

Workplace gossip: Everything you need to know

Author: Fadzai Danha . January 2022

‘Psst...Did you hear?’

Gossip plays an important role in casual discussion, and the office is not immune to this phenomenon. These are terms that are frequently used to pique an audience's interest and to set the stage for gossip on employees'. Office gossip is a phenomenon that occurs in the office and can range from pleasant chit-chat to malevolent behind-the-back conversations among coworkers. Co-workers maybe be engaged in a gossip episode about other co-workers. There are often negative [effects of gossip](#) that result from gossip on employees' which come with a massive negative impact.

We frequently overhear or make critical remarks about someone who is not present - in other words, we gossip (Foster, 2004). Aside from the notorious watercooler, an office gossip episode may occur virtually anywhere: the corridor, kitchen, elevator, and even more official situations like meetings (Hallett et al., 2009). According to studies, gossip accounts for roughly 14% of our talks (Robbins and Karan, 2020), and more than 90% of the workforce gossip on employees' (Grosser et al., 2012).

A gossip episode is a regular occurrence at work. Almost all workers are guilty of making, hearing, or otherwise partaking in evaluative remarks about someone not present in the conversation. Gossip is frequently defined as informal, casual, or unrestrained talk or stories about other people, generally incorporating unconfirmed data (Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). According to researchers, 14% of office coffee-break discussion is truly gossip on employees', and around 66% of general conversation between employees is devoted to social themes involving gossip about other individuals (Cole & Dalton, 2009). Thus, gossip serves as an informal communication and information sharing medium, even if the information communicated through gossip is not always precise or full.

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If this seemingly harmless sort of informal talk is not effectively monitored and dealt with, it might have serious effects in the workplace. Malicious gossip [reduces an organization's productivity](#), derails coworkers' attention away from their jobs, fosters workforce division, causes revenue losses, and can inflict significant misery on those who are the focus of such talk. (Akande & Odewale, 1994; Armour, 2007; Bruce & Bruce, 1997; De Gouveia, Van Vuuren & Crafford, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Negative workplace gossip generates [social undermining](#) and great side effects to

employees with some of them mentioned above.

Despite the potentially harmful impact that office gossip can have on the workforce, Michelson and Mouly (2000, 2004), Noon and Delbridge (1993), and Kurland and Pelled (2000) all agree that, despite the potentially harmful impact that office gossip can have on the workforce, gossip processes have received less attention than other work-related processes. This might be because workplace gossip is not a visible, transparent behaviour but rather more private and hidden in nature, making it more challenging to analyze and regulate. However, reactions to the negative workforce gossip may be massive and need to be dealt with.

What is Workplace Gossip?



Gossip is defined as "...informal, evaluative discourse about a member of the discussants' social context who is not present" in this study (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 123). Furthermore, workplace gossip is described as "...the dissemination of information between two or more persons behind their backs concerning a situation or person they may or may not know, addressing information that is of no value to

them." The message's content is not intended for public consumption, and disclosing it leads to unfavourable outcomes such as fueled conjecture, erroneous perceptions, and a [breakdown in confidence](#) " (De Gouveia et al., 2005, p. 67).

Gossip has an impact on and is pervasive in everyone's daily life. The importance of gossip in conversation is highlighted by the following:

- a person who does not gossip or does not react to gossip with a bit of curiosity may be marginalized from their social group (Eggins & Slade, 1997, as cited in Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963),
- whereas a person who gossips excessively may also be marginalized from their social group (Eggins & Slade, 1997, as cited in Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963). (Gilmore, 1978; Yerkovich, 1977).

For decades, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, sociolinguists, philosophers, social historians, psychologists, and evolutionary biologists have conducted extensive research on gossip (Besnier, 1989; Foster, 2004; Fox, 2001; Handelman, 1973; Holland, 1996). Although office gossip researchers have made numerous recommendations to control, reduce, or eliminate office gossip in the workplace (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Jacobs, 2009; Matthews, 2007), insufficient research has been conducted to determine which elements have an impact on the occurrence and perceptions of office gossip, as well as the characteristics of these elements.

As a result, scholars have focused more on the prevalence, repercussions, and control of gossip than on the probable origins of gossip. The [literature on workplace gossip](#) is being held back and it lacks a theoretical framework.

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Workplace Gossip Statistics

- Approximately 75% of white-collar professionals admitted to chatting about workplace concerns or coworkers while at work, according to new research released by Captivate (a network of nearly 12,000 elevator screens in office buildings across North America).
- Workers in the United States spend roughly 40 minutes each week chatting on average.
- Moreover, half of the males (55%) admit to chatting at work, while four out of five women (79%) do so. On the other hand, men appear to be the more blabbermouths; they spend approximately an hour a week chatting about the juicy details, compared to just over 30 minutes for women.
- [Millennials](#) (81%) are the most likely to gossip at work, followed by Gen Xers (70%) and Baby Boomers (60%), respectively (58 percent).
- Almost a third of professionals (30%) claimed their supervisor had explicitly requested rumours

to learn about workplace troubles.

- Office gossip is their "primary [source of knowledge](#)" regarding workplace happenings, according to more than a quarter (29%). Millennials were particularly affected by this comment (41%).
- According to more than a quarter, office gossip is their "main source of knowledge" about workplace activities (29%). This remark had an especially strong impact on millennials (41%).

Who do workmates spread rumours about?

Most office gossip is about workplace problems involving colleagues, [management](#) teams, employers, and clients. According to the [Office Pulse](#) research, the breakdown is as follows:

- "That one coworker" (71%).
- Executive/Management Team - 44%
- Immediate Boss - 34%
- Clients - 31%
- [Human resources](#) -20%
- Interns - 5%

Workplace Gossip and Technology

According to a poll done by [Blue Coat Systems Inc.](#) in 2003, among 300 respondents, 65% of employees in the United Kingdom and 39% of employees in the United States had private chats at work using instant messaging. Furthermore, 80 percent of employees with access to instant messaging admitted to engaging in workplace gossip via instant messaging.

A survey conducted in 1999 among senior directors of 800 FTSE-1,000 ([Financial Times and London Stock Exchange](#)) organizations discovered that, even though email and internet use among employees had increased, organizations in the United Kingdom had not taken adequate measures to ensure that they were protected from legal liabilities that could arise from the use of these communication channels ("Are you at risk?", 1999).

The use of technology to gossip exposes businesses to the risk of cyber liability. 22% of the businesses have been exposed to "cyber liabilities," which used emails to talk with individuals within or outside the organizations. Over half of these firms said that males were the primary perpetrators of email gossip ("Are you at e-risk?", 1999). As a result, using technology to gossip exposes organizations to the risk of cyber liability which is one of the major negative workplace gossip.

The negative consequences of workplace gossip

There are several consequences of gossip. These can be consequences for gossip senders or the gossip

recipient. Thus, workplace gossip can be very serious if the gossiper has significant power over the recipient, according to authors Nancy Kurland and Lisa Hope Pelled in their article "Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip and Power in the Workplace," which appeared in the April 2000 issue of The Academy of Management Review. The following are some of the harmful outcomes of negative workplace gossip:

- Erosion of trust and morale due depending on the condition of causality attributed to the gossip episode.
- [Lost productivity](#) and [squandered time](#).
- Employees become more anxious as rumours swirl with no concrete information as to what is and isn't true.
- Employees are divided as people take sides.
- Feelings and reputations are harmed.
- [Attrition results](#) from good employees quitting the organization due to a toxic work environment with toxic gossip. [Managers](#) who support a [healthy workplace culture](#) should address the issue in a way that supports and promotes a [positive culture](#). If they cannot figure out who is spreading the rumors, they should remind them of the [company's behavioral standards](#) in the [employee handbook](#) and escalate the situation if needed.

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There are several other perceived negative [workplace gossip influences](#) to employees and the organisational citizenship behavior in the workplace. These also contribute to the harms of gossips.

What is considered gossip in the workplace?

[Bullying](#) occurs when gossip contents are spiteful, inaccurate, exaggerated, or based on unsuitable themes of discourse. Gossip frequently involves inconsequential topics such as a coworker's new hairstyle, weight reduction, weight gain, or a recent trip to Vegas. Spreading tales about a coworker's sex life, criminal background, suspected company policy infractions, or medical problems are all examples of harmful workplace gossip.

Gossiping in order to ruin a coworker's reputation in a harsh, unjust, or harassing manner is a manipulative conduct. Through scapegoating and pulling down coworkers or supervisors, the gossiper tries to increase his own authority and influence at work. Malicious gossip might result in legal consequences or even workplace violence. If you become aware of this form of rumour, you must determine who is behind it and handle it forcefully before it escalates.

Related: [Workplace Bullying Examples Every Employee Need To Know](#)

How to deal with workplace gossip

To cope with office gossip, use the tactics listed below.

- **Recognize the difference between true information and gossip:** So long as it's professional, a nice coworker is fully within their rights to provide you with [background information](#) about others. "Our marketing person is unusual but clever; some of her initiatives have even won prizes," conveys a different meaning than "Our marketing person?" Sure, she's good, but who wouldn't be if they worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week? She doesn't have much of a social life if you ask me."
- **Stop it in its tracks:** During your first encounter, an office rumour will frequently determine whether or not you are a [receptive listener](#). When what is being said becomes disrespectful, simply remark, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I don't feel comfortable talking about coworkers in this manner."
- **Alter the subject:** Instead of allowing the conversation to continue in a gossipy vein, change the subject to work-related concerns or anything neutral, such as the weather.
- **Confront those who are slanderous:** If someone spreads harmful talk about a colleague, for example, that he isn't excellent at his work, inform them that it is up to your supervisor to determine your [colleague's performance](#). Also, underline that gossiping may be detrimental to someone's profession and kindly urge that they cease spreading rumours.
- **Implement 'zero-tolerance' workplace gossip policies:** Many firms have policies to prevent workers from releasing sensitive information to others. If, for example, a manager publishes sensitive information about an employee that leads to workplace gossip, the manager may face disciplinary action or perhaps termination. Each organisation should have a process [model of workplace gossip](#) to be able to determine the outcome if one is caught off-guard. For example an [attributional process model of workplace gossip](#) that focuses on how a gossip recipient's attributions of a gossip episode influence their subsequent response and behaviors.
- **Set a good example:** Don't gossip and be a positive role model for others to follow. Be firm, move away, or change the subject when the chatter begins. You're sending a message to others that this conduct will not be allowed.
- **Maintain the privacy of your personal life:** Unless you are confident that you can trust a coworker, the rule of thumb is simple: don't share personal information at work with anyone who will be fodder for gossip. This is a dead giveaway that you're dealing with serial gossipers: If you catch them chatting about other people, you can guarantee they'll be gossiping about you as well. Don't give them the means to do so.
- **Ignore the nitpicker:** Gossipmongers thrive on attention and will take advantage of open and welcoming ears. Your strategy is to be preoccupied with your work (as you should be), so you're not accessible to listen. Please don't remove the juicy gossip baton from the gossipier (because they want to spread it by enlisting more gossipers). If you target office gossip, your workplace might become quite unpleasant. However, as [Chana R. Schoenberger](#) points out in her [BBC Capital](#) piece "When office gossip is about you" the best method is to raise the matter immediately with whoever is in charge. The following strategies will be beneficial.
- **Don't be adversarial:** Whether the gossip is maliciously spread or not, being antagonistic is unlikely to improve the situation. Instead, use politeness or comedy to make your point without engaging in an argument.
- **Flip it around:** [Sue Shellenbarger](#) recommends addressing the issue seriously and then asking for the gossip's assistance in the [Wall Street Journal](#) article "What to Do When You Are the Subject of Office Gossip." You may say something like, "I know how much people appreciate

talking to you, so maybe you should tell them the truth."

- **Colleagues should be on your side:** If the individual continues to be difficult, get the help of one or two coworkers to assist you by either clarifying any false rumours or telling the gossip to stop talking about you.
- **Bring it to your Boss's attention:** If the workplace gossip won't stop and it's interfering with your enjoyment of your job, it's time to meet with your Boss and insist that they step in.

Can you be fired for gossiping at work?

There are several reasons why it may be appropriate to fire an employee for gossiping.

For starters, office talking can generate conflict. At its most fundamental, workplace friction interrupts everyone's work.

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It might start as a verbal argument, become a disturbance, or even get violent. Hence, these actions might threaten the individual's [job security](#).

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When these situations emerge, employers must act immediately to put a stop to them. While this does not generally imply terminating someone without cause but it sure does threaten job security to certain level even if given as a verbal warning. If the rumour is severe, it can result in immediate dismissal and disciplinary action that finally leads to termination.

Finally, the dimensions of gossip can foster a [hostile work climate](#).

Employers and supervisors both view aggressive work environments to be undesirable. Furthermore, if an employee engages in gossip that creates a hostile work environment, the employer can fire them to end the hostile work environment issue. Thus, it is imperative to always maintain a [healthy work environment](#) at all times.

Why People Gossip

Although it is conventional wisdom to avoid work-related dimensions of gossip, the allure of being in the know is attractive – and essentially human nature. So, why do specific individuals feel compelled to chatter all the time? There are certainly as many explanations as rumours, but here are a few:

1. To feel like a member of the group. People chatter to feel like they are a part of the group. When acceptance is predicated on being "in on a secret," it is based on exclusion or maliciousness, not on a person's identity.
2. To have a sense of importance. Many gossipers like being perceived as a reliable source of information, and they feel powerful when they receive requests for more details.
3. To have a sense of superiority. People who don't feel good about themselves feel temporarily better when they pass unfavourable judgment on others.
4. As a result of jealousy, people spread rumours to harm others whose abilities or lifestyles they admire.
5. Because I was bored, when people cannot develop engaging conversations based on their expertise or views, gossip frequently fills the hole.
6. In a fit of rage. Someone who lacks the [confidence](#) to settle a quarrel face to face or who cannot resolve an issue with someone in a higher position sometimes seeks retaliation by uttering derogatory statements about the person.

Positive Effects of Gossiping at Work

Gossip may help company owners in a variety of ways. It could be debatable whether negative workplace [gossip beneficial to the organisations](#) exists, which role it plays and to what extent it can then be controlled. To begin with, gossiping allows office workers to relieve themselves of the stress of their daily routines and personal difficulties. Furthermore, if a person speaks about another person, they will divert attention away from everyday problems or negative aspects and focus on something else.

Gossiping is an integral part of creating a friendly [work environment](#). It allows users to stay up to date on essential news, politics, and fashion and be aware of some of their coworkers' personal qualities. It is also an essential aspect of culture since it allows human civilization "as we know it" to exist (Beck, 2014). However, bad gossip or harmful gossip will result in a toxic work environment.

The Importance of Encouraging Positive Gossiping

Some people believe it is unnecessary and even detrimental despite the benefits of gossiping. For example, suppose gossips become harsh and turn into bullying or neglect the person being discussed. In that case, it may negatively impact both the person being discussed and the gossipers. Such individuals distrust their coworkers and seek employment elsewhere (Quast, 2013). Obviously, if a person becomes the subject of rumours and only their negative aspects or errors are discussed, they may feel abused and offended. As a result, negative gossip has the potential to ruin people's lives. On the other hand, negative talk about others might motivate a person to strive harder to avoid being a victim of rumours. Furthermore, if bad rumours are immediately suppressed, the working environment will improve.

According to DiFonzo (2011), gossiping should be encouraged because it "signals affiliation, closeness, and camaraderie" among employees. Furthermore, negative gossip may serve as a beneficial warning about potentially hazardous persons, such as informing a new coworker about the Boss's destructive behaviours and preventing a new employee from being entangled in problematic circumstances. Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, and Labianca speak about gossip being a necessity in the working collective in the

offices of large organizations. While talking behind someone's back may not appear to be a nice thing, it has a beneficial rather than a negative influence.

"A co-worker's gossip can serve as a sounding board, and with whom she can come to grips with the shift," according to Schreiner (Schreiner, 2016). That indicates that eliciting compassion from coworkers through gossip may be beneficial in the workplace, fostering trust and affection among coworkers. That is why it is critical to foster only positive office chatter. Gossiping is an excellent way to learn about other people's experiences and how they utilize (or don't use) that knowledge at work. As a result, it is reasonable to suppose that a good employer will foster positive workplace gossip to have more productive employees.

Communication, while necessary in any organization, has its limitations. Although no business can exist without communication, communication (in the casual sense) might sometimes become perceived as gossip. Office gossip and rumours have long been recognized as a normal aspect of the workplace, with places like the coffee machine and water cooler offering seemingly ideal and comfortable locations for discussion. Unwanted communication may spread quickly because of systems like the Internet and email. According to Greengard and Samuel (2001), the kind and severity of gossip have gotten more severe in today's spiteful society. Hopefully, this white paper will help you navigate workplace gossip in your company.

Fadzai Danha is a consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd a management and human resources consulting firm. Phone +263 242 481946-48/481950 or email: fadzai@ipccconsultants.com or visit our website at www.ipccconsultants.com

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