



Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Rachel L. Morrison Terry Nolan, (2007), "Negative relationships in the workplace: a qualitative study", Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management, Vol. 4 Iss 3 pp. 203 - 221

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/11766090710826646>

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Negative relationships in the workplace: a qualitative study

Negative
relationships in
the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose this paper is to expand upon existing knowledge of this important topic by providing an expanded inventory of the causes and consequences of having enemies at work.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data were collected from 412 respondents using an internet-based questionnaire with respondents spanning a wide range of occupations, industries and nationalities. Using a structured methodology for handling a large data sample of qualitative responses, emergent thematic categories are identified and explained by means of verbatim text.

Findings – It was found that several aspects of the work environment directly exacerbated or created negative relationships which, in turn, negatively impacted respondents' experiences of work. Findings illustrate some strongly held employee expectations of behaviour and felt-obligations defining both formal and informal organisational roles.

Research limitations/implications – The findings discussed here emanate only from data emphasising negative relationships at work. A study into other relational factors may provide interesting and important points of comparison as well as serving to overcome the inevitable bias towards the negative within this inquiry.

Practical implications – The conclusions present a number of important challenges to employers and managers for anticipating and dealing with negative co-worker relationships. Employees seek an equitable and reciprocal relationship with their organisations. An important lesson for management is that workers expect and depend upon their managers to provide support and assistance in overcoming negative workplace relationships.

Originality/value – The data, discussions and conclusions are derived from specific questions which have not previously been expressed in the literatures.

Keywords Workplace, Employee relations, Stress, Employee productivity, Problem employees, Social dynamics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The impact of social relationships on employee well-being has long been of interest to researchers, generally in the form of enquiries regarding the positive impact of social support (Allen *et al.*, 1999; Buunk *et al.*, 1993; Francis, 1990; Gant *et al.*, 1993; Loscocco and Spitze, 1990). The impact of negative social relationships, or enemies, is a topic that has received far less attention, particularly in the work environment. Some studies have "hinted" at the negative side of relationships in the workplace, but these are mostly concerned either with the negative outcome of friendship, or the negative outcome of having no friends (Burt and Celotto, 1992; Rook, 1984).

The first aim of this research was to unearth various causes and consequences of negative relationships through a qualitative analysis of verbatim responses from respondents. The researchers anticipated that this type of response might uncover deeply held feelings which have so far gone largely unreported in the literature. The second purpose was to derive lessons for workers and management in dealing with both the causes and consequences of negative workplace relationships.



The marked lack of attention to negative workplace relationships in the current literature may be due to researchers' focus on the identification of factors that reduce the stress and anxiety of employees. In organisational literature, for example there has been attention given to how negative relationships might affect, or be dealt with, by managers (Grove, 1993; Monroe *et al.*, 1992; Bramson, 1981). An important study was conducted by Sias *et al.* (2004) finding five specific causes of deteriorating relationships: personality, distracting life events, conflicting expectations, promotion and betrayal. The current paper addresses Sias *et al.*'s call for further research into this topic and provides an expanded inventory of deterioration causes, strategies and consequences. The responses to two open-ended questions relating to the causes and consequences of negative relationships at work are examined. The conclusions present a number of important challenges to employers and managers for anticipating and dealing with negative co-worker relationships.

Literature review

Although no standard definition of negative relationships yet exists, such relationships can be characterised by conflict, with communication ranging from "... passive to active dislike, animosity, disrespect, or destructive mutual interaction" (Dillard and Fritz, 1995, p. 12). A negative relationship is one where interactions such as concealment, manipulation, conflict, disrespect, disagreement and/or animosity are frequent. Personal experience and emotions such as feeling fearful of someone who threatens one's personal space or beliefs are powerful factors which lead to the perception of others as "enemies" (Middents, 1990).

Moerbeek and Need's (2003) study specifically examined the effects of negative relationships in work environments, providing an alternate conceptualisation of negative workplace relationships. Moerbeek and Need define negative relationships in the context of social capital rather than in terms of the interactions between individuals. A person's social network can be either helpful or harmful to his/her future career. Moerbeek and Need term relationships which have a negative effect "sour social capital" and they use the term foes to refer to a person's sour social capital, stating that all kinds of people can be foes: acquaintances, colleagues and even family members. The only people who cannot be foes are friends (at least not simultaneously).

Moerbeek and Need (2003) state that the one major difference between friends and enemies is that people do not choose to have foes in their social network; relationships with foes will be involuntary relationships. When a relationship degrades or turns sour in a workplace the individuals concerned often have to continue to interact. The workplace is one of the few environments where people are "forced" into relationships with others and, as a result, it is an ideal environment to examine these negative relationships. The two aspects of the definition of negative relationships given to respondents in this study are:

- (1) negative interactions; and
- (2) the involuntariness of the relationship (refer to Method section).

An explanation for why people would be willing to intentionally harm a colleague comes from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974). Social exchange theory proposes that whether we like somebody, or want to engage in a friendship with him or her, is determined by the cost-reward ratio. People will evaluate the cost to themselves

(e.g. time, money, effort) to get a positive reward (e.g. satisfaction, pleasure, support) from a particular person (Rook, 1984). Social exchange theory holds that people enter into relationships because of the rewards (benefits, fulfilled needs and other “profits”) that such relations are expected to bring. On the other hand, if an individual expects a person to be obstructive or harmful in the future, they may be willing to harm or obstruct this person in the present; and if a person has obstructed an individual in the past, the individual may be willing to harm him or her in return.

The causes of negative relationships

The causes of negative workplace relationships are multi-faceted. People can obstruct each other for reasons of jealousy or competition, and for a variety of other reasons. The personality characteristics of individuals are certainly likely to contribute to negative relationships in the workplace. For example, “Type A” behaviour patterns[1], when combined with impatience/irritability and hostility/aggression, are related to more difficulty dealing with workplace conflict (Baron, 1989). Dillard and Fritz (1995) also claim that people who exhibit verbal aggressiveness or have a generalised negative outlook (i.e. negative affectivity) are more likely to be involved in negative relationships at work.

Another cause of negative relationships is the “problem personality” described by Sias *et al.* (2004) as the display of an unacceptable personality trait or behaviour such as selfishness, disrespect or flirtatiousness. Actions which “complicate” relationships can be caused by, for example a co-worker’s excessive drinking. Further, complications arise from the “conflicting expectations” regarding behaviour towards one another. This latter cause relates to the dialectical tensions experienced in “blended” relationships (Bridge and Baxter, 1992), by which friends expect unconditional support, whereas co-workers are required to critically evaluate each other. The sense of betrayal therefore can exist between co-workers, when evaluation takes the place of supportive behaviour (Bridge and Baxter, 1992). In addition, workplace envy is a factor that is likely to create negative emotion in the workplace. Envy is common in businesses and organisations; it may be defined as an emotion occurring when a person begrudges another for having something that he or she does not have, or seeing another individual gain advantage and viewing it with displeasure (Bedeian, 1995). The way that limited resources (such as office space, company cars, promotions, secretarial support) are distributed creates an environment where envy is not only possible but almost inevitable. Envy implies hostility; it is generally viewed as a dangerous emotion, and not one that people will readily acknowledge.

It is also possible to create an enemy without knowingly doing anything wrong, through genuine misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Some behaviour may be interpreted differently by different individuals or by those from other cultural backgrounds (for example, behaviour interpreted by one individual as rude or brusque may be viewed by another as efficient or no-nonsense) (Johnson and Indvik, 2001). Thus, as workplaces become more diverse the potential for misunderstandings and hostility increases, along with the number of negative relationships.

The work context may provide the opportunity for negative relationships to form; people are rarely in a position to choose who they work with. If an individual continually has to interact and work with a person with whom they do not get along, the potential for deepening hostility exists (Dillard and Fritz, 1995). The organisational environment may provide other elements conducive to the formation of

negative relationships. People may have to compete for resources or individuals might have incompatible goals. Combined with other factors, such as personality or an unhealthy organisational climate, a previously benign relationship can escalate into a hostile one. Accordingly, Wheatley (1994) urges a research focus on the organisation of relationships rather than the organisation of tasks, functions and hierarchies.

The outcomes of negative workplace relationships

Although, the effects of negative workplace relationships have received very little attention in the literature, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of these relationships is likely to adversely affect an individual's experience of work. If someone is experiencing animosity or obstruction in the workplace, they are likely to be less satisfied with their job than someone not having to deal with interpersonal negativity. These negative relationships are likely to be differently related to the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of job satisfaction (Richer *et al.*, 2002; Knoop, 1994). It is likely that satisfaction with aspects of the job itself (intrinsic satisfaction, such as satisfaction with variety or responsibility in ones job) will be less affected by negative relationships than satisfaction with the more extrinsic factors, such as "physical conditions" or "fellow workers".

Moerbeek and Need (2003) found that people who experience a bad atmosphere at work leave more quickly than people who experience a good atmosphere. Because both intention to turnover and job satisfaction are strongly related to organisational commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Cohen, 1993; Irvine and Evans, 1995; Mobley, 1977), it is also reasonable to assume that organisational commitment will be reduced when individuals are engaged in negative relationships with others at work.

Methodology

Data were collected from 412 individuals by means of a self-administered, internet-based questionnaire. Initially, friends and acquaintances of the author were sent an e-mail inviting them to complete an online questionnaire, which included a link to a data collection site. In addition two e-mail lists, EMONET (an international list of academics and practitioners in the field of emotions in organisations) and IOnet (a list of industrial organisational psychologists) were sent the e-mail. These groups were selected for their interest in this research and for their opportunities to forward information about the research to other professionals and employees. The snowball technique was used with all recipients being encouraged to pass it on to friends and colleagues. As with most online data collection there is no way of knowing the total number of people to whom the survey links were sent, so it is not possible to calculate a response rate.

The demographic data indicated a diverse range of respondents, ranging in age from 19 to 64 years and from a large variety of industry sectors. As there were no exclusion criteria (other than having a job), a wide variety of responses were elicited. Table I summarises the demographic data collected.

Respondents were given the following definition (written by the researcher to include the two aspect of negative relationships), and was based on Kram and Isabella's (1985) definitions of organisational peer types:

This person is not one of your friends. You do interact with this person on a fairly regular basis but you would definitely not continue the relationship if you did not work here.

Variable	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Valid percent
<i>Sex (six missing)</i>		
Males	127	31.3
Females	279	67.7
<i>Age (years) (mean 35.23, s.d. 11.07) (six missing)</i>		
> 20	8	2.0
20-29	150	37.0
30-39	116	28.6
40-49	70	17.2
50-59	57	14.0
Over 60	5	1.2
<i>Country of origin (five missing)</i>		
New Zealand	277	68.1
USA	52	12.8
United Kingdom	33	8.1
Australia	20	4.9
Canada	5	1.2
Other	20	4.9

Note: Values are presented in percentages excluding respondents who declined to answer

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Table I.
Demographic data of
respondents

Your interactions with this person are characterised by disrespect, disagreement, dislike, conflict and/or animosity. You would rather not have to interact with this person.

Two critical incident questions were used to give respondents an opportunity to comment on these negative relationships. In their responses, respondents outlined how their negative relationships either negatively affected their work environment and, if appropriate, how the workplace might have affected their relationships. The instructions given were as follows:

- (1) Please briefly outline how a negative relationship with someone with whom you work (ed) has made your work more difficult.
- (2) Please briefly outline how your work environment has exacerbated (made worse) a negative relationship you have had at work.

The two questions selected for analysis in this paper evoked responses varying in length from very short phrases – “wouldn’t usually deal with that person” to short narrative accounts implying causality and “retrospective meaning-making” (Chase, 2005). However, unlike the narrative interview style that Chase articulates, the questionnaire generally invited relatively short responses, resulting in a large number of respondents answering with general rather than particular instances of their experiences. This phenomenon is partly explained by Weiss (1994) who suggests that interviewees assume that researchers are more interested in generalities. The assortment of emotions embedded within the responses, described respondents’ perceptions, decisions and behaviour regarding their experiences of negative relationships at work. Thus, the agglomerated data represented an array of individualised, internal representations, of both physical and conceptual aspects of the workplace (Kearney and Kaplan, 1997).

In order to handle with the relatively large number of qualitative data responses, the researchers adopted a technique for data management and analysis advocated by Huberman and Miles (1994). This technique involves three linked sub processes: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. The first of these sub processes, data reduction, is used to anticipate the array of data likely to be received. Using “enemies at work” as a conceptual framework, the two questions were carefully formulated so as to oblige respondents to focus clearly upon the cause and effect processes under scrutiny within this inquiry. By reducing data in this way, relevant themes could then be found from clustering responses. This thematic data was displayed in Tables II and III, together with accompanying explanations. Huberman and Miles (1994, p. 429) emphasise the importance of drawing meaning from data through conclusion drawing/verification. This stipulation is accomplished by

Impact of negative relationship on work	<i>n</i>
<i>Poor communication (process)</i>	
General breakdown in communication	26
Avoiding the person	21
Lack of trust	13
Withholding information	10
Total	70
<i>Lack of cooperation (task)</i>	
General uncooperative behaviour	19
Person not pulling their weight	6
Could not ask for task-related help	4
Total	29
<i>Distraction from work (task)</i>	
Time/energy spent managing the relationship	12
Time spend thinking about events/interactions	7
Total	19
<i>Impact on career task</i>	
Leave the organisation	10
Effect on career/reputation	7
Total	17
<i>Emotion related outcomes (emotion)</i>	
Less enjoyment of work	11
Frustration	9
Stress	11
Decreased self-esteem/self-confidence	9
Decreased motivation	7
Nervousness/Paranoia	7
Flow over to rest of team	7
Less respect	3
Total	64
Other response (no clear category)	27
Total people describing adverse impacts of negative relationships at work	226
Respondents stating that they did not have a negative relationship at work	9

Table II.
Responses to the question

Note: Please briefly outline how a negative relationship with someone with whom you work(ed) has made your work more difficult

Impact of work environment on negative relationship		Negative relationships in the workplace
	<i>n</i>	
<i>Proximity</i>		209
Having to continually see the person		
Total	44	
<i>Workplace/Systemic</i>		
Lack of management support	12	
Disorganised management systems	11	
Poor communication in the workplace	4	
Physical aspects of workplace/layout	3	
Total	30	
<i>Co-workers</i>		
Conflict	5	
Personality traits	8	
Performance	5	
Total	18	
<i>Poor management/supervision</i>		
Incompetence	9	
Unfairness	5	
Total	14	
<i>Working conditions</i>		
Poor working conditions	5	
Stressful job	13	
Total	18	
Other response (no clear category)	4	
Total people describing adverse impact of work environment on negative relationships	128	
Note: Please briefly outline how your work environment has exacerbated (made worse) a negative relationship you have had at work		Table III. Responses to the question

comparing and contrasting themes, noting patterns and highlighting extreme cases in the Results and Discussion section, below.

Eight academic colleagues were enlisted to form an analytical group to conduct an initial analysis of the data. Each of the responses was first examined to see if it contained more than one answer to the question; if it did the response was separated into its component statements and printed out to be cut up into individual strips, which were then laid out in a pile on the table. Colleagues then took it in turn to pick a response strip and read the response to the group. A discussion then commenced as to how each response related to the abstract concepts. This method was adopted from James (1962; cited in Kearney and Kaplan, 1997), for revealing elements of the environment that are implicit, entailing object-construct formation by presenting abstract concepts, which have associations to the events described by respondents. For example, responses recounting direct incidences of disruptive behaviour from co-workers were allocated to a thematic category under the heading of “co-workers” as representing the root cause of the problem. Other responses recounting, for example the negative effects of working in close proximity to enemies, were associated directly with the issue of proximate working, rather than the enemy him/herself. This technique of eliciting the root cause was applied to each response, allowing several thematic categories to emerge from the data. Each thematic category represented

associated causal factors, emotions, behaviours and outcomes of negative relationships. The analytical process became more efficient as the analysts became familiar with the nature of the responses and the thematic categories, thus allowing individuals to use their autonomous judgement in deciding which thematic category to allocate the more obvious responses. Where doubt occurred, the response was put to the whole group for discussion, sometimes resulting in the revision of entire thematic categories. The final stage of data sorting involved the authors revisiting and refining the data themes. A number of responses were re-categorised into alternative themes, themes were amalgamated and new categories emerged to reflect a more coherent scenario.

It is worth noting at this point that there were a small number of occasions where an answer could have been interpreted as falling into more than one category. For example:

No. 178 I get frustrated when people don't pull their weight.

No. 219 You do not look forward to coming to work – affects productivity.

Response No. 178 could have been either an emotion related outcome (frustration) or a task-related outcome (cooperation/not pulling their weight), while response No. 219 could have been either an emotion related outcome (decreased enjoyment of work) or a general task-related outcome. When there were responses with apparent overlapping categories the analysts discussed the response and a consensus was reached as to the primary impact the respondent was describing. In both the instances above, for example it was decided that the respondents were describing their emotional response to the negative relationship, respondent No. 178 described an antecedent to the frustration but it was the frustration itself that they highlight as the impact of the negative relationship. Similarly respondent No. 219 describes a decrease in productivity as a possible outcome to the decreased enjoyment of work but, again it is the affective response that seems to be the primary impact of their negative workplace relationship.

Results and discussion

Question 1

About 57 percent of respondents ($n = 235$) answered the question *Please briefly outline how a negative relationship with someone with whom you work(ed) has made your work more difficult* and all but nine (who stated that they did not have any negative relationships) reported ways negative relationships adversely impacted them. Five main themes were identified, covering the range of responses, these are summarised in Table II. Although it is impossible to know for certain it is likely that those respondents not answering this question did not believe they had any negative relationships at work.

Respondents described the effect of these relationships on their ability to carry out work processes and functions (task-related outcomes, $n = 155$), or the effect negative relationships had on their emotional well being (emotion related outcomes, $n = 64$). About 27 individuals responded to the question in ways that indicated they were negatively impacted by these relationships but which did not fall clearly into a category of responding, for example:

No. 1 Negative relationships make my job more difficult.

No.169 There is such a relationship. Luckily I don't have to work closely with this person. . .

No. 449 That person abuses boundaries, screams and yells.

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Task-related outcome 1: communication. The most commonly reported process-related outcome of negative relationships was the impact on communication. Four sub-themes were identified. In the first of these, respondents spoke about the effects upon their work stemming from a general breakdown in communication, for example:

No. 409 Created tension in the office, people stopped communicating as effectively and problems sometimes became worse, deadlines have been missed, mistakes made.

No. 305 . . . decreases problem solving because of poor communication.

Delays in completing work were an outcome of avoidance tactics, for example:

No. 139 It can sometimes make you avoid the inevitable contact, therefore work takes longer to get done.

No. 181 Reluctance to approach someone has meant delay in projects/job getting done.

Thirdly, a lack of trust and/or honesty in the relationship was also mentioned in the context of communication breakdown in the workplace, for example:

No. 324 Feeling that I cannot trust the person to act in a professional manner. Communication is fragmented and the relationship could be described as obstructive.

No. 150 It is difficult to be honest because this person will tell everyone what you say.

No. 240 I can't really stand being around them. I constantly think they are saying nasty things about me, although what they say to me face is a lot different – I'm not sure who to trust anymore.

The fourth communication sub-theme involved the withholding of information. Interestingly, respondents reported both that, their workplace enemy would withhold information from them, and vice-versa:

No. 106 Direct boss didn't like me at all, made a point of pissing me off by not telling me important things at all or at the last possible moment.

No. 286 Caused me to be less open and sharing of work related information. Eventually meant that neither of us worked effectively with one another.

Task-related outcome 2: cooperation. A lack of cooperation was the second task-related outcome that respondents talked about. There were three sub-themes in this category with general uncooperative behaviour being the most common response, for example:

No. 263 Lack of cooperation and respect – not willing to work as a team in a small environment.

No. 390 Obstacles placed in the way of progress by someone with a non-collaborative agenda.

The next sub-theme within the cooperation category related to the extra work required to pick up slack for a co-worker as follows:

- No. 460 When a bad attitude co-worker will not complete their work, but the task must get done, it puts more pressure on me to complete the tasks.
- No. 413 There is one person in the office who is completely disagreeable . . . what happens is that now no one asks them to do anything and everyone else has to take up the slack.

The final cooperation sub-theme was related to people feeling unable to ask for, and being less likely to give, task-related help to the person with whom they had a negative relationship, such as these responses:

- No. 257 Don't feel that I can ask them to help me, would rather struggle on my own and work longer hours to meet deadlines.
- No. 223 Discouraged from going out of my way to help them.

Task-related outcome 3: distraction from work. Respondents reported that negative relationships distracted them from their work in two ways: the first related to the amount of time and energy spent managing the relationship rather than concentrating on work, for example:

- No. 446 I have to try to act like a professional when it comes to this person, not allowing the negative feelings to interfere with any work that we have to do and it is very hard to do so.
- No. 246 Tip toeing around people takes more time.

Respondents were also distracted by the time spent dwelling on, and thinking about, the relationship rather than concentrating on work, as reported here:

- No. 457 You spend time thinking about the negative relationship instead of work.
- No. 10 It can make it difficult to fully focus on the job that needs to be done instead of how you feel personally at the time.
- No. 253 Negative relationships cause me to lose my focus on work, spending time stewing on events/things that a person may have done that has displeased me.

Task-related outcome 4: impact on career. In the final task-related outcome, respondents reported on how a negative relationship had affected their careers. In one sub-theme, individuals explain why they had left previous jobs because of negative relationships (or were ready to quit from their current one):

- No. 247 Having a manager that didn't like me made the job hell and resulted in me quitting.
- No. 252 I do not like my immediate supervisor's boss much: It means I am less likely to stay in the organisation.

The other sub-theme focused more on the perceived long-term effects on the respondent's reputation or career opportunities, for example:

No. 347 Envious and jealous colleagues and supervisors bad mouthed me to others and attempted to destroy my reputation.

No. 350 In a previous job, I had a manager who was inherently lazy and wasn't interested in advancing my career opportunities for fear of my skills and abilities.

Emotion related outcomes. As well as describing the impact that negative relationships had on respondents' ability to effectively perform their jobs, a significant number of respondents ($n = 64$) described the emotional or affective outcome of having an enemy at work. It is worth noting that the division into discrete categories of responses within this theme is somewhat artificial as emotions seldom occur without other flow-on effects or emotional contagion to others in the environment. Again, after discussion of responses not easily categorised, a consensus was reached between the researchers. An example of responses from each sub-theme is given below:

Less enjoyment of work:

No. 415 Feel awkward around them, they annoy me, they do not make my time with them enjoyable.

No. 29 It puts me off wanting to work with them, and even going to work as it is less enjoyable.

Frustration:

No. 367 Increased frustration as not being able to carry out my job well.

No. 142 Feelings of anger and frustration and sadness at times.

Stress:

No. 456 I feel very stressed when working with my colleagues is not harmonious.

No. 105 Personal conflict with a work colleague divided the office and caused a lot of stress and friction in the work place. This meant that work was not a pleasant place to be at the time.

Decreased self esteem/self confidence:

No. 116 Constant negativity of a peer undermining own confidence in ability.

No. 340 Constant criticism leading to lowered self esteem. Taking on their characteristics: bitter, sharp, cynical.

Decreased motivation:

No. 255 I had co-workers who didn't care if they were doing a good job or not, just went through the motions, and that drove me crazy and made me think, why should I work hard?

No. 191 It brings your motivation levels down. You have to try harder to be positive when negative people are around you.

Nervousness/paranoia:

No. 319 One co-worker has made me feel quite nervous as I feel I am constantly being watched.

No. 293 When you know someone dislikes you and vice versa, it can make you feel a little paranoid about your performance at work.

Impact on others:

- No. 199 Generally raised levels of stress. The tension can never be contained to just being between the 2 individuals as other members of the team are always involved (willingly or not). This can be a cascade effect where the neg. relationship with one individual can impact even well established relationship with others (either in a positive or a negative way!).

- No. 323 ... this meant that any upset within the group was closely felt by all...

Less respect:

- No. 24 I have a hard time respecting my manager when she treats me poorly and picks fights with others.

Question 2

Of respondents 31 percent ($n = 128$) gave valid responses to the question "Please briefly outline how your work environment has exacerbated (made worse) a negative relationship you have had at work". Five main themes were identified, covering the range of responses, these are summarised in Table III.

Each of the above themes is now discussed in turn, with illustrative responses provided.

Workplace factor 1: proximity. The most commonly reported workplace factor exacerbating negative relationships was simple proximity to the enemy. About 44 respondents mentioned being forced to work in close proximity with persons as the main contributor to negative relationships. Respondents in this category spoke of "imprisonment" "being trapped" and "being forced" by the organisation to interact with those with whom they did not get on. The difficulty or impossibility of avoiding those with whom one would not normally interact, speaks of the strain and resentment of a number of respondents, such as in the following example:

- No. 460 When you can't stand a co-worker, you still have to spend time with them at work, and even if you do not want to know or listen, you usually hear them complaining or hear about what awful thing they did to another worker anyway. You're trapped in an office, you get to know all those little annoying things about people that come out over the course of time.

The above response refers to the problems of proximate working with a difficult personality, whereas the following example possibly puts the blame elsewhere:

- No. 291 Only to the extent that the person got more and more annoying the more time I had to spend but that's probably not the work environment as such. Perhaps, just stress in the work situation made things come to a head.

The considered viewpoint expressed above is continued in the following response, perhaps adding a further layer of complexity:

- No. 368 Usually in a negative relationship I avoid the person in question. In the work environment I am required to maintain a level of professionalism, which requires me to put aside differences and work with that person, which seems to add more strain to the situation because you both know that neither of you wants to be involved.

Workplace factor 2: workplace/systemic. This workplace factor relates to systemic workplace issues and workplace systems; issues such as disorganised management and unclear power, rather than about a particular supervisor or work colleague. There were four sub themes within this theme, the first being complaints relating to a lack of management support for dealing with problem relationships. This issue may point to a strong expectation that management take on a mediation role (Mintzberg, 1975; Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998) for example:

- No. 54 Again the culture of my organisation (which I have taken a career break from to continue my studies and which I do not intend to return to either) is very archaic and patriarchal, and it allows for authoritarian relationships and a lot of sexual harassment and bullying goes on as management do not seem to realise the potential legalities of allowing such a culture to manifest itself, therefore you have to be very careful in your work and spell out to certain individuals (management) that position does not allow for misuse of their perceived power, so the culture of the organisation has led me to leave the organisation.
- No. 135 I had a negative relationship with a past member of my team, and due to the lack of suitable processes in the company structure to deal with our inability to work together, it was an extremely strained atmosphere until she finally left the company.

The above accounts alluding to a lack of management support, point to a perceived powerlessness on the part of co-workers to resolve conflicts due to the constraints of organisational rules and the expectation put upon them to work together in a cohesive manner. It may also point to employee expectations that their organisation will help and support them (perceived organisational support) (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Another interesting response suggests an incidence of a co-worker adopting an unauthorised position of power, with strong undertones of a negative relationship:

- No. 97 Unclear power structure means that this person tends to railroad initiatives even though she is not in a management position.

A further sub theme illustrates how the strain of having to work with disorganised or poor managerial systems can also contribute to poor relationships. Perceived disorganisation can shape patterns of communication for example, causing role ambiguity and confusion about who is in charge:

- No. 40 The disorganised management structure role ambiguity I feel at times has contributed to my not liking one of my colleagues.

The third sub-theme related to systemic communication issues, for example:

- No. 251 Multiple lines of power equals one person [person A] telling you to do something, needing info from someone else who is in a power struggle with person A and refuses to give help or information.

A final sub-theme within this workplace factor is the physical environment, with two respondents outlining how the building layout puts a physical separation between teams, thus exaggerating the differences between them; creating an “us and them” attitude from both sides. This attitude actually constitutes the flipside to the problems reported from working in proximity with others. Another respondent also points to a variation of “sick building” syndrome:

- No. 199 ... the awful concrete '60s style complex, the oppressive nature of the surrounding ... have an exaggerated impact on negative relationships. When travelling in, in the morning you'd not only think "this is going to be a difficult day with [person X]" but you'd also have a little voice saying "... and it's a shite place (environment) to work".

Workplace factor 3: co-workers. Co-workers come in for critical evaluation in the third main theme. The bulk of criticisms relate to general difficulties with co-workers' personal traits, which include different ways of working, racism, being overly critical and, in a different vein, one respondent who reported that "... *everyone being too nice to set the few difficult people straight*".

Romantic overtures can cause problems for co-workers, for example:

- No. 183 There is a romantic interest by co-workers, which makes it difficult as I'm only interested in being their friend and nothing more.

Co-workers' performance is a subject for critical evaluation, especially when one person's poor performance results in increased work and/or stress for another, for example:

- No. 416 The negative relationship was made worse because the job was a client services position that was very busy. The more work there was the more pressure there was as he failed to achieve, my workload increased.
- No. 44 Poor performance from other person who I have a negative relationship with made me angry and affected my judgement.

However, criticisms can be levelled against co-workers for less specific reasons, as illustrated by the response below:

- No. 25 Currently there has been a lot of reorganization and layoffs. One of my co-workers continuously leaves early and comes in late. It aggravates me that so many people are without work and the rest of us are overworked when she does not pull her weight.
- No. 352 Some people in my office separate themselves from the rest of us and only socialize within their own group, even speaking a different language than the rest of us while at work. I find that this makes me feel uneasy and even hostile towards them.

The latter response (above) demonstrates how hostility can be unwittingly invited through innocent actions such as speaking one's native tongue.

Workplace factor 4: poor management/supervision. The fourth of the six themes relating to ways that the work environment can exacerbate negative relationships includes responses recounting incidences of poor management and supervision. Accounts within this thematic category, whilst alluding to some of the issues in the previous section, relate to problems encountered with specific managers or about particular incidents arising from those contacts. Although a number of respondents make specific mention of managers with whom they have on-going relationship problems, an equal number refer only to managers as causing problems at work. However, given that references specify a particular person, we infer that a negative relationship exists possibly as a result of the problem rather than the individual.

Direct accusations of poor performance/incompetence form a major sub category, with a number of criticisms again directed at unsupportive managers. One invective goes as follows:

- No. 287 A colleague wrote a personal attack in a communication book which nobody knew what she was referring to, but also couldn't be bothered to address. Our current boss is spineless and has not known how to address the current problem caused by two staff upsetting the rest of an otherwise good team.

The above account is an example of a manager causing a negative relationship between others to continue and to worsen. The use of the word "spineless" however, clearly indicates a negative relationship between the respondent and the boss. In the following response, one observes an on-going, dysfunctional relationship, stemming from some previous, unreported incidents:

- No. 272 Boss again – sometimes there can be weeks we don't speak to each other – he just comes and dumps the work on my desk and leaves the room.

Here, the opening words "boss again" signify the existence of a negative relationship, whereas the action reported – weeks of silence – may on the face of it, simply indicate a remarkably reticent manager.

Outright bad behaviour on the part of a manager is reported in two cases, for example:

- No. 5 My supervisor is widely known to be insolent to subordinates. There are times when it is challenging to tolerate this behaviour.

Perceived unfairness is also criticised:

- No. 33 The supervisor I have problems with has been there so long that a lot of her problems with myself and other employees are overlooked by her bosses. It's common knowledge that she doesn't treat her employees fair and equal, but nothing is done about it.

The above account calls to mind the saying that "there are two sides to every story" such that it is impossible to know whether the alleged unfairness is real or merely perceived by this respondent who is negatively disposed to the supervisor, due to previous encounters between them.

Workplace factor 5: working conditions. The concluding theme evoked comments about the stresses associated with a job or as a result of general conditions of work. Two of respondents speak only of having a "stressful job" although the rest add levels of detail, most alluding to relationship problems rather than stating them explicitly, for example:

- No. 411 ... when the team was under stress due to organisational decisions.
No. 210 ... too much work pressure, coupled with lack of communication/understanding.

A more direct reference to another person is shown as follows:

- No. 104 The work environment is highly pressurised, so the relationship has got worse because of tension between myself and that other person has been elevated by the pressure.

Whilst somewhat unusually in the responses received, this next respondent acknowledges his/her share of the blame:

No. 425 Too much work puts me under stress and so makes me grumpier before speaking with the person I don't like.

Conclusions

The above, short narratives, present a sense of widespread strain and resentment amongst workers suffering from the effects of negative workplace relationships. The five causes of negative relationships identified by Sias *et al.* (2004) are evident in the data, as are the array of personal interactions outlined by Dillard and Fritz (1995) – concealment, manipulation, conflict, disrespect, disagreement and/or animosity. A prominent theme emerging from the data also confirms Moerbeek and Need's (2003) study signifying increased staff turnover resulting from a bad atmosphere at work. Indications of further important causes of negative relationships are also identified within the data. In addition, we can derive a number of important lessons for management which, if overlooked, are likely to lead to negative consequences for the organisation. We conclude this paper by addressing these issues.

The lack of support offered by management, disorganisation, and poor communication practices are highlighted as a prominent "workplace/systemic" theme in Table III. Further, responses allege management incompetence and unfairness. Incidences of poor working conditions and stressful work, implicate management and managerial practices as central causative factors in this inquiry. These data illustrate the central role that managers play in the lives of those working under them. It becomes clear from the responses received that workers are highly dependent upon their managers for support and assistance, particularly at critical points in their working lives. It appears from the strength of the emotions expressed in the responses, that trying to deal with enemies at work constitutes a one such critical point and that workers look to their managers for help and support in dealing with the crisis. Because, organisational performance is, in large part, dependent upon employees' performance, an important function of management is to facilitate workers in their jobs. In spite of this, many respondents indicated that management interceded or mediated far less than expected. This expectation on the part of workers should be a matter of concern to management.

These expectations on management may be explained by workers seeking an equitable and reciprocal relationship with their organisations. For example, a highly regulated and structured work environment delivers a sense of security for many, who believe that if they operate within the system and regulations, these same rules will provide a support mechanism to ensure fairness and protection. The normal means for conflict resolution between individuals may be distorted and constrained by organisational norms of politeness, low emotionality and the avoidance of behaviour such as personal attacks or sabotage. Thus, in their efforts to work in accordance with the organisational rules and norms of behaviour imposed upon them, workers expect, in return, that these rules and conditions will be enforced in their favour when things start to go wrong.

For example, when a colleague assumes power which is not authorised, it is expected that that person will be put to rights by those with legitimate authority,

rather than be allowed to continue overstepping their authority. Resentment and stress arise therefore, when managers implement rules in a fashion which is perceived by workers to be unfair. These emotions may also emerge when managers neglect situations involving conflicts between workers. Instances of neglect may indicate a lack of interpersonal skills (e.g. for conflict resolution) on the part of managers, although it may also be indicative of the pressures placed upon managers to ensure that the job gets done, irrespective of other factors.

The degrees of regulation and structure described above vary between workplaces, with some organisations publicly projecting an informal approach to work practices, particularly in relation to communication styles. As the data presented here is assumed to represent the views of people from a wide variety of workplaces and organisational cultures, it appears that employees' expectations relating to the implementation of rules, the role of managers as mediators and the general causes of stress and unhappiness remain constant, irrespective of the culture within the organisation. The result, when these expectations are not met, is that disagreements and problems between workers deteriorate, with strategies such as avoidance and non-cooperation brought in evidence. The emotional effects upon workers include frustration, stress, motivation and decreased self-esteem, together with nervousness and paranoia. Reduced enjoyment of work eventually causes some to leave the organisation whilst others are left to repair the damage caused to their career and reputation.

Because, of the important role organisational membership has in fulfilling certain human needs, the workplace occupies a special place within the hearts and minds of employees. However, it is clear from the findings that co-workers, including managers, act to enable or thwart others in gaining satisfaction and contentment from their work. Consequently, the implications of having workplace enemies can be extraordinarily salient. Indeed, the strength of emotions expressed within the data indicates the destructive effects that a negative workplace relationship can have on those who perceive themselves to be on the "receiving end".

Regardless of the perceived cause of the negative relationship (co-worker or organisation), the outcomes upon individuals, their performance and therefore, the organisation are the same. Negative relationships cause people to become distracted from their work. As a result, the quality and quantity of work suffers and with it, the workers' motivation and commitment. An important lesson for management is that workers expect and depend upon their managers to provide support and assistance in overcoming negative workplace relationships.

The findings discussed here, emanate from data relating to negative relationships. As such, we consider that our findings provide an interesting counterpoint to the literatures covering positive workplace relationships and the implied bias towards the beneficial outcomes of relationships.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge the limitations of internet surveys. One such limitation, as stated earlier, is that there is no way of knowing the total number of people to whom the survey links were sent, so it is not possible to calculate a response rate. Furthermore, not everyone possesses the necessary skills in using the internet or indeed has access to it, thus preventing them from partaking in this form of

research method. For the purposes of this qualitative study, however, (under) representation is not a critical issue as we do not seek to generalise our findings.

Note

1. The core elements of the Type A behaviour pattern are extremes of aggressiveness, easily aroused "free floating" hostility, a sense of time urgency and competitively striving for achievement (Mathews, 1982).

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