Have you thought about psychological safety in your workplace?

By Matt Pasternack

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Over the past 150 years, the responsibility an organization carries for employee safety has evolved rapidly and drastically:

- The first health and safety legislation passed in Massachusetts in 1877[1] The law required physical safety measures such as belt and shaft guards as well as fire exits.

- The first workers’ compensation law came online in 1911[2] and modern material-safety data sheets were introduced around 1960[3]

- The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970[4] created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which works to set and enforce standards of safe and healthful working conditions for all workers.

In recent years, workplace safety has increased in scope from just physical safety to include emotional and mental health. With regulations around the globe like Ontario’s Human Rights Code,[5] Australia’s Workplace Health and Safety Act,[6] and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act,[7] companies now have the responsibility to protect workers from unhealthy conditions and unsafe workplace relationships resulting in sexual harassment, bullying, or
discrimination. In modern law, workplace hazards far surpass the boundaries of employee physical safety.

**Protect your people: Identify and mitigate human behavior risk**

Psychological harm often is the result of human behavior such as sexual harassment, discrimination, or bullying. Unfortunately, harassment is extremely common in the workplace. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received approximately 90,000 complaints in 2015, and it estimates that 75% of all incidents go unreported.[8] This is illustrated very publicly in the recent #MeToo movement.[9]

*Human behavior risk* is any unsafe situation created by an employee’s verbal or nonverbal conduct; this can be either out of negligence or malice.[10]

In order to mitigate human behavior risk, objective identification and early intervention is critical. This will both responsibly minimize harm to the employee and the organizational culture, while also protecting the brand’s reputation from a national headline or litigation.

**Prevent harm by identifying work-related risks in both the physical and digital workplace**

Regularly audit for new types of hazards. The workplace is quickly evolving, and new forms of communication are constantly introduced. Essentially, two workplaces exist for every organization—the physical workspace and the ecosystem that lives digitally. Any area that holds space for communication between employees is a potential space for human behavior risk.

In recent years, the introduction of enterprise collaboration tools that operate similar to social networks within a company’s technical environment (e.g., Workplace by Facebook, Microsoft Teams, Yammer, Slack) have pulled a load of communication from more traditional tools such as email, which has historically had more compliance measures in place.

These chat-heavy tools have become adopted more widely across enterprises.
For good reason, they break down department siloes, increase innovation, and connect geographically dispersed groups.[11] However, these tools are often overlooked as an area of potential risk. Conversations move quickly and informally. It is way easier to hit “return” with little thought and send a haphazard message out to coworkers than it is in a formal email context.

There’s also the blind spot of “private” channels or groups, which often can give employees the sense they are communicating in a truly secret space. This can often be an avenue for unhealthy conversations and harassment situations. It makes sense why our research has seen that private messages are 160% more likely to be toxic than public messages.9

These tools also offer ways to backtrack with instant *edit* and *delete* functionality, which can drastically hinder forensics without the proper archiving in place.

**Control risks by implementing measures that remain effective over time**

When a psychological risk emerges, have the controls in place to respond effectively and early. As more employees take communications online, take advantage of potential automation to ensure proactive intervention and long-term follow-through.

Leverage monitoring solutions for email, collaboration, chat, and other platforms to surface risky or toxic conversation and bring it to the attention of the right people. Automate notifications where necessary, either to human resources, an employee’s manager, or the employee directly. This method reduces the suffocation and pressure some victims face when the only process in place is self-reporting. Automated moderation allows for objectivity, surfacing events to inform if intervention is necessary, thus allowing leaders to get ahead of a harmful and damaging situation before it’s too late.

**Review controls and ensure that they are working as planned**

Regularly review your organization for areas of risk. Employee engagement metrics aren’t only useful for recruitment but could be symptoms of areas of risk, such as sudden drops in employee retention.
Investigate unexplained behavioral changes by leveraging qualitative metrics, such as employee sentiment and communication health, to identify potential areas of toxicity and areas of human behavior risk. Content analysis tools can readily provide insights in real time by scanning employee communications and recommending departments, teams, or subject areas for further investigation.

Workplace psychological safety has emerged as a regulatory leader’s top priority, and human behavior risk can be a company’s largest liability. Today’s most effective compliance leaders are looking to modern technology to objectively identify risk early, respond efficiently, and measure the effectiveness of actions. Protect your people and your company by getting in front of these toxic situations before they harm your brand or—more importantly—your people.

Takeaways

- When it comes to workplace risks, psychological safety is a new area of emphasis for lawmakers around the globe.
- Evaluate your organization’s level of psychological risk due to inappropriate human behavior, just as you would evaluate your physical risk.
- Monitor company-sponsored public and private communication areas to protect employee psychological safety.
- Work across business functions to identify, evaluate, and respond to instances of human behavior risk before they become catastrophic.
- As the modern workplace continues to evolve, continuously review monitoring procedures and adapt as needed.

2 Workmen’s Compensation Act (1911).
5 Human Rights Code, R.S.O. 1990, c. H.19
7 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Pub. L. 88–352)

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