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Virtual bullying at the workplace

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

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Workplace cyber-bullying is a particularly unwelcome side-effect of the hi-tech office, where you can never be far from your computer, and when emails, text and video can be conveniently delivered on a hand-held BlackBerry, making you accessible wherever you are, 24/7.

Sadly, as a UK anti-bullying charity reminds us, any means of communication can provide a channel for bullying. So the age of unrestricted interactive dialogue undoubtedly presents bullies with many tempting new ways to indulge in intimidatory behaviour. Especially as the means of detection and deterrence can sometimes be difficult.

Overtly threatening emails are perhaps the most obvious outlet for virtual bullying. Even the milder form of it, copying you in on dubious emails not personalised to yourself, can be highly disturbing, and in some countries is already classed as an offence. But unless the sender has managed to use sophisticated software, the emails can be traced and the offender dealt with. Potentially more destructive is the posting of personally adverse or negative material via the social networking sites, which can be extremely damaging to the individual concerned. Yet if the company decides to block the relevant site, they may be blocking one of their own chief marketing and recruitment mediums.

Most sinister of all, however, is potential abuse of the powerful new Big Brother software that is meant to monitor an individual's productivity, including (inevitably) surveillance of their internet use, at work. The acquiring of personal information can lead to some vicious campaigns of anonymous bullying. To be a vulnerable employee, at risk not only from a jealous colleague, but possibly from the very management that is meant to protect you, could drive you into desperate action.

To tackle all classes of offenders, there clearly needs to be relevant and enforceable rules regarding acceptable behaviour in the workplace. However, it is well-known that such rules tend to lag behind technology, and cyber-bullying needs to be posted right up there among banned activities.

As with all bullying, intimidation needs to be rooted out with urgency, and the bully may be playing on an employer's reluctance to face adverse publicity. A good alternative is mediation, ideally in its quicker and less formal version, facilitation, taking care to use a neutral

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outsider in such a sensitive context.

But regulations apart, line managers might also try to interpret the psychological terrain in which cyber-bullying has been allowed to flourish in the first place. The hi-tech office itself, where long hours, continuous pressure and little relief may increase an overheated urge for mischief.

Keeping the technical and human elements of a department in correct balance may yet become the standard test of managerial competence.

Key points: Cyber-bullying

- Hi-tech communications have enabled a virulent cyber-bullying culture
- House rules need to be adapted in line with the relevant technology
- Managers should discourage total dependence on internale-dialogue

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carol Spears Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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