Multitasking Behaviors as Incivility in the Workplace

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Increasing use of technology in the workplace have led to more multitasking behaviors. Multitasking may be considered productive or counterproductive work behaviors, but tend to be perceived as incivility. Negative consequences of incivility should prompt the organizations to pay close attention to the issues. This paper proposes a model depicting factors relating to multitasking and ultimately perception of incivility. Literatures in multitasking and incivility are reviewed, and propositions for future studies are included.

Field of Research: Management, Counterproductive work behaviors, Incivility

1. Introduction

In recent years, negative work behaviors have received more focal interests in research. These behaviors may include deviance, aggression, antisocial behavior, and violence (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). One of the milder form of these counterproductive behaviors is incivility, a "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson, Pearson, 1999).

Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout (2001) found that more than 71% of the U.S. federal employees in their study experienced some forms of workplace incivility in the previous 5 years. These incidents negatively affect job satisfaction of the employees. Another study by Porath and Pearson (2009) found that incivility resulted in decreased work effort, time at work, and work quality. Targets of incivility worried more about the incidents, avoid the others, reduced work performance and commitment, and some ultimately left their organizations. The negative effect could catch on to others in the organization or those who witnessed, thus affecting overall organization culture.

At the same time, technology uses have also attracted interests regarding their negative effects in the workplace. Some issues that have been studied are misuses of technology at work (Weatherbee 2010), personal use of internet during work hours or cyber loafing (Lim 2002; Mastrangelo, Everton, Jolton 2006), internet abuse (Mirchandani & Motwani 2003), emotions related to personal internet use at work (Stratton 2010), flaming in electronic communication (Alonzo & Aiken 2004).

Technology also brings about another form of incivility, cyber incivility. Computer-mediated behaviors that violate workplace norms of mutual respect can be
perceived as incivility (Lim & Tel 2009). Cyber incivility can lessen organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and increase intention to quit and workplace deviance.

The rising use of technology has made multitasking more prevalent in organizations. Multitaskers perform multiple tasks or communicate with many people simultaneously. These behaviors frequently require the use of communication technology devices such as Smartphone, the internet, chat programs, and tablet computers. Multitasking behaviors may be deemed necessary in today’s fast-pace business. Jobs that are designed for workers to multitask may facilitate the development and implementation of new ideas and improvements in the complex and unpredictable environment (Zoghi, Levenson, & Gibbs 2005).

Not all multitasking behaviors lead to better performance. A study by Kraushaar and Novak (2010) found that students often multitasked extensively on their laptops during the lecture. Many behaviors were found not to be class-related. Based on their observations, extent of the students’ e-mail and instant messaging use were often underreported. In this study, students who engaged in distractive multitasking behaviors performed less well academically. Another study by Ellis, Daniels, and Jauregui (2010) also found that students who were allowed to text during lectures performed worse in the exam.

This paper attempts to integrate the understanding of technology use in multitasking and incivility as counterproductive work behaviors in a model. It will propose the conditions which boost multitasking behaviors and whether they are counterproductive, and may lead to perception of incivility in the workplace.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Incivility in the Workplace

Incivility is a form of counterproductive work behaviors. It is similar to, but not the same as, aggression and violence in the workplace, and all of these behaviors are perceived as negative and immoral (Pearson, Andersson & Wegner 2001). Incivility is usually less intense than other forms of aggression at work, but it can intensify, and can lead to eroding morals and negative culture in the workplace.

Cortina and Magley (2009) examined how employees emotionally appraise uncivil behavior at work. They found the determinants of appraisal to include target relative job position, instigator position, and higher variety, frequencies, and enduring behaviors. The incivility behaviors were perceived as annoying, frustrating, and offensive, but not so threatening.

Incivility behaviors in the workplace may include seemingly benign behaviors such as lack of pleasantries in communications, texting during meeting, screening phone calls, or being inconsiderate to others (Andersson & Pearson 1999). However, incivility can be a precursor to more aggressive behaviors. Andersson and Pearson
(1999) suggested that incivilities can spiral past the tipping point into coercive actions which are counterproductive or violent. These harmful consequences are stemming from a simple uncivil behavior that was perceived negatively. The temperaments of the multitaskers and the climate of informality in the organizations may escalate the situations. Uncivil behaviors can spread throughout the organization, leading to uncivil climate or culture. Scott et al. (2008) proposed a model of likelihood for workplace aggression, where the trigger event, along with certain workplace environment (abusive supervision or rigid policies) and individual personality (hostile attribution style, neuroticism) can escalate an aggression into an act of violence. Incivility may heighten into aggression in similar manners.

2.2 Multitasking and Technology

Communication and mobile technology have become ubiquitous in business world. However, technology’s influence in organizations has not been well studied (Orlikowski & Scott 2008). One of the more recent gadgets available include computer tablets such as the iPads. The iPads were estimated to be used in 50 percent of the Fortune 100 companies (Kaneshige 2010). With similar communication technology and devices, employees are more equipped with tools to multitask.

Businesses require that their employees be productive in order to stay competitive. The increased urgency in business competition leads many employees to multitask, attempting to get more work done in less time. With the availability of communication technology, the employees can now effectively engage in multitasking and multicommunicating. Reinsch, Turner, & Insley (2008) defined multicommunication as when one engages in two or more overlapping, synchronous conversations. Multicommunication often requires the person to assume multiple roles in order to hold many ongoing conversations on many topics, each at a fast pace. The authors also argued that multicommunication could improve workers’ productivity up to a point. Multicommunication or multitasking may aid the employees in gathering information from multiple sources simultaneously. Chat software and other technologies facilitate the compartmentalization of the interactions and allow multicommunication to proceed at flexible pace.

However, this may come at a cost of divided attention or delayed responses in one of the paralleled communications. Multitasking behaviors may be considered minor annoyances to most people, but may appear as inconsiderate, rude, and demeaning to others. These can lead to perception of incivility in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson 1999; Pearson, Anderson & Wegner 2001).
3. Model development

Given that technology use and multitasking behaviors are on the rise, a thorough understanding of the behaviors is warranted. Probable negative consequences of the situation should encourage organizations' to pay attention to the issue.

Bowling and Gruys (2010) proposed that studies of counterproductive behaviors should be specific to work environment. In prior studies, there might be some irrelevant items or issues that did not apply in most environments or organizations, non-differentiation between major counterproductive behaviors and incivility and task vs. non-task related behaviors. This paper proposes that the use of communication technology devices serves as a specific behavior that can be applied to most organizations, while implying that their uses are task-related.

In Figure 1, the model suggests that multitasking behaviors are more likely to occur when the organizations require them, when multitasking is considered acceptable behaviors, by some employees who have higher proclivity to do so, and when the employees are motivated to do so. Multitasking may ultimately be considered productive if it leads to better performance by the individuals or the organization. Multitasking behaviors that do not align with organizations’ goals or fail to improve the work performance may be considered counterproductive. The model also suggests that multitasking in itself constitutes incivility, regardless of personal or organization outcomes.
3.1 Organization factors

According to Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2000), economic pressures force many organizations to consider budget cut in the environment with higher diversity and number of contingent workers, and increased competition. Organizations tried to become more efficient by empowering their employees and flattening the organizations, making the structures more informal. These lead to uncivil behaviors which may include multitasking.

Roscigno, Hodson and Lopez (2009) proposed that one of the sources of incivility was organization chaos, caused by factors such as downsizing and outsourcing. With fewer employees, multitasking becomes necessary to achieve the goals of the organizations.

Other factors may also affect how much multicomunication or multitasking occurs. For example, the employees would be less likely to multitask in the presence of their supervisor, customers, or suppliers. Nor would they multitask during a job interview or performance appraisal (Reinsch, Turner & Tinsley 2008).

Proposition 1. The extent of multitasking is related to organization factors such as their financial situation, size, and employee-specific situations.

3.2 Organization norm

Reinsch, Turner & Tinsley (2008) also proposed that multicomunication occurs more when the media is available and when the organization allowed it. Where organizations are permissive or accommodating of multicomunication, employees simply accept the behaviors as norms.

Voice mail, e-mail, and teleconferencing may lead to information overload and intensified feelings of time pressures in organizations. Rudeness or incivility may increase as politeness is perceived as less significant (Pearson, Andersson & Porath 2000). As a norm, employees may be less sensitive to others' feelings towards their multitasking.

Proposition 2. The extent of multitasking is related to the organizations' culture such as tolerance for multitasking behaviors or expectations of politeness.

3.3 Individual propensity

Not all people prefer to multitask at work. König, Oberacher and Kleinmann (2010) found that the predictors of some multitasking behaviors are polychromic value, tendency to respond quickly (impulsivity), and higher work demand. Arnold, Pulich and Wang (2008) proposed that employees who were immature, irresponsible, or irritating maybe more likely to exhibit incivility behaviors.

Proposition 3. The extent of multitasking is related to individual characteristics such as polychromic value, impulsivity, and immaturity.
3.4 Individual Motivation

Some people are motivated to multitask to accomplish personal goals. For example, people faked phone calls in public in order to avoid others, impress bystanders, or to cope with social anxiety (Harmon 2005). These people may try to manage the impressions others have of them (Gardner & Martinko 1988). In this case, the employees multitask to demonstrate their self-importance, their technical or communication skills. Multitaskers may use the behaviors to communicate messages intended for others, or signal to others that they are unwelcome.

An employee may intentionally try to look bad. Becker and Martin (1995) argued that impression management is not necessarily a lie and may project negative impressions in order to lower performance expectations (but at the risk of being misinterpret as actual performance problems). In this case, multitaskers may pretend to be too busy multitasking to avoid unpleasant tasks, a valued outcome for them.

Proposition 4. The extent of multitasking is related to individual motivation such as positive or negative impression management.

3.5 Productive vs. counterproductive behaviors & Incivility

Multitasking behaviors may benefit the organizations if they improve the employees' or organizations' performance. In this case, multitasking behaviors may include searching for solutions from multiple sources (e.g. internet, other employees) while communicating or working with another. The behaviors are task-related and serve mutual goals. On the other hand, excessive multitasking or non-task-related multitasking may lead to mistakes or lowered performance (Ellis, Daniels & Jauregui 2010; Kraushaar & Novak 2010). The behaviors may be unintentional but still can be considered counterproductive work behaviors. When multitasking behaviors are non-task-related, they are more likely to be counterproductive, especially when the employees' motivation for the behaviors is self-serving.

Proposition 5. Multitasking may be considered productive or counterproductive work behaviors based on the outcomes.

Proposition 6. Multitasking is more likely to be counterproductive when the behaviors are non-task related or with self-serving motivation.

Regardless of the outcome, the act of multitasking by itself can be perceived as incivility. Productive work behaviors of multitasking may be more acceptable then when the behaviors are counterproductive. The cost of incivility to the organizations, however, remains high (Porath & Pearson 2009).

Proposition 7. Multitasking is more likely to be perceived as incivility when the outcome is productive than when it is counterproductive.
4. Discussion

The understanding of factors relating to multitasking behaviors should help managers in mitigating their unintended consequence, incivility. Organizations may reevaluate their goals and their climate, eliminating the needs of employees to always do more. Employees who may be prone to multitask may be managed by redesigning of jobs and work roles, improving selection process, training, using of performance appraisal system effectively, rewarding desirable work performance, and disciplining and discharge (König, Oberacher & Kleinmann 2010).

Targets of incivility have to deal with the situation at hands. The methods of coping were studied by Cortina and Magley (2009). They questioned how employees cope with uncivil behaviors at work. The authors proposed that coping depended on the appraisal and the determinants. They found that most incidents did not involve formal complaints, as incivilities are perceived as ‘minor’, and went uncorrected. The authors suggested that management not wait for formal complaints to do something but develop a preventive systems that incorporate culture. They also proposed categories of coping that include support seeker, detacher, minimizer, and conflict avoider (prosocial and assertive) - all impacted by the appraisals, position of instigators.

Porath and Pearson (2009) suggested that the leader set high expectation for civility, weeding out potential uncivilized employees, teaching civility, training employees to recognize and respond to signals, taking complaints seriously, not making excuses for powerful instigators, and conducting exit interview. Roscigno, Hodson and Lopez (2009) found that skills level, seniority, and grievance mechanisms present in organization provide some protection against incivilities. Counterproductive workplace behaviors such as integrity, drug/alcohol, or violence can be tested during the selection process (Maclane, Walmsley, 2010). Critical incident job analysis or Job Compatibility Assessment JCA) can be used in selection procedure (Bolton, Becker, Barber, 2010). These selection tools may be modified to measure incivility tendencies for both multitasking and incivility.

5. Conclusion

More studies need to be conducted to determine the impact of multitasking and of the role of communication technology in the process. Multitasking can also lead to role overload and intensify role conflicts. Management needs to consider whether the employees are prepared to take on multiple tasks, are more capable of processing more information, and need more stimuli to stay productive? However, multitasking and the use of technology in multicommunication can lead to incivility. Multitasking may be used as an impression management tactics and provide the actors with some coping mechanism to deal with the demands of the workplace.
If multitasking behaviors are to become the norm of the society, the employees and the organizations will require a new set of skills that include effective use of technology, teamwork, communication, sensitivity, and civility, in order to fully benefit from the technology and a productive, civilized workforce.

References


