

The AD-roit Links

NEWSLETTER

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#10

From Jokes to Hostility: Workplace Trust vs. Gossip Culture

Inside this edition: How workplace gossip and online comments can quietly turn toxic, damage trust, and escalate into serious PoSH concerns.

**YOUR NO. 1
GUIDE TO A
SAFER
WORKPLACE**

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From the **FOUNDER'S DESK**

Dear Readers,

In today's hyperconnected workplace, conversations don't end when the workday does. They travel with us—into WhatsApp groups, Slack channels, LinkedIn messages, and even anonymous corners of the internet. This constant connectivity has made collaboration easier than ever. But it has also blurred an important boundary: the line between open communication and careless commentary.

What often begins as a “harmless joke” or a casual aside can quietly evolve into something more damaging. When conversations shift toward gossip—or worse, comments that demean, stereotype, or objectify colleagues—they stop being harmless. They begin to erode something far more valuable than we realize: trust.

And trust, once fractured, is difficult to rebuild.

A workplace does not become toxic overnight. It happens in small moments—in what we choose to say, what we choose to ignore, and what we allow to pass as “normal.” Digital spaces amplify this effect. Words travel faster, linger longer, and often feel detached from accountability. But the impact they create is very real.

As leaders, colleagues, and individuals, we must ask ourselves a simple question:

Are we contributing to a culture of trust, or feeding a culture of gossip?

Because culture is not defined by policies alone—it is defined by everyday behavior.

Respect is not situational. It does not apply only in meetings or official channels. It extends to private chats, informal groups, and even moments when we believe no one important is listening.

Building a culture of trust requires intention. It means choosing dignity over humor at someone else's expense. It means speaking up when something feels off. And most importantly, it means recognizing that every interaction—online or offline—shapes the environment we all work in.

At its core, a strong workplace is not just productive—it is safe, respectful, and grounded in mutual trust.

And personally, this is something I think about often. The kind of culture we build isn't defined by big statements, it is shaped in the quiet, everyday choices we make. If each of us can be a little more mindful, a little more respectful, we don't just avoid harm rather we actively build something better.

Let's be intentional about that.

Warmly,

Leeza Dutta Singh 

**Founder & Managing Partner,
AD-roit Links**



From Jokes to Hostility

Workplace Trust vs. Gossip Culture

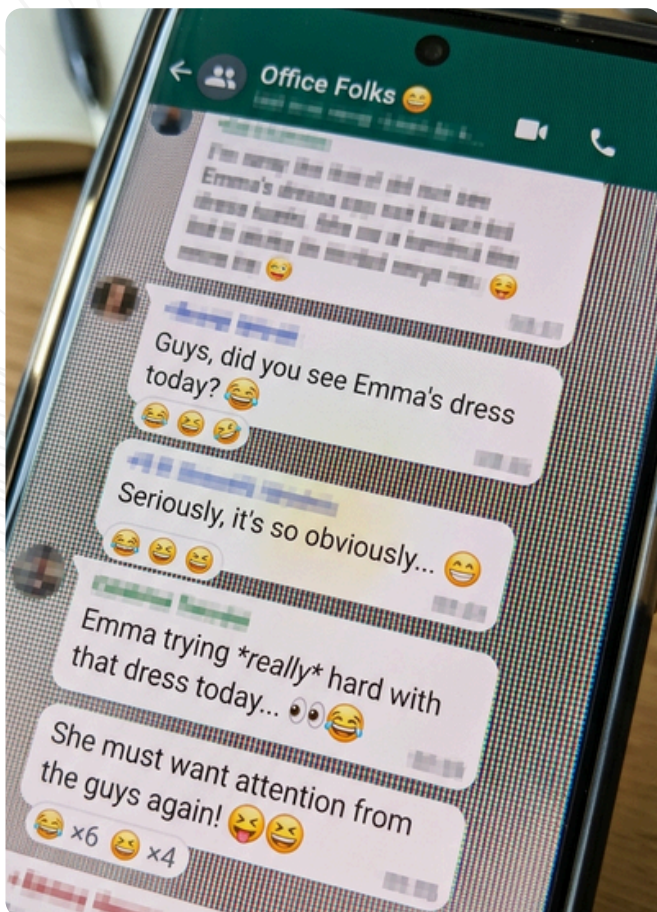
~ By Atryee Dutta

In today's hyperconnected digital workplaces, conversations cannot end at the office door. They spill into WhatsApp groups, Slack channels, LinkedIn messages, and even anonymous forums like Reddit.

While digital platforms have empowered employees to share ideas and collaborate seamlessly, they have also opened the door to something more harmful, inappropriate comments and gossip about colleagues online.

At first glance, a "harmless joke" or a casual remark may seem insignificant.

But when these comments target individuals, especially in ways that demean, stereotype, or sexualize them, they create a hostile environment.



The Hidden Impact of Inappropriate Online Comments

When a colleague becomes the subject of online gossip or inappropriate remarks, the damage is twofold:



Personal Harm

The individual feels humiliated, unsafe, and excluded.



Cultural Harm

The workplace culture shifts to a hostile one and employees wonder who might be the next target.

Unlike face-to-face comments, online remarks may stay in their minds for longer. Screenshots are circulated in groups, posts may resurface later, and reputations are damaged long after the original comment was made. This makes digital gossip especially toxic.

Gossip Culture is More Dangerous Than We Think

When inappropriate comments go unchecked by HR and leadership, they normalize disrespect. Over time, this creates a culture where employees feel:

- **Unsafe to speak up:** Fear of being the next subject of gossip.
- **Disconnected from the team:** Trust becomes invisible when colleagues laugh at someone's expense.
- **Demotivated to contribute:** Talented employees become unable to contribute when they feel undervalued and humiliated.

The result? **Attrition.**

Organizations lose great employees not because of workload or pay, but because of a culture that tolerates disrespect.

Real Costs of Gossip in the Workplace

Loss of Talent

Skilled employees leave, taking knowledge and expertise with them and often client trust is lost also in the process.

Damaged Reputation

Word spreads quickly, internally and externally, that the workplace isn't safe.

Reduced Productivity

Energy is wasted on rumours instead of innovation.

Legal & Compliance Risks

Inappropriate comments can escalate into formal complaints under PoSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) or workplace conduct policies.

PoSH and Digital Responsibility

The Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act in India, and similar workplace conduct laws globally, extend beyond physical spaces. Online harassment, dirty jokes, and gossip about colleagues fall under hostile workplace behavior.

Organizations must recognize that:

- ✓ Digital comments are workplace comments.
- ✓ Online jokes can be harassment.
- ✓ Gossip can escalate into formal complaints.

By treating digital misconduct with the same seriousness as in-person behavior, companies can protect both their employees and their culture.

How Gossip Can Escalate into a PoSH Complaint

Gossip in the workplace often begins casually. A colleague might make an inappropriate or sexualized remark about another employee, disguising it as humour.

At first, it may seem like "just talk," but for the person being spoken about or even for those overhearing, it can feel humiliating, unsafe, or

deeply uncomfortable. What one person laughs off as a joke can land as a personal attack for someone else.

When these comments go unchecked, they start to feel normal. The occasional remark becomes frequent, and soon the workplace atmosphere shifts. Instead of being a space for collaboration and respect, it turns into one where employees anticipate ridicule or gossip.

This normalization is dangerous because it silently erodes trust and creates a hostile environment that discourages people from speaking up or contributing fully.



Eventually, the discomfort reaches a tipping point. The affected employee may decide to escalate the issue, reporting it to HR or the Internal Committee (IC).

At this stage, what began as "harmless chatter" is formally recognized as misconduct. If the remarks are sexual in nature, derogatory, or persistent, they qualify as harassment under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act.

Once a complaint is filed, the IC investigates thoroughly. This process can involve interviews, documentation, and corrective measures. If the organization is found negligent in addressing such behaviour, the consequences can be serious, ranging from reputational damage to legal and financial penalties.

What Employees Expect from Us

Employees are not just workers; they are consumers of workplace culture. Just as clients expect transparency and quality from us, employees expect:

RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

No jokes at someone's expense.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Clear action when inappropriate behaviour is reported by anyone.

INCLUSIVITY

A workplace where diversity is celebrated, not mocked.

SAFETY

Assurance that complaints will be heard and addressed fairly.

How Organizations Can Break the Gossip Cycle



Set Necessary Policies

Explicitly include online behaviour in workplace conduct guidelines and make them a mandatory part of their onboarding training modules.



Encourage Reporting

Create safe channels for employees to raise concerns without fear.



Act Decisively

Address immediately upon reporting, showing zero tolerance for inappropriate comments.

Gossip isn't necessarily harmless. Dirty jokes definitely aren't funny.

If we fail to protect the employees from gossip and hostility, we risk losing not just great talent, but the very trust that keeps organizations alive.

SafeStories: May Edition

Follow us on LinkedIn to see every new Safestory and join the conversation about building safer workplaces.

The SafeStories Comic Strip series is a creative initiative by AD-roit Links to spark meaningful conversations around workplace safety, dignity, and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH). Every month, we bring you a relatable, thought-provoking comic to help spread awareness in a memorable and engaging way.

Not Harmless, Not Funny



Ask the Legal Expert!

Your legal queries, addressed with expert insight.

Q Is gossip always considered harassment under PoSH?

Not every piece of gossip qualifies as harassment. But when gossip involves sexual remarks, dirty jokes, or creates a hostile environment that makes someone feel unsafe or humiliated, it can become a PoSH issue. The key is impact, not intent.

Q What should I do if I overhear inappropriate jokes but they're not directed at me?

You can still raise it. PoSH protects everyone from hostile environments, not just direct targets. If you feel uncomfortable, it matters — and HR or the Internal Committee (IC) will take it seriously.

Q Do online comments in platforms for private/close office groups count as workplace misconduct?

Yes. Even if posted outside office hours, if the comments involve colleagues and affect workplace dignity or safety, they fall under workplace conduct and PoSH. Digital spaces are extensions of the workplace.

Q What happens after I file a complaint?

The IC or HR will investigate, interview parties involved, and take corrective action. Confidentiality is maintained throughout the process to protect everyone involved. You'll be kept informed of progress.

Q Will reporting gossip affect my career growth?

Absolutely not. Retaliation against complainants is prohibited. Organizations are legally bound to ensure you are not penalized for raising concerns. Speaking up shows courage and helps build a safer culture.

Q How can I tell the difference between casual banter and harmful gossip?

Casual banter is mutual, respectful, and harmless. Harmful gossip or dirty jokes are one-sided, demeaning, and make someone uncomfortable. If you feel uneasy or excluded, it's a red flag.

Q What if I'm accused of making inappropriate comments unintentionally?

Intent doesn't erase impact. HR will counsel and may take corrective measures. Sensitivity training is often provided to help prevent recurrence. The focus is on learning and ensuring respect.

Q I didn't understand all the policies shared during onboarding. Where can I revisit them later?

You should be able to access policies through your company's internal portal, HR team, or onboarding resources. If anything is unclear, reach out. Policies are meant to guide you, not confuse you.

Highlights in Frames

Some snapshots of the moments that shaped our month.



Our Services



PoSH Compliance Training & Advisory

Building safer workplaces, one session at a time.



Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)

Creating cultures where everyone feels a sense of belonging.



Ethics and Code of Business Conduct

Empowering decisions with ethics and integrity.



Simplifying Labour Law Compliance

Turning complex laws into crystal clear solutions.



POCSO Awareness & Support

Protecting children through awareness and action.



Policy Drafting & Review

Policies that work — for people and compliance.



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