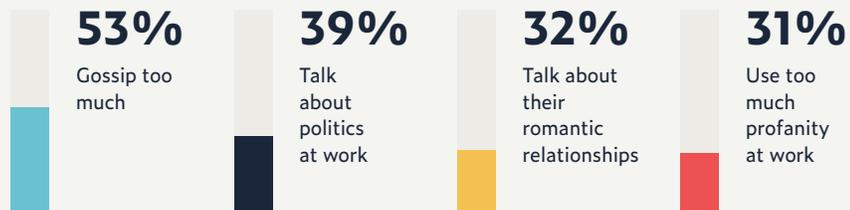# 2019
Workplace Boundaries Report

Udemy

Boundaries Overstepped:
Companies Are Not Confronting Behavior Issues in the Workplace

Today's workplace not only looks different from 10 years ago, it feels different. Companies have gone from jeans-only Fridays to an extremely casual workplace that can sometimes resemble a college campus — a shift made to appeal to millennial and Gen Z employees, who now make up approximately **40% of the workforce**. In addition, with social media, always-on communication, open floor plans, and a growing menu of "fun" perks, employees are feeling pressure to share more of themselves with their coworkers.

Not everyone is excited about this. And, if you think this is another example of Baby Boomers and millennials in a culture clash, read on. Our research shows these attitudes don't strictly align by generation.

It makes me uncomfortable when my coworkers...

53%
Gossip too much

39%
Talk about politics at work

32%
Talk about their romantic relationships

31%
Use too much profanity at work

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For this report, Udemy set out to explore the current state of personal–professional boundaries in the workplace, how people are navigating these boundaries (or not), and the effect they have on both employees and companies. How are behavior issues in the workplace impacting business performance, employee satisfaction, and productivity? Gallup reports that unhappy, actively disengaged employees cost U.S. companies **$450 billion to $550 billion** per year, so blurring boundaries could have an enormous economic impact.

What's the Definition of Appropriate Office Behavior?

While many employees are glad they don't need to purchase a closet's worth of suits and adhere to a strict corporate hierarchy, what's rubbing many the wrong way is the lack of understanding around what constitutes professional behavior at work. **Why is this happening?**

> *In organizations where managers aren't given the training, coaching, and ongoing support from their leaders on how to set these expectations and give (and receive) ongoing feedback, the problem is likely to persist – and grow.*

Deborah Grayson Riegel
Executive Coach, Speaker and CEO of Talk Support

One contributing factor may be a change in employment trends. For one thing, many entry-level jobs, such as administrative assistants and coordinators, have been eliminated due to automation or organizational decisions. Those were traditionally the places where new workers learned the ropes from a close supervisor. In addition, fewer young employees are entering the workforce with summer job experience (only about **a third of teens** have summer jobs). As a result, they aren't as familiar with workplace norms when they secure real office jobs, but no one is explicitly tasked with helping them figure it out.

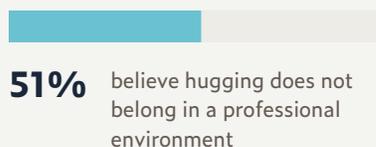Our research indicates that the workplace is fraught with questionable behaviors and crossed boundaries, from oversharing personal information and gossiping to far worse offenses, such as condoning or ignoring body-shaming and bullying. Furthermore, we get the sense that many companies are not doing enough to curb this behavior or clearly communicate expectations. Taken together, this suggests an urgent need for companies to create safe spaces where leaders and individuals can discuss workplace behaviors and communicate their norms and expectations to each other.

Otherwise, employees won't know whether their idea of a respectful, professional workplace aligns with what their coworkers have in mind. And they won't have tools for bridging those gaps and resolving conflicts. "There are a number of reasons that business leaders are struggling with
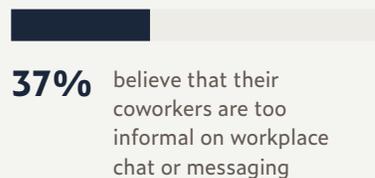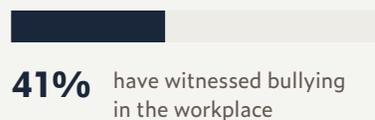
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workplace boundaries," according to Deborah Grayson Riegel, an executive coach, speaker, and CEO of Talk Support, who has taught management and communication at the Wharton School of Business and Peking University. "It often starts when managers in organizations wrongly assume that their workforce 'just knows' how to interact with each other, not realizing that those expectations must be explicitly discussed, and often vary company to company, as well as across cultures."
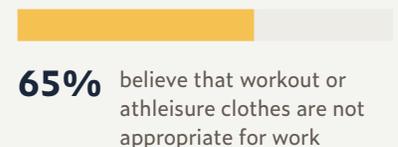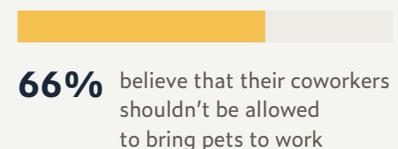
Key Findings

| Too much physical contact in the workplace	Inappropriate communication methods are commonplace	Employees treat the workplace like their home
51% believe hugging does not belong in a professional environment	**41%** have witnessed bullying in the workplace	**66%** believe that their coworkers shouldn't be allowed to bring pets to work
31% have received an unwelcome hug in the workplace	**37%** believe that their coworkers are too informal on workplace chat or messaging	**65%** believe that workout or athleisure clothes are not appropriate for work

Managers Need Help

Other outside research has found that there's a crisis in management. Gallup reports that just [18% of managers](#) demonstrate a high level of talent for managing teams and that promotions to managerial positions are typically based on factors like tenure and performance in a past role, rather than potential to excel in the next one. This is a real liability, as the skills needed for management are completely different from those for an individual contributor. Millennial workplace consultant Aaron Levy explained in the [2018 Udemy Employee Experience Report](#) that, when people move into management, **30-40%** of their time shifts from "doing work" to dealing with people issues.
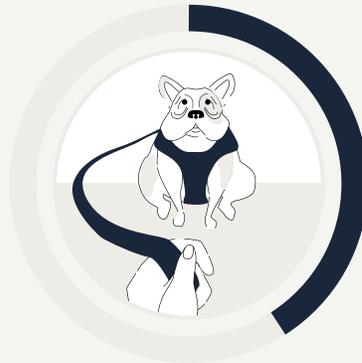

59% of managers feel pressured to work through lunch

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Top 3 Social or Work–Related Situations that Make Managers Uncomfortable
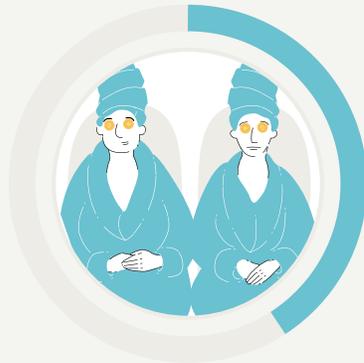
41%
of managers would be uncomfortable sharing a hotel room with a coworker for a company event

41%
### of managers would be uncomfortable caring for a coworker's pet or child

35%
of managers would feel uncomfortable going on a non-work-related trip with their coworker

In today's fluid and challenging workplace, new managers aren't getting adequate soft skills training on how to handle the stress and team dynamics, let alone guidance for managing themselves. We see from the responses to our survey that, compared to their non-manager coworkers, managers are feeling more pressure to blur their personal-professional boundaries. Companies could do a lot more to support the transition to management with training around soft skills like communication, conflict management, and emotional intelligence.

For example, more managers than non-managers say they let work take precedence over meals and relaxation time, with **59%** of managers (vs. **46%** of workers) revealing they feel pressured to work through lunch or eat with coworkers (**63%** of managers vs. **50%** of workers). While longer hours may be expected of those moving into management, without effective preparation, managers may find themselves spending a disproportionate amount of time learning on the fly.

Perhaps another side effect of this lack of preparedness, managers say they've experienced or witnessed inappropriate or discriminatory behavior at work more than non-managers. Fifty-three percent of managers (vs. **49%** of workers) have witnessed inappropriate behavior

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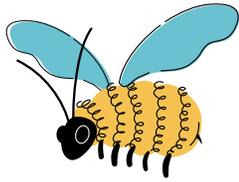
related to a coworker's political or social beliefs, opinions, or attitudes. In addition, **42%** of managers (vs. **36%** of workers) say they have witnessed body–shaming in the workplace, and **55%** of managers (vs. **46%** of workers) say they have heard inappropriate discussion of personal relationships and dating. A shocking **66%** of all employees have either witnessed or experienced bullying in the workplace.

Social Butterflies Set the Tone in the Workplace

A somewhat surprising finding from our survey is that generational differences aren't what's driving disputes over personal boundaries. It's personality. Employees either like to blend their work and personal lives or they don't. Our research revealed a "silent majority" across all age groups that would prefer to just do their work and keep their private lives private, but, unfortunately for them, it's their highly social coworkers setting the tone.
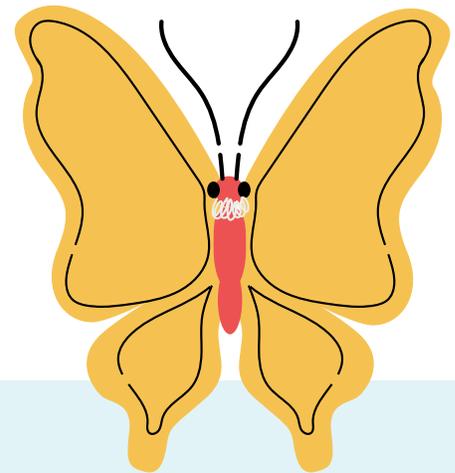
How Can the "Silent Majority" Be Heard?

Conflict can occur when we assume that people want what we want, need what we need, and will act how we would act in a particular situation. Conflict can also be exacerbated when we avoid articulating our wants, needs, and expectations for fear of hurting someone's feelings or making things worse. More often than not, avoiding a discussion leads to resentment — and allows the current dynamic to become entrenched.

Deborah Grayson Riegel
Executive Coach, Speaker and CEO of Talk Support

One approach is to redirect a conversation that's getting too personal or chatty by saying something in the moment like:

1. *"Thank you for asking about my weekend. It was good — and now I have to focus on this deadline that's quickly approaching."*

2. *"Wow! It sounds like you've got a lot going on. Who can you lean on outside of work?"*

3. *"I appreciate your concern/interest. I'm not really going to be talking about it at work, but I'll let you know if something comes up that will impact my work, okay?"*

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Our Research Reveals Two Camps Around Perceived Appropriateness of Workplace Behavior

A survey question about hugging in the workplace exposed a near 50/50 split between two camps: pro-hugs or no hugs. Looking at the data through the pro-hugs/no hugs lens exposes consistency in opinions around what is and isn't considered professional workplace behavior.

Social Butterflies
Pro-huggers tend to find certain behaviors more appropriate at work

VS

Worker Bees
Anti-huggers tend to find certain behaviors less appropriate at work

I believe my coworkers are too informal on workplace chat or messaging

28%
45%

I think my coworkers gossip too much at work

47%
58%

I feel uncomfortable when coworkers talk about their romantic relationships

22%
40%

● Social Butterfly ● Worker Bee

It's interesting to note that Worker Bees aren't all business all the time. While they do want more established structures and norms in the workplace, they're open to crossing some boundaries when they've left the office. For example, **62%** of all employees (including the Worker Bees) say they would care for their coworkers' children or pets outside of the office; **74%** would exercise with their coworkers (**64%** would even exercise with their managers!); and **67%** of employees would go on a non-work trip with a coworker.

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Social Media Contributes to Behavior Confusion

Social media use at work is often blamed for productivity issues; our 2018 Workplace Distraction Report found that **56%** of employees cited social media as their top distraction at work. But the challenges go beyond distraction; it gets downright confusing when people want to use these channels to connect to coworkers for non-work purposes.

Generational differences come into play somewhat. Younger generations, of course, have been using social media for most of their lives, while older generations worked for years before social media even existed, let alone entered the workplace. As a result, people have very different perspectives on how to interact on social media. Moreover, many communication and project management tools now mirror the user experience of social media platforms in an effort to make them familiar and user-friendly, perhaps prompting people to adopt the same casual communication style for business as they use for personal situations.

63%

of employees say they keep their social media private from coworkers

Are you "friends" with your manager?
Yes, we're connected on:

Facebook	50%
Instagram	23%
LinkedIn	22%
Twitter	18%
Snapchat	13%
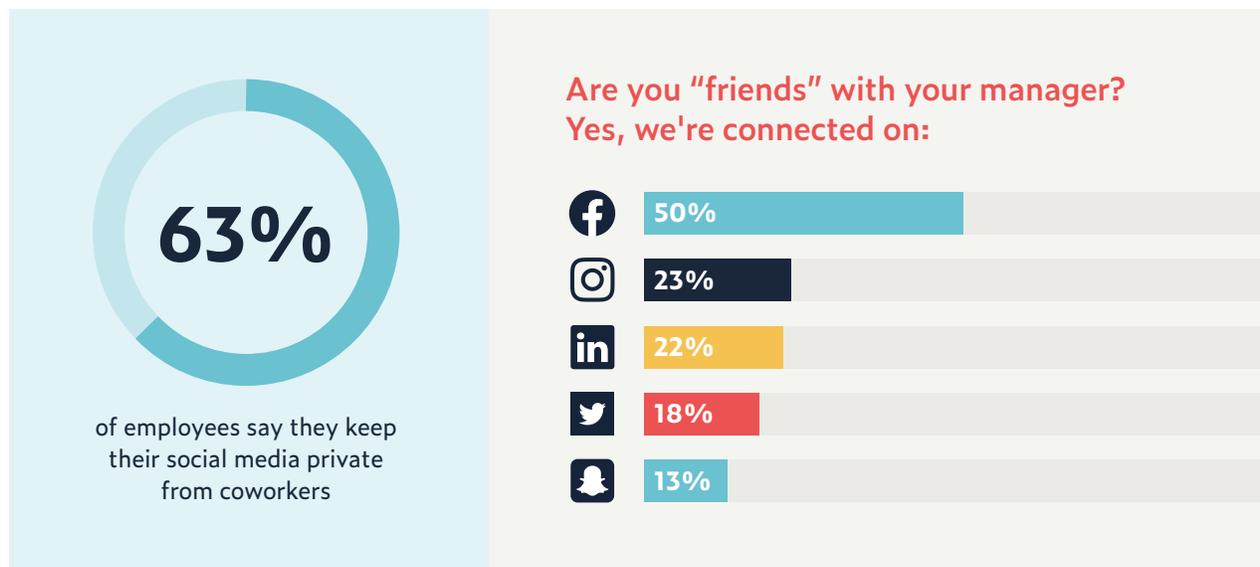
Our survey reveals some pushback from employees when it comes to bringing coworkers into their social media channels. Specifically, while **46%** of employees say they've felt pressured to accept a friend request on social media from a coworker, **63%** of employees say they keep their social media private because they don't want their coworkers to follow them.

Interestingly, **50%** of employees say they are "friends" with their managers on Facebook, compared to only **22%** of employees being connected to their boss on LinkedIn. You might expect those stats to be reversed, considering LinkedIn is specifically designated as a professional network.

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Oops, Did I Do That?

34%	22%	Taken a work call from a location they'd feel embarrassed disclosing to coworkers
25%	9%	Had one of their private messages displayed while presenting or sharing their screen
27%	9%	Have forgotten to mute a conference call and said something they shouldn't have
29%	18%	Mistakenly sent a private message to a coworker or messaged the wrong person
23%	4%	Been dressed inappropriately for a work-related video chat

● Men   ● Women

We Are All Somewhat Responsible

We can't blame the pro-hugging Social Butterflies for all of the behavior issues in the workplace. Sometimes we're our own worst enemies and trip over our own boundaries. Having clear norms around workplace behavior might also help save us from ourselves.

Workplace Boundaries Must Be Clarified

Currently, there's very little dialogue and clarity around acceptable workplace behavior. This puts a lot of pressure on managers and employees to figure it out in real time. To support employee happiness and productivity, as well as reduce turnover, it's imperative that companies support different personalities and work styles by opening the lines of communication around how to coexist peacefully and productively.

"An important part of our role as people leaders is to start the conversation. For some organizations, those discussions will reveal whether any boundaries are being crossed, and for others, the dialogue will focus more on how to navigate challenges that have already been identified," said Cara Brennan Allamano, SVP of Human Resources at Udemy.

"We spend time asking our employees about perks and career opportunities, but it's time to also ask how we can create an environment where our people feel supported to work more effectively," adds Allamano. "Noting the 'silent majority' uncovered by our research, I would urge leaders to move past assumptions and ask the questions that will provide an authentic picture of their workforce."

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A good place to start would be for leadership to help managers, teams, and individuals establish their own boundaries, since every group and person is different, and there's no clear consensus on what's "right."

What's Next?

Setting and communicating boundaries comes from the top! Deborah Grayson Riegel shares 3 things leaders can do to help reinforce a respectful culture others will appreciate.

1 Set and communicate your own boundaries clearly. Share stories with others about challenging boundaries you needed to set, both in your personal and professional life, how you navigated and negotiated them, and what the impact was.

2 Make sure that "setting and communicating clear boundaries" is included as a behavior to hire for, to recognize and reward among your staff, and is discussed in performance evaluations. If you want people to do it well, make sure they know it!

3 Create a culture of helpful feedback. Nobody gets better at anything— including setting and communicating boundaries— without consistent feedback (both reinforcing and constructive). If your leaders aren't doing this well, offer them coaching or training to develop this skill and cascade it throughout the organization.

The survey was conducted online by Toluna Group on behalf of Udemy in July 2019 among 1,000+ U.S. office workers in full-time jobs who are ages 18 or older. Complete survey methodology available upon request.

About Udemy

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