

Pervasive Bullying In Law Is Impacting Young Attorneys

By Aebra Coe | 30 October 2024

Law360.com

A report released earlier this month cataloging the experiences of more than 6,000 Illinois lawyers found that one quarter say they have experienced bullying within the last year. Among the youngest lawyers, that number jumps to 39%. Attorneys between the ages of 25 and 35 years old were more likely than any other age group to indicate they'd recently been impacted by bullying, with the numbers declining with each tier of seniority and 12% of those 66 to 75 years old reporting they had been bullied in the last year. The study was conducted on behalf of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism and its results will reassure many young lawyers that they are not alone in experiencing bullying: "This is happening and it's not only happening to you, but to a really huge swath of people in the legal profession," Roberta Liebenberg - who conducted the survey - said. "This is a real problem and employers can no longer say this is an isolated incident. This is an issue that needs to be discussed and addressed. And the results would likely be the same if surveys were conducted in other U.S. states. This is not only an Illinois state problem."

The survey found that the youngest lawyers were most likely to have experienced bullying, which most often includes verbal intimidation such as insults, name-calling or shouting; harsh, belittling or excessive criticism of work; demeaning nonverbal behaviors like eye-rolling; and the spreading of malicious rumors about the target. "There is an industry standard to mistreat, overwork, and haze new attorneys," one survey respondent said. "Older attorneys think they have the right to bully younger attorneys just because they've been around longer," another said.

The impacts of bullying on individual lawyers and the profession as a whole were wide-ranging. Fifty-four percent of those who experienced workplace bullying reported a decrease in emotional well-being because of it, while 39% said they felt less productive at work and 20% experienced a decline in physical health. Of the respondents who reported experiencing bullying within the previous year, 18% said they left a job practicing law because of it, and 9% of all respondents said they were looking for a new job or would leave their current job because of workplace bullying.

Kenneth Matuszewski, chair of the young lawyers section of the Chicago Bar Association, says he wants to take on bullying as a priority in his current leadership position. He's reached out to the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism and is working with them to develop programming to educate the industry on bullying and ideas for combating it. Matuszewski says he wasn't surprised by the report's findings when it comes to the prevalence of bullying among younger lawyers because it's both something he's experienced himself and heard about from peers. He remembered a time another member of the profession told him he just wasn't cut out to be in private practice. "That takes a mental toll," he said. "Bullying can truly negatively impact your confidence in your own abilities."

One of the most important aspects of attacking the problem of bullying in legal workplaces is ensuring that those who experience it feel they can approach leaders within their organizations and know they will be supported and action will be taken. "People may be targeted and the employer's response is to ignore the problem. In too many workplaces, the response is lacking," he said. The commission found that just 20% of those who were bullied it to a supervisor with the belief the employer wouldn't do anything listed as a top reason for why it went unreported. More than half of those who did report an instance of bullying rated the employer's response to the report as either "not sufficient" or "totally unsatisfactory". "There's a huge opportunity for this to change," Matuszewski said. "Where there's a will, there's a way. It can be done. It's leaders who have to take the reins on this and get the changes done."