

# Desk rage spoils workplace for many Americans

By Ellen Wulforst *Thu Jul 10, 7:13 AM ET*

Get out of the way, road rage. Here comes desk rage.

Anger in the workplace -- employees and employers who are grumpy, insulting, short-tempered or worse -- is shockingly common and likely growing as Americans cope with woes of rising costs, job uncertainty or overwhelming debt, experts say.

"It runs gamut from just rudeness up to pretty extreme abusive behaviors," said Paul Spector, professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of South Florida. "The severe cases of fatal violence get a lot of press but in some ways this is more insidious because it affects millions of people."

Nearly half of U.S. workers in America report yelling and verbal abuse on the job, with roughly a quarter saying it has driven them to tears, research has shown.

Other research showed one-sixth of workers reported anger at work has led to property damage, while a tenth reported physical violence and fear their workplace might not be safe.

"It's a total disaster," said Anna Maravelas, author of "How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress." "Rudeness, impatience, people being angry -- we used to do that kind of stuff at home but at work, we were professional. Now it's almost becoming trendy to do it at work.

"It was something we did behind closed doors," she said. "Now people are losing their sense of embarrassment over it."

Contemporary pressures such as rising fuel costs fan the flames, said John Challenger, head of Chicago's Challenger, Gray & Christmas workplace consultants.

"People are coming to work after a long commute, sitting in traffic watching their discretionary income burn up. They're ready for a fight or just really upset," he said.

Added to that, he said, are financially strapped workers having to cut back on paying for personal pastimes that might serve as an antidote to work pressures.

## LET OFF STEAM

"That means people come into work after a weekend and they haven't been able to let off any steam," he said.

Spector said his research has found 2 percent to 3 percent of people admit to pushing, slapping or hitting someone at work. With roughly 100 million people in the U.S. work force, he said, that's as many as 3 million people.

Maravelas said she conducted a seminar this week in rural Iowa, where she asked participants if they thought anger was increasing at their workplace.

Everyone raised their hands, she said, which is typically the response she gets. She cited research showing 88 percent of U.S. employees think incivility is rising at work.

"Many of us sense we're losing ground economically and socially. The safety net is unraveling. Hence, anxiety and unease are skyrocketing," she said.

People reassure themselves by blaming others and "find comfort in believing their suffering is caused by a callous, incompetent or selfish organization, leader, supplier, union or regulatory body," she said.

The worst offenders are overachievers, said Rachelle Canter, a workplace expert and social psychologist. "The usual profile is Type A, really, really smart, with impossibly high standards they set for themselves as well as for other people.

"They are so invested, I would say maybe over-invested, in success and in everyone being every bit as driven as they are that they just lose their sense of perspective, and they can lash out at other people," said Canter, author of "Make the Right Career Move."

But desk rage extends across industry and class lines, from top white-collar jobs to gritty blue-collar work, and companies pay dearly in terms of lost productivity, sagging morale and higher absenteeism, Spector said.

The worst cases end in violence, he said.

"Somebody didn't just come to work one day and shoot somebody," Spector said. "There's probably been a pattern of less extreme behaviors leading up to it."

(Editing by Michelle Nichols and Bill Trott)