

Volume 7 Issue 1

THE GLOBAL

ANALYST

₹150 AN EXCLUSIVE MONTHLY ON BUSINESS & FINANCE January 2018

Looking

Ahead



IUP Publications
(A Division of The ICFAI Society)
www.iupindia.in

Workplace Sexual Harassment

Interpretation of the Malady

Organizational climate is a strong predictor of workplace sexual harassment and can include situations where men outnumber women, where supervisors are predominantly male, and where there is a sense among employees that complaints will not be taken seriously.

In this collection of some of the most interesting studies published in the top science journals over the last few weeks, there are lessons for all of us engaged in leading, managing or structuring firms and companies of all kinds.

Sexual harassment naturally is something that we all need to be aware of. How widespread is it? Why does it happen? And what does the term mean anyway? These are all questions that the researchers grapple with.

Another team of researchers looked at the problem of the “24-hour workday.” Why have we come to this and are we in danger of this becoming the norm?

Finally there was a great piece which looked at the role of narcissism in leadership. Do narcissists make good

leaders? Contrary to much popular, and scientific, opinion, the researchers found that some do.

Workplace sexual harassment “a chronic problem”

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a pervasive, chronic problem that can cause enduring psychological harm, according to the President of the American Psychological Association, to which I belong.

“Sexual harassment in the workplace is a significant occupational health psychology problem,” he said. “Psychological research has offered understanding into the causes of workplace harassment, as well as some strategies for preventing or reducing it. However, there is limited research re-



Bob Murray

Principal

FORTINBERRY >>
MURRAY USA



garding the characteristics of harassers, which makes it difficult to predict who will do it and where and when it might happen. What we do know is that harassers tend to lack a social conscience and engage in manipulative, immature, irresponsible and exploitative behaviors.”

Indeed the problem is “chronic.” An important data analysis from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, released recently broke down the industries that generate most sexual-harassment charges. Some of the leaders: hospitality and food services (14% of complaints), retail (13%), manufacturing (12%), healthcare (11%), and administrative and support (7%). The “information” (3%) and arts and entertainment (2%) sectors are well down the list. Farmworkers, janitors and restaurant are particularly vulnerable, as are women in any position where they are isolated or work at night. A government survey conducted in 2011 found that 1 in 5 women said they had been raped (though not all at work). Altogether these are shocking and horrible figures.

What the researchers say: Recent research has shown that sexual harassment is primarily aimed at women, but men are also targets of such behavior.

Perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace are not only supervisors/superiors, but are also coworkers, subordinates, customers and clients, he said

According the article “Sexual Harassment: Have We Made Any Progress?” published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, women tend to report more adverse effects than men after experiencing workplace sexual harassment. These may include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, post-traumatic stress and a lower level of overall happiness.

Women are more likely to report sexual harassment than men, according to the article, but “studies indicate that men may be at a higher risk of mental health issues and depression.” Men in the US military are 10 times more likely to experience sexual harassment than civilian men, but an estimated 81% of military men who are harassed do not report it, the article added.

Organizational climate is a strong predictor of workplace sexual harassment and can include situations where men outnumber women, where supervisors are predominantly male, and where there is a sense among employ-

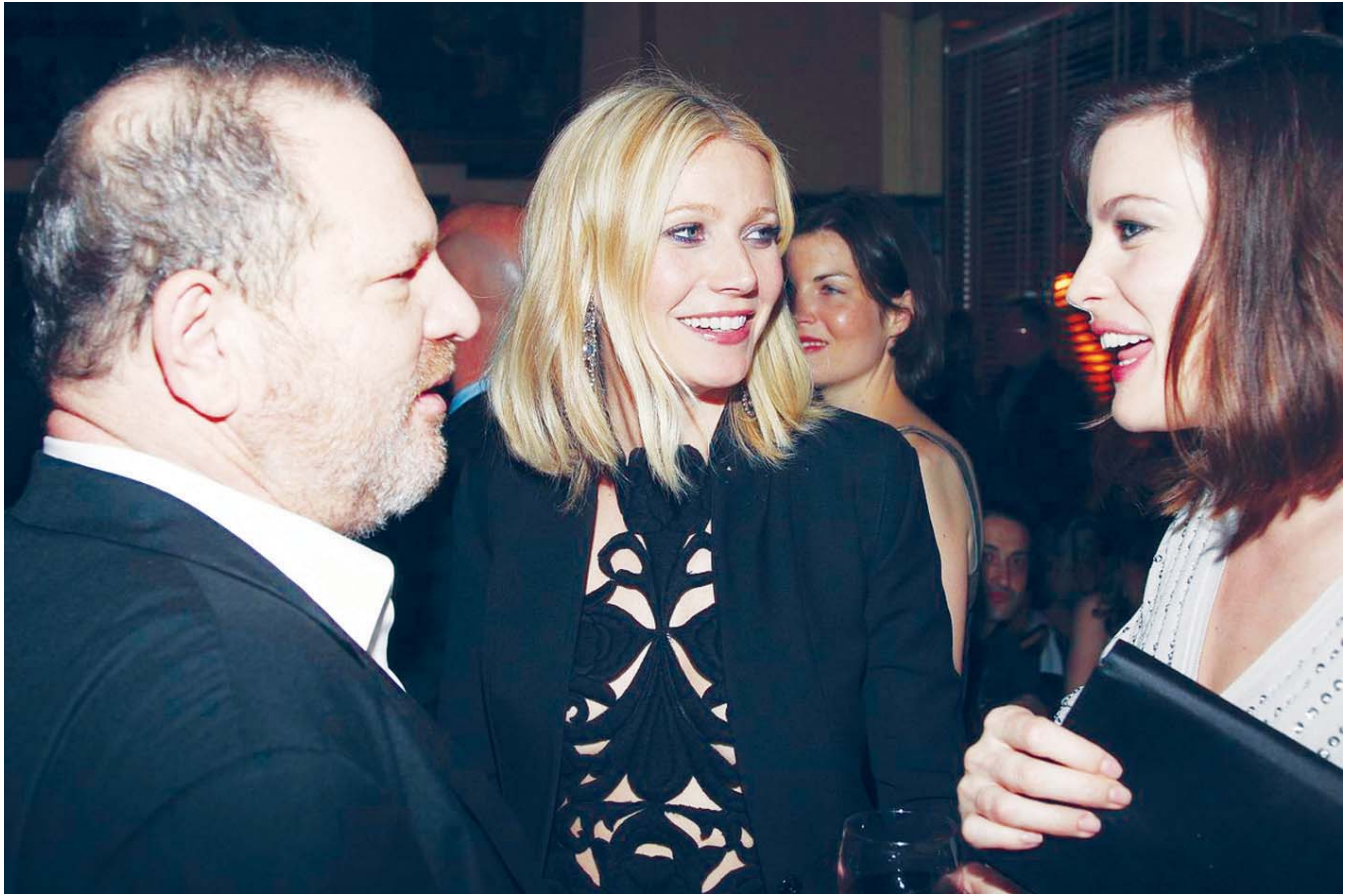
ees that complaints will not be taken seriously. Research has shown that hierarchical power dynamics are at the root of sexual harassment. In other words, it is not about sex.

“Psychology can help, in the form of sexual harassment training, but it only works if it is part of a comprehensive, committed effort to combat the problem,” the researchers said. “Most research points to sanctions as the primary way that organizations can be less tolerant of harassment. Organizations need to be proactive in establishing policies, prohibiting sexual

harassment, raising employee awareness, establishing reporting procedures and educating employees about these policies. More research is needed to identify the antecedents to harassment that will help employees and managers identify and respond appropriately.”

So what? Donald Trump, Roy Moore Bill Clinton and, it would seem, perhaps millions of others have been implicated in workplace “sexual harassment.” One of the problems is that nobody seems willing to define what the term actually means. To say this is not to defend the harassers—most of them deserve all the bad things that I hope are coming to them, and more. The problem is that we tend to use generalizations when we have not really thought through what behaviors they really refer to. What are the actions that fall under that rubric? They probably vary according to custom and culture and maybe from person to person depending on their psychogenetic makeup. For example, there is currently a move afoot in the UK, according to *The Times*, to ban sleeping beauty because of the “nonconsensual kiss” that the Prince bestows on Beauty.

There are certainly a great number of things that we can all agree on and



these should be clarified both in the workplace and in society generally. Just saying “you mustn’t sexually harass” is useless, it is rather like saying you have got to be “customer-centric” or “a team player.” Without defining what actions constitute being a “team player” or “customer-centric” your exaltation is meaningless. Your ideas of what constitutes “sexual harassment” are probably wildly different to those of a man raised on violent video games, or who was a witness to sexual abuse in the household or even one who has grown up with a spiritual belief system that sees women as possessions of or of lesser status than men.

Until we get a societal agreement as just what constitutes “sexual harassment” Trump and his lesser ilk will likely continue to get away with it.

What now? In workplaces, for a start, we must work out what we mean by all of the pious generalizations that we make and “values” that we claim to adhere to. We have hidden behind them

for far too long. We must make our core values concrete and actionable, and stick to them. People are far less stressed when they understand what they are required to do or not to do—what behaviors they have to adhere to in order to be a member of the “tribe”—even if they do not agree with them. We can use people’s overwhelming need to belong to reduce the incidence of harassment, sexual or otherwise, in the workplace.

Can we prevent 24-hour working becoming the new norm?

Many of us, especially in the professions, are trapped in a 24-hour work day thanks to our attachment to smartphones and the like. Research is beginning to show that this is not such a smart idea.

What the researchers say: Many researchers are urging employers to do more to ensure employees do not feel pressured into working outside of their contractual hours and offer more sup-

port regarding how they work flexibly, a new study in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* reports.

During the review, researchers scrutinized 56 studies examining the use of technology during non-working hours. They found that a “one size fits all” approach to the use of technology outside working hours, such as switching off email servers outside of office hours, is not conducive to the needs of every employee, although in some countries such as Germany, it is becoming mandatory.

The researchers identified a number of factors that contribute to people choosing to work outside of hours. The Internet and improvements in ICT have made non-manual work increasingly portable and accessible, resulting in employees finding it far easier to work during non-contractual hours.

The study found that many employees felt pressure from their organization to be constantly available and to engage in work during non-work time, which was exacerbated when expecta-

tions about what was required were vague. A desire to prove dedication and “go the extra mile” were also found to be reasons why people were working more than they should.

An employee’s behavior may in turn also shape what is expected and lead to additional out of hours working (e.g., a lawyer who has been available at all times on certain matters is expected to be available all the time in the future).

However, the researchers also found that increased access to technology and working outside of office hours is actually preferred by some employees, who felt it gives them greater flexibility and control over their workload, leading to increases in self-reported efficiency and performance. The study also found that employees appreciated the benefits of being able to monitor continuously the information flow and stay on top of their work. I would say it is called work addiction.

To overcome this disparity in how employees choose to work, researchers recommend that employers give individuals control over their working patterns and actively involve them in any decisions or policies about technology

use, so employees can reap the benefits of modern technologies without being enslaved by them.

“A failure to disconnect from work can negatively impact on a person’s well-being and health,” said the lead author. Many individuals report feeling pressured into logging in after hours to complete work, a task that is becoming more commonplace with the advance of technology. However, the flip side of this is that some actually prefer the flexibility this offers.

“Although employers implementing policies such as restricting accessibility to emails outside of office hours take a step in the right direction to ensure a good work/life balance for their workers, such regimented approaches to when you should and should not be working do not work for everyone. Employers need to work with their staff to understand their individual needs wherever possible. However, employees also need to take responsibility for their working behavior, as it is ultimately up to them if they switch their phone off or not.”

“Our research stresses two facts,” the researchers noted. “First, there is no

blanket solution to how to maximize technology use for communication. Second, we need to put the issue on the table and spell out expectations about what is reasonable. Then agree on some boundaries whilst retaining flexibility.”

“We have found the Internet and new technology can give people flexibility in the way they work, and they feel this can make them more efficient and feel empowered. But other people feel enslaved by the constant need to check and reply to emails, and managers must lead by example to ensure their wellbeing is protected,” the researchers concluded.

So what? It reminds me of research done a few years ago which came to the conclusion that no technological advance has ever added to the sum of human happiness. Convenience, yes, but happiness no. Those researchers found that tech advances enriched the few at the expense of the many, reduced happiness and, anyway, were often a way of countering the intended or unintended ill-effects of earlier technological gizmos. It is worthwhile remembering their realizations as we charge unthinkingly into the 24-hour work day.



What now? The researchers behind this present study are absolutely correct in one thing (actually a number of things, but I only want to concentrate on one) and that is that no tech “advance” should be brought in without the agreement of the people who will be affected by it. As an employer you can only have a flexible and empowered workforce if you give people the right to take part in the decision-making process and acknowledge that often they will be right and you are wrong.

Narcissism and leadership: Does it work to be a jerk?

Well, now it is official—what we have always known: narcissists are more likely to become leaders and they are also more likely to be bad leaders.

Ask most workers if they have ever had a narcissist for a boss and you will hear stories of leaders who have taken credit for others’ work, made decisions without consulting others and used every opportunity to talk about themselves.

Yet, there have been scholars who have argued that the confidence that comes with narcissism is essential for a leader’s success. Research has yielded mixed findings—some studies have shown narcissism relates to poorer organizational outcomes, while others find that narcissistic leaders are more effective.

What the researchers say?

A newly published study sought to conclusively answer the question: Do narcissists make good leaders?

The researchers reviewed existing literature and aggregated past and current research to come up with an answer: Though narcissists were more likely to attain leadership positions, being a narcissist did not make a person a good leader.

The researchers also discovered a nonlinear relationship between narcissism and leader effectiveness by looking at personality assessment for hiring decisions. Specifically, the study found that bosses with either extremely high

or extremely low levels of narcissism were poorer leaders.

“Our findings are pretty clear that the answer to the question as to whether narcissism is good or bad is that it is neither. It is best in moderation,” said the lead author of the study. “With too little, a leader can be viewed as insecure or hesitant, but if you’re too high on narcissism, you can be exploitative or tyrannical.”

The study found that those with moderate levels of narcissism have achieved “a nice balance between having sufficient levels of self-confidence, but do not manifest the negative, anti-social aspects of narcissism that involve putting others down to feel good about themselves.” The team, which has conducted extensive research on maladaptive traits in the workplace, said finding that narcissism can be a double-edged sword is not new.

“Narcissists are usually very good in short-term situations when meeting people for the first time. But the impression they create quickly falls apart,” they said. “You soon realize that they are nowhere as good or as smart as they say they are.”

Those in charge of hiring or promoting leaders for their organization should proceed with caution, they added.

“Narcissists are great in interview situations—if you can reduce a leadership contest down to sound bites, you will give them an advantage,” the lead author said. “But as time goes on, they become increasingly annoying. At the personal level, they can be jerks. At the strategic level, they can take huge gambles because they’re so confident they’re right. They’re either making a fortune or they’re going broke.”

The researchers said the findings thus far show organizations should be wary of creating hiring and promotion practices that cater to narcissists’ strengths—but they should not assume that very low levels of narcissism make better candidates.

They added that research is needed to determine if narcissists function better in some leadership situations than others. The risk-taking and persuasiveness of narcissists may make them strong leaders in the midst of chaos, she said, but those traits could create problems in a more stable environment.

So what? I have personally met with a few leaders who were genuine full-blown narcissists—mostly, I suppose, they do not think they need my, or my firm’s, help. So be it. But this is important research because it fits in with what we know about human leadership genetics.

Humans are not genetically geared to have leaders in normal times—virtually no hunter-gatherer band has a leader as such. Decisions are made by consensus, and, in my observation of living with them for a year, are usually right. However, in times of crisis they turn to a leader who has the self-confidence to make swift decisions. Generally these people have a degree of narcissism. The problem with narcissistic leaders is that they often manufacture crises to justify their absolute authority. We see this in many of the world’s most authoritarian leaders—most of whom are the genuine narcissistic article.

What now? I think that the researchers’ guidelines for hiring leaders are good and should be followed. However, I also think that we need to rethink the structure of many firms and corporations and ask ourselves whether we can’t get rid of many of the layers of leadership and open them up to more consensus decision-making.

OK, I think I have got it: We need to get rid of the harassers (once we discover what we mean by harassment), put aside our smartphones outside of reasonable work hours, and be careful not to hire those with too much or too little narcissism. Simple. ■

(The author is an internationally recognized expert in strategy, leadership, human personality and behavioral change.)