanctions (e.g. formal sanctions, informal sanctions and shame etc.). Although certain criminal behaviors are deterred by fear of punishment, decisions based one's sense of morality are not affected by notions of benefits and costs. Second, moral rules create a line among delinquent behaviors. Some criminal behaviors are inhibited by moral rules while others may be deterred by external sanctions.

In the context of workplace cyberbullying, sanctions and moral inhibitions may lose their efficacy. For example, some perpetrators know there are sanctions for their cyberbullying behaviors and some understand it is immoral to conduct such behaviors. In neutralization theory, Sykes and Matza (1957) indicated that individuals can maintain their noncriminal image by neutralizing their delinquent behaviors as acceptable. Thus, in order to investigate why workplace cyberbullying happens, we went to neutralization theory.

Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory supposes that law breakers believe in the values held by law-abiding society. However, it also argues that there is a delinquent sub-system composed of values that stand for the inversion of values held by the general community. It is the sub-system that makes offenders define their offences as "right" and exhibit no feelings of embarrassment or disgrace when the criminal behaviors are detected (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, in the context of workplace cyberbullying, we assume that although perpetrators admit that the bully behaviors are socially undesirable, they still bully others because their sub-system provides them with some weapons that defend them against the dominant social orders and justify cyberbullying behaviors as "right" and "acceptable." We refer to these weapons as neutralization techniques.

Five neutralization techniques were proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957) in their paper of neutralization theory: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. "The metaphor of the ledger" was added into neutralization theory later (Siponen & Vance, 2010). We used four dimensions from Sykes and Matza and the metaphor of the ledger. We omit the condemnation of condemners because this neutralization technique allows the delinquent to justify his unacceptable behavior by blaming those who disapprove of his delinquency. In the context of workplace cyberbullying, it is illogical to argue that the perpetrators legitimize their bullying behaviors by claiming that the anti-cyberbullying policies in companies are unreasonable. The five neutralization techniques used in this study will be discussed next.

Denial of Responsibility

According to the denial of responsibility neutralization technique, the delinquent justifies his offense by perceiving himself as the victim of the environment (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). The delinquent defines himself as a "billiard ball" helplessly propelled into an environment with factors such as unloving parents or bad companies that force him to commit a crime (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Baillien et al. (2009)

summarized a three way model of workplace bullying based on 87 real workplace bullying cases. In the model, one path that may lead to the occurrence of workplace bullying is the company atmosphere that directly stimulates bullying (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009). In this situation, the bully may shift accountability for his negative behavior to his company.

Denial of Injury

The denial of injury neutralization technique allows the delinquent to define his harmful acts as causing little negative consequences (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). Or, the perpetrators deem that the victims can easily afford the harm (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, the delinquent admits his responsibility of the bad acts but breaks the tie between the caused harm and his delinquency. The features of cyberbullying make it more convenient for bullies to deny the injury because they don't have to face the consequence of their bullying behaviors directly when conducting those harmful acts. Research reported that 40% of those who cyberbullied others online thought it was funny (Dooley et al., 2009). In the workplace, employees being bullied a few times usually choose to cope passively, either by keeping silent or by distancing themselves from the work situation (Baillien et al., 2009). However, such responses may be counterproductive in that the perpetrators may remain unaware of the harm or injury caused by their bullying and continue to bully the same targets.

Denial of Victim

The denial of victim neutralization technique asserts that even if the delinquent takes the responsibility of his harmful behavior and acknowledges the injury caused by such behavior, he can still justify his delinquency as retaliation upon a deserving target (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Sykes & Matza, 1957). By transforming a victim to a person deserving injury, the delinquent minimizes his feeling of shame or guilt for his bad act. Research has shown that 25 percent of those who engaged in electronic bullying reported that they did it "to get back at someone they're mad at" (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007, p. 570). In the workplace, bullying is usually a result of interpersonal conflict (Baillien et al., 2009). Employees with poor conflict management skills are more likely to escalate the conflict by forcing a solution (Branch et al., 2013). Thus, they are more likely to treat the target as someone "had it coming" and conduct the bullying behaviors.

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

The appeal to higher loyalties neutralization technique claims that the delinquent conducts criminal crimes in order to find a solution to a current problem. The delinquency happens not because the dominant social orders are rejected but because other norms belonging to a higher loyalty are endowed with precedence (Sykes & Matza, 1957). For example, productivity may be perceived by an employee as a higher order norm that takes precedence over politeness. In their study of culture's influence on the acceptance of workplace bullying, Power et al., (2013) found that cultures with high performance orientation are more acceptable of workplace bullying behaviors than those with future orientation. In other words, employees in a performance-oriented company may feel that their bullying behaviors are more acceptable when the purpose of such behaviors is to get a job done.

The Metaphor of the Ledger

The metaphor of the ledger neutralization technique argues that the delinquents legitimize their harmful behaviors by claiming that their bad acts can be compensated for by their previously constant good performance (Siponen & Vance, 2010). For example, in the workplace, Lim (2002) reported that employees legitimize their engagement in the action of cyberloafing by their good job performance. Similarly, we argue that employees may feel their general adherence to company policies and good performance can compensate for their cyberbullying behaviors in the company.

Consequences of Workplace Cyberbullying

Previous literatures have proven the negative consequences of workplace bullying behaviors for victims, witnesses and organizations (Branch et al., 2013). In this paper, we are interested in the impacts of workplace cyberbullying, as a new type of workplace bullying, on victims and witnesses. Since the level of

analysis for this paper is the individual level, we do not discuss potential organizational level impacts such as organizational climate or performance. In addition, our analysis focuses on job-related consequences (e.g. job satisfaction) rather than clinical-level harm (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder).

Research results have indicated the severe work-related consequences for victims of workplace bullying. For example, In their qualitative study with employees in three industries, Buttigieg et al. (2011) found that workplace bullying was directly correlated with poor organizational commitment and high turnover intentions. Likewise, Kivimäki et al. (2000) reported that absence from work due to sickness were 1.5 times higher for bullying targets than for others. We expect that workplace cyberbullying will have similar consequences to workplace bullying. Yet because it is arguably easier to cyberbully than to bully, because one does not have to be co-located with the target, one would expect even higher rates of cyberbullying than non-cyber forms of bullying.

Not only are the targets of cyberbullying affected, but so too may be the bystanders or witnesses who feel powerless to help their co-worker in cases where the cyberbully is a superior. Research suggests that the work-related consequences can be as severe for witnesses as for the victims (Branch et al., 2013; Rasool et al., 2013). Djurkovic et al. (2004) also reported that witnesses of workplace bullying may feel threatened and consider leaving the company. Therefore, we argue that workplace cyberbullying may lead to similar consequences for the witnesses as for the target.

Research Model

Our research model of the antecedents of workplace cyberbullying is shown in Figure 1. The dependent variable in the model is "Intention to Cyberbully in the Workplace." We view expressed intention to cyberbully in the workplace as an indication of a motivation for an action prior to the commission of the act rather than as a proxy for the actual behavior (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Thus, intention can be used as a proxy for occurrences of actual bullying behavior.
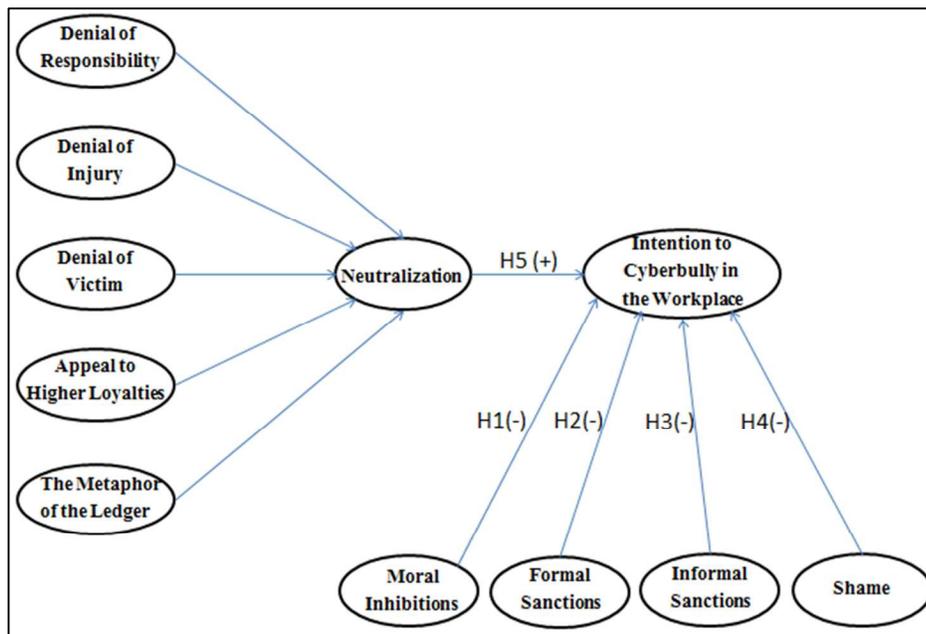

Figure 1. Research Model of Antecedents of Workplace Cyberbullying

The four deterrence constructs identified in the rational choice theory of corporate crime are: formal sanctions, informal sanctions, shame and moral inhibitions. In the context of workplace cyberbullying, we define formal sanctions as announced company policies that explicitly prescribe what cyberbullying behaviors are and specify the associate sanctions when employees conduct such behaviors. In a recent global survey, only 37% of respondents reported that their company has a comprehensive policy covering workplace cyberbullying ("Cyberbullying policy survey," n.d.). In addition, we define informal sanctions

as the loss of respect and good opinion of managers and/or colleagues when an individual's cyberbullying behaviors are known by them. Most often, this may jeopardize one's promotion prospects. Shame is defined as feelings of guilty and embarrassment when an employee knows his cyberbullying behaviors are perceived by others. As previously stated, moral inhibitions is an internalized deterrence and not affected by external sanctions. Employees may make the decision to not cyberbullying because he believed it was immoral to do it. Thus, we offer the following hypotheses consistent with rational choice theory of corporate crime:

H1: Moral inhibitions negatively affect intention to cyberbullying in the workplace.

H2: Formal sanctions negatively affect intention to cyberbullying in the workplace.

H3: Informal sanctions negatively affect intention to cyberbullying in the workplace.

H4: Shame negatively affects intention to cyberbullying in the workplace.

As shown in Figure 1, neutralization is modeled as a formative second-order construct with denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, appeal to higher loyalties and the metaphor of the ledger being modeled as five first-order sub-dimensions. Although all these neutralization techniques are conceptually different, at a higher level, each reflects a distinct facet of the neutralization construct and can be used by the workplace bullies to justify their harmful behaviors (Jarvis, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003; Siponen & Vance, 2010). Thus, each first-order construct measures a different aspect of the unobservable higher-level construct (neutralization) (Petter, Straub, & Rai, 2007).

Based on the theoretical lenses of neutralization theory, we argue that, although employees are aware of the deterrence of cyberbullying behaviors at work, they may still conduct such behaviors because they may use neutralization techniques to legitimize those behaviors.

H5: Neutralization positively affects intention to cyberbullying in workplace.

Hypotheses of Consequences of Workplace Cyberbullying

Two groups of job-related consequences are tested in our study: motivation-related (e.g. enjoyment of job and job satisfaction etc.) and turnover-related (e.g. turnover intention and job-security etc.) Comparisons are made among victims, witnesses and the other employees (neither victims nor witnesses of workplace cyberbullying). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H6a: Compared to the other employees, victims of workplace cyberbullying have low work motivation.

H6b: Compared to the other employees, victims of workplace cyberbullying have high turnover intention.

H7a: Compared to the other employees, witnesses of workplace cyberbullying have low work motivation.

H7b: Compared to the other employees, witnesses of workplace cyberbullying have high turnover intention.

Research Design

People tend to respond to a controversial topic in a socially acceptable manner, even if their responses are far removed from their true feelings. This tendency will lead to social desirability biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Those biases may occur in measuring an individual's intention to cyberbully in the workplace because the respondent may wish to hide his intention to conduct harmful behaviors in order to present himself in a socially acceptable manner. Those biases may not only lead to spurious distribution of the answers on intentions to cyberbully in the workplace but also create false relationships between variables (Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983). In order to avoid such biases, we use factorial survey approach to measure our DV (Intention to cyberbully in the workplace).

Factorial survey approach

Drawing from the strengths of both an experimental design and the survey approach (Taylor, 2005), a factorial survey approach was used in our study to measure "Intention to cyberbully in the workplace." By using this approach, true-to-life vignettes (case scenarios) are presented to respondents to make a

decision on those scenarios (Taylor, 2005). Scenario-based methods are a common means for controlling social desirability bias (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Each vignette includes "dimensions", "levels" and "decisions" (Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005). A dimension is an independent variable that has an impact on the respondents' decision. It may be framed as categorical, ordinal or interval (Taylor, 2005). A level is a specific value of one dimension (Shlay et al., 2005). The independent variables should be not only controlled by the investigators, but also presented to the respondents randomly (Taylor, 2005). A decision is a dependent variable in the vignette. The respondents analyze the information provided (the independent variables) and make a decision/decisions.

Previous literatures suggest that the situations in the vignettes must be realistic to the respondents (Siponen & Vance, 2010). In their study, Hoel and Cooper (2000) found that the most common bullying behaviors in the workplace was "someone withholding information"(Hoel & Cooper, 2000). In addition, Privitera & Campbell also verified that "someone withholding information by e-mail" was the most frequently reported cyberbullying behavior at work (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Thus, it was used as a proxy for cyberbullying behaviors in workplace in our hypothetical scenarios.

Baillien et al. (2009) summarized a three way model of workplace bullying based on 87 real workplace bullying cases. In their model, the three paths that may lead to the occurrence of workplace bullying are: strains (frustrations), conflicts, and aspects within the team or the organization which directly stimulate bullying(Baillien et al., 2009).

We used these three paths as dimensions in our vignettes. Specifically, we designed two levels for both strains and conflicts dimensions (low strain vs. high strain; low conflict vs. high conflict) in our vignettes. Although two levels exist for the third path (aspects within the team or the organization which directly stimulate/prohibit bullying), we only used one level in our scenarios (prohibit bullying). In all our scenarios we describe that: "Tom/John knows that the company has a policy that no one should withhold work-related information that affects other's performance". The four vignettes are presented in Table 1. The levels of dimensions for each scenario are shown in the Figure 2.
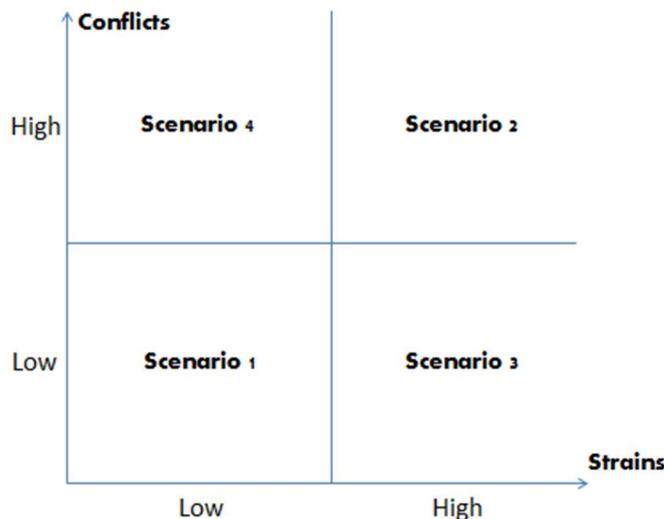
Note 1) The cyberbullying behaviors in all the scenarios are prohibited from the organizations. 2) Scenario 1 and 2 will randomly assigned to one half of the respondents and Scenarios 3 and 4 will assigned to the other half of respondents.

Figure 2 Dimensions of Scenarios

Measures

Most of the construct items were adopted from previously validated instruments where possible and measured on a 7 point Likert-type scale. The neutralization techniques, formal sanctions and informal

sanctions were adopted from Siponen and Vance (2010) and adapted to the workplace cyberbullying context. We also created the items for the three celerity constructs based on the definitions from Paternoster and Simpson (1996). The dependent variable, Intention to Cyberbully in the workplace, was measured using one item adapted from Siponen and Vance (2010). Taylor (2005) indicated that using only one question to measure the dependent variable is efficient and avoid the risk the distracting the respondents in factorial survey.   Moral inhibitions was measured by using one item adopted from Paternoster and Simpson (1996). In addition, the two groups of job-related consequences measurement items are adopted from previous literatures.

Our next plan

Our next plan includes the following two steps:

1) Data will be collected from employees in different industries, organizations and positions.
2) Based on the comments of reviewers and the track chair, we plan to use media synchronicity/richness theory (Dennis etc. 2008) to emphasize the technology aspect of workplace cyberbullying. The five capabilities of media (symbol sets, parallelism, transmission velocity, rehearsability, and reprocessability) can be used to compare cyberbullying behaviors and face-to-face bullying behaviors.

Scenario 1: Low Conflict & Low Strain	Tom is in charge of collecting and distributing updated work information to the colleagues in his department by email each week. Dan is in the same department. Dan was assigned to a 6 month project launched by another department as a communicator between the two departments. Tom was unsatisfied with this arrangement because it increased the workload on his department. Additionally, the departments are in competition with one another since each department is rewarded based on their performance. Tom knows that the company has a policy that no one should withhold work-related information that affects other's performance. However, Tom deleted Dan's name from the mailing list during the implementation of the project.
	Low Conflict: Dan's new role (communicator between the two departments) conflicts with Tom's job (collecting and distributing updated work information to the colleagues in his department by Email each week) since the information of Tom' department may be revealed to the other department if Tom distributes the information to Dan.
	Low Strain: Tom was unsatisfied with this arrangement because it increased the workload on his department.
Scenario 2: High Conflict & High Strain	John is in charge of collecting and distributing updated work information to the colleagues in his department through a weekly email. Phil is in the same department. Phil was assigned to a 6 month project launched by another department as a communicator between the two departments. Due to this new workload, Phil has been turning his work in late to John. Additionally, the departments are in competition with one another since each department is rewarded based on their performance. John knows that if his department doesn't perform well, he may lose his job. Furthermore, John and Phil are competing for the same position. John knows that the company has a policy that no one should withhold work-related information that affects other's performance. However, John deleted Phil's name from the mailing list during the implementation of the project.
	High Conflict: Phil has been turning his work in late to John; John and Phil are competing for the same position; Phil's new role conflicts with John's job.
	High Strain: John knew that if his department doesn't perform well, he may lose his job.
Scenario 3: Low Conflict &	Tom is in charge of collecting and distributing updated work information to the colleagues in his department through a weekly email. Dan is in the same department. Dan was assigned to a 6 month project launched by another department as a

High Strain	communicator between the two departments. Additionally, the departments are in competition with one another since each department is rewarded based on their performance. Tom also knows that if his department doesn't perform well, he may lose his job. Tom knows that the company has a policy that no one should withhold work-related information that affects other's performance. However, Tom deleted Dan's name from the mailing list during the implementation of the project
	Low Conflict: Dan's new role conflicts with Tom's job. High Strain: Tom knows that if his department doesn't perform well, he may lose his job.
Scenario 4: High Conflict & Low Strain	John is in charge of collecting and distributing updated work information to the colleagues in his department by email weekly. Phil is in the same department. Phil was assigned to a 6 month project launched by another department as a communicator between the two departments. John was unsatisfied with this arrangement because it increased the workload on his department. Due to this new workload, Phil has been turning his work in late to John for distribution. Additionally, the departments are in competition with one another since each department is rewarded based on their performance. John and Phil are also competing for the same position at work. John knows that the company has a policy that no one should withhold work-related information that affects other's performance. However, John deleted Phil's name from the mailing list during the implementation of the project
	High Conflict: Phil has been turning his work in late to John; John and Phil are competing for the same position; Phil's new role conflicts with John's job Low Strain: John was unsatisfied with this arrangement because it increased the workload on his department.

Table 1. Scenarios

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