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10 THINGS by Catey Hill (Author Archive)

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10 Things Your Coworkers Won't Say

(single page view)



1. "You're the most stressful part of my day."

While working in the IT department at a large telecommunications firm a few years back, Hayley Chalmers, 38, was tormented by a coworker who regularly left his cell phone at his desk while he was away – with the ringer volume jacked way up high. Three or four times a day, Chalmers and some four dozen annoyed colleagues were treated to a loud, digital rendition of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee." After a few months Chalmers finally confronted her tormentor – to no avail. "He never apologized and just kept doing it," she recalls. "It was maddening."

Nearly 80% of American workers say they are stressed out by at least one aspect of their jobs – with about one in ten saying coworkers cause the most tension, according to a [study](#) conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of Everest College. Those colleagues who talk too much, share too much personal information, gossip often or blame others for their failures are among the most stressful, says career coach Marc Dorio, who conducted an informal survey of employees during a management seminar. Despite all the agony they inflict, stress-inducing workers are rarely asked to change by their exasperated office mates – and that may be an expensive mistake: Stressed-out workers spend nearly 50% more on health care each year than their more-relaxed peers, according to a study published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

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2. "It's your fault I can't squeeze into my skinny jeans anymore."

Cupcakes for your coworker's birthday, cookies to celebrate an upcoming vacation, a crumb cake "just because" -- all these thoughtful gestures may in fact be fueling resentment among some of your coworkers, says career coach David Couper, especially those trying to slim down. Almost half of workers say they have gained weight at their current jobs (up slightly from 2009), with nearly one in five citing "workplace celebrations" like birthdays or potlucks as major contributors to this weight gain, according to 2010 study by CareerBuilder.com. On top of that, 38% of workers say they eat more unhealthy snacks at the office than at home.

All that extra snacking, of course, can lead to serious health problems and higher medical costs. The average overweight person pays \$346 more per year on medical-related costs than their healthier peers, according to a [study](#) from George Washington University. The average severely obese person pays an additional \$1,566 each year.

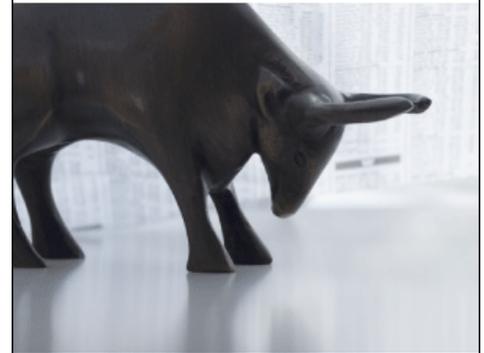
3. "Stop being such a bully."



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More than one in three people has been a victim of bullying in the workplace – from verbal abuse and intimidation to sabotage -- according to a study conducted in 2010 by the Workplace Bullying Institute, a non-profit. In most cases, the bully was a higher-ranking worker, but 28% of the time, it was someone at an equal or lower level. And often such harassment is inadvertent. For example, you may consider the teasing of a colleague good-natured, while it's actually making him or her uncomfortable – not that you'd necessarily know it, says career coach David Couper. Just like at the playground, "people are scared of the consequences of calling a bully out."

If it gets bad enough, it may cost a victim his job. More than 40% of women and 36% of men who had been the victim of bullying said they left their jobs because of it, a 2010 study by the Workplace Bullying Institute found. And that may be the best possible outcome. Workplace bullying can lead to "excessive and prolonged stress," which contributes to a host of health problems, including both physical health issues like heart disease and irritable bowel syndrome, as well as mental health issues like depression and anxiety, says Dr. Joseph Cilona, a Manhattan psychologist. Treatment for depression, for example, can cost as much as \$1,000 or more per month for counseling and medication, he says, and many insurance plans limit the number of therapy sessions per year.

4. "I'm sleeping with the boss."

Despite the warnings about office romances, experts say such affairs are still fairly common. Two out of every five employees says they've had at least one office romance; more than one-third of those hooked up with a superior in the company, according to a survey of more than 8,000 workers by CareerBuilder.com. Separately, one-third of executive women said they know a colleague who's had an affair with a boss, according to a 2010 study by the Center for Work-Life Policy.

For the obvious reasons, it's not something most people advertise, says Karen Sumberg, a senior vice president for the Center for Work-Life Policy, and co-author of the study. "Numerous companies have policies against it, and your reputation is at stake too." In fact, when a woman was having an affair with her boss, 60% of male executives and 65% of female executives said they felt she unfairly won a plum assignment over them, the Center for Work-Life study showed. And the effects of the affair seem to ripple throughout the office. More than one-third of both men and women say it caused a decrease in their dedication and commitment to work.

5. "I hate you because you make more than me."

Workers with lower salaries like their higher-paid colleagues significantly less than those who make about the same (or less), according to a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. In fact, due to the level of the lower-paid employees' dissatisfaction with pay discrepancies, the researchers note that "employers have a strong incentive to impose pay secrecy rules." "People get really resentful when they find something like this out," says Couper. "Sometimes they feel like this even if they just sense that someone is getting paid more or receives a bonus of bigger pay raise."

Sharing paycheck details isn't common among coworkers. While 83% of workers say they're comfortable sharing how much they make with someone in their lives (usually their spouse or significant other), just 15% would do it with coworkers at their level, according to a 2010 Glassdoor.com survey. But some groups are more candid. "The millennial generation is more open about salaries than older generations," Couper reveals. Furthermore, employees in the West are twice as likely as employees in the South to share salary information with coworkers at the same level, and those that make more money are more apt to discuss the payday details, according to the survey.

6. "We trash you behind your back."

You'd probably prefer no one ever mentioned your alcohol-fueled dance-a-thon at the holiday party or the botched presentation in front of your boss' boss. Not likely. Office gossip is "very prevalent" and spreads even quicker these days due to IM and email, says Bettina Seidman, president of career coaching firm SEIDBET Associates. Such workplace chatter is primarily negative and happens in formal and informal settings, from scheduled meetings to the break room, according to a 2009 study published in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. Furthermore, 28% of employees in offices without a consistent method of communicating news (like regular staff meetings) rely on gossip as their first source for information, according to a study by office supply manufacturer Steelcase. And that all means that all those untruths your coworkers might be spreading about you can be especially harmful these days, affecting how others in the office view you both personally and professionally, says Seidman.

7. "You're wrecking my marriage."

Actual romances aside, research finds simply working with a lot of people of the opposite sex can increase the chances of divorce. A 2005 study from the University of Colorado, Boulder, found that those who work with a larger fraction of workers of the opposite sex are more likely to get divorced than those who work mostly with their own sex. And women who work with a large group of men are at a higher risk than men who work with a large group of women. "With the economy like this, people are spending lots of time with their coworkers," says career coach Nicole Williams, author of "Girl On Top: Your Guide to Turning Dating Rules into Career Success." "It creates a false sense of intimacy that ends up making you more attracted to someone in the workplace."

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8. "That nasty attitude is rubbing off on me ..."

Whether you're constantly whining about your boss, the job or just plain sullen most of the day, your bad attitude is likely to rub off on your coworkers, several studies show. In fact, a 2006 **study** that looked at negative groups in the workplace – defined as groups having a member who persistently withheld effort, expressed negative affect or violated key interpersonal norms like reciprocating major favors – found that the negativity leads to poor performance and an unhappy team. "Negativity can spread like a virus," says Dr. Brian Grossman, a psychologist and communication expert. "It seeps in because people start to believe the negative things are true."

Just ask Cindy Agoncillo, 23, a graphic designer for a small Pennsylvania publishing company who says she struggles with the seemingly never-ending negativity from one of her coworkers. "She always has something to say, whether business-related or personal, but it never seems to be something positive," Agoncillo says. "I am significantly happier in the office when she is not there." Unfortunately, most exasperated workers like Agoncillo wait for someone else to confront the ornery workmate, says Grossman, thus allowing the negativity plenty of time to spread through the office. The result: One bad attitude can lead to lower morale and less productivity, Grossman says.

9. "... And your good attitude makes me hate you."

The reverse is also true: If you're that super-optimistic employee who is always working longer hours or buddy-buddy with the boss, you can expect some of your coworkers to secretly – or not so secretly -- dislike you, say work pros. In fact, a study by researchers at Washington State University found that coworkers who work long hours or ask for extra work are some of the most hated employees in the workplace. The study, which was conceived as a way to examine how slacker workers are treated in a group, ended up showing that "those who give much to the group effort yet take little of its subsequent reward are not applauded but rather targeted for expulsion."

What is it about going above and beyond at your job that so reviles coworkers? People actually consider those "unselfish" workers to be "rule-breakers," who make most everyone else look bad in comparison, the study showed. Of course, this creates a problem for ambitious sorts since taking on extra work and befriending the boss are important ways to climb the corporate ladder. To remedy the situation, experts say you have to keep quiet about your workload. "Don't be a martyr about it," says Williams. "People hate it when you talk or brag about all the extra stuff you're doing."

10. "You're disgusting."

As many companies embrace open-plan offices and communal workspaces, slobs have become increasingly annoying to their coworkers, experts say. These tight quarters put us face to face with others' mess, says Williams. What's more, most people don't realize how annoying – or unhealthy – these bad habits can be. If the mess extends beyond piles of papers to food scraps or dirty tissues, it becomes a **bacterial nightmare**. More than half of all workers say that a colleague has made them sick, according to a survey by CareerBuilder.com. And that's costing workers from about \$100 or so per year to deal with relatively minor cases of colds and flu to thousands of dollars for more severe illness, like hepatitis A or a particularly nasty staph infection.

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