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Banter: **Just a Bit of Fun or Crossing the Line?**

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Our Research: Why Now?

In the twelve months prior to this research there was a spate of news stories reporting the alarming prevalence, and apparent continued acceptance, of workplace based sexual harassment. A notable example was the exposé of sexualised verbal and physical behaviour targeting female staff at the Presidents Club (BBC, 2018). This itself follows a string of other revelations (involving MPs, sportspeople and those in the performing arts), which comes hot on the heels of the widely publicised #MeToo movement; the moniker that has gained international momentum as a rallying cry against all sexual harassment and assault (Sini, 2017).

Although all these cases are inevitably different, a common thread that links them has been the presence (to a greater or lesser extent) of what many may still dismiss as harmless workplace 'banter'.

There is a key challenge in understanding when 'banter', which is regarded by experts as a normal part of social development often used for building relationships (Mills, 2018), becomes bullying, or even harassment.

According to recent research undertaken by the TUC (2016), half of the women respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace and a third have experienced unwanted sexual jokes; this suggests that a line of some sort continues to be crossed. These findings also imply that 'everyday sexism' is still very much rife in workplace settings.

Banter can be defined; the Oxford English Dictionary describes it as "the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks" (OED, 2018). In addition, many see it as a useful communication device to engage in difficult topics (Mills, 2018). At The Institute of Leadership & Management we were, however, surprised that there very few research papers exploring banter, and particularly how it can morph into something more nefarious.

We, therefore, wanted to get a broader understanding of the role and impact of workplace banter, both positive and negative, and understand what is considered appropriate and inappropriate.

The context for the research

'Banter' is an everyday aspect of interaction with people (Mills, 2018). However, there are strong social norms that seem to regard 'bad' banter as an inescapable part of life; for instance, in the restaurant sector, it has been identified that there is a culture where banter is the accepted norm. Banter is viewed as a mechanism to socialise new staff; "surviving" the "induction" is viewed by chefs and restaurant staff as a rite of passage and as a way of gauging an individual's "fit" (or not) for that particular workplace (Giousmpasoglou et. al., 2018).

A particular challenge is distinguishing between banter as a non-threatening and welcomed interchange that is appreciated by the recipient, and banter that might be viewed as discriminatory, unwanted, threatening or oppressive. The legal structures are not easy to understand or navigate; Middlemiss (2017) identified that under article 8 of the 1998 Human Rights Act, workers have the right to a private and family life, noting that banter could breach this right. However, Middlemiss (2017) also noted (under article 14) that workers have rights to freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination. Although Middlemiss concluded certain forms of banter could easily breach Human Rights legislation, Middlemiss also observed there is currently no legal protection for banter per-se, only protection under bullying and harassment legislation. As a result, Middlemiss called for legislation to provide clarification about when workplace banter is unacceptable.





Although legislation on bullying and harassment exists, experts report that is vague in relation to the role of banter, which may contribute to a serious and unidentified workplace problem (Middlemiss, 2017 & TUC, 2016). When the TUC investigated the nefarious use of banter in workplace based sexual harassment, it found that while the initiator saw their actions as 'harmless fun' and were often left wondering why the subjects of the banter 'couldn't take a joke', the recipient often felt undermined, humiliated and sometimes terrified by the experience. The TUC found 32% of women had been the subject of unwelcome banter with a sexual overtone. It is even more concerning that the TUC found that only 1 in 5 women were actually reporting sexual harassment in the workplace, suggesting there is fear about the impact of reporting these experiences. As such the TUC is calling for all organisations to change their workplace practices, policies and procedures to protect people from becoming victims of banter used as a form of harassment (TUC, 2016).

To gain a better understanding of the scale of banter in professional settings, the role of banter as a behavioural phenomenon and the impact that it is having within the workplace (both positively and negatively), The Institute of Leadership & Management undertook research with its members. The following reveals our findings and the respondents' views about the use of banter within the workplace.

Research Highlights

Our research shows that banter plays an important role in the workplace when used in appropriate ways. However, when it crosses the line it can have serious implications:

- Twice as many women as men report loss of confidence due to banter
- Banter is universal; 98% of respondent's experience it; however, nearly three-quarters (73%) said they would not ban it
- Comments about age, rather than topics of a sexual nature, are the most common form of banter reported (identified by 71% of respondents), followed by gender, personality, behaviour and physical appearance (52%, 52%, 45% and 45% respectively)
- When asked which topics were inappropriate for banter, medical issues/health was rated highest (68%), followed by sexual orientation (65%), ethnicity (62%) and faith/religion (62%)
- The most popular use of workplace banter reported was to get to know colleagues (by 65% of men and 56% of women respectively)
- Older people (70% of over 60's) or those in more senior positions (79% of senior managers and 71% of experienced managers) were more likely to challenge or report inappropriate banter than their younger peers (46% of 18 – 30 year olds)
- Of those who had experienced (or witnessed) inappropriate banter, men were more likely than women to directly challenge the behaviour (73% compared to 55%)
- More respondents (37%) do not know if there is a policy in their workplace about banter than those who say there is one (27%). However, 37% say they do not have one
- One in ten people avoid workplace situations as a result of negative banter
- Some 4% of people have left their employer due to being at the receiving end of negative banter

Our Findings

Banter is viewed as a fact of life and is largely accepted

Our research findings suggest that workplace banter is normal part of everyday life and culture that is generally accepted; although a significant minority experience negative impacts from it, some of which are quite serious.

Overall, respondents agreed banter was ever-present in the workplace, with near universal (98%) experiencing it.

While 26% reported that their workplaces had a policy on banter, suggesting their organisations take it very seriously (Figure 1); a little over one third (37%) did not know if their organisation had a banter policy, and the same percentage said their organisation did not.

We found the most popular purpose of banter was for staff to get to know their colleagues better; for 65% of men and 56% of women this was the top answer, followed by using it to build team spirit (by 65% of men and 54% of women), and closely followed by making the workplace more fun (by 59% of men, and 55% of women). We also found it has a role supporting learning, with just over 30% of respondents saying they used or experienced banter in this way. The vast majority (73%) said they would not ban banter in the workplace at all; only 5% said they would (Figure 1).

The purpose of banter differs from the topics people engage in banter about; we asked respondents to identify the topics of banter they participated in or heard; age was the most popular topic of banter (71%) (Figure 2). This included asking them to identify what they classed as the inappropriate topics they most commonly experienced or saw. Medical/health issues topped the list for inappropriate topics (68%), followed by banter around sexual orientation (65%), religion (62%), and ethnicity (also 62%) came next in that order (Figure 3).

Figure 1a. Pie chart, showing responses to the question 'Does your organisation have a formal policy on banter?'

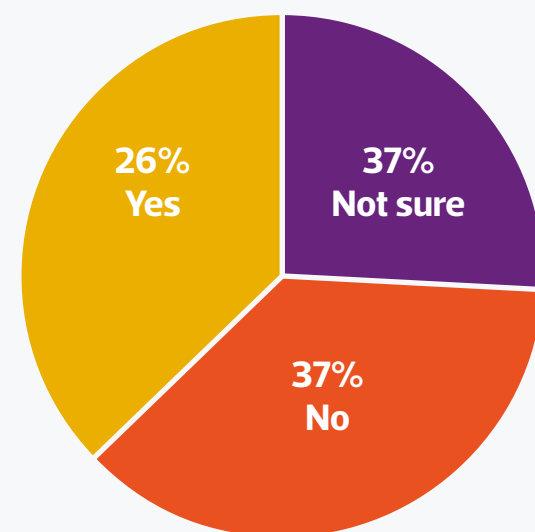


Figure 1b. Pie chart, showing responses to the question 'Do you think workplace banter should be banned?'

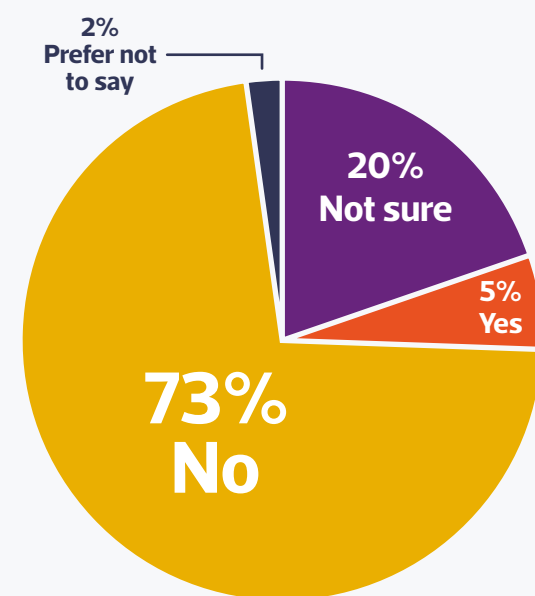
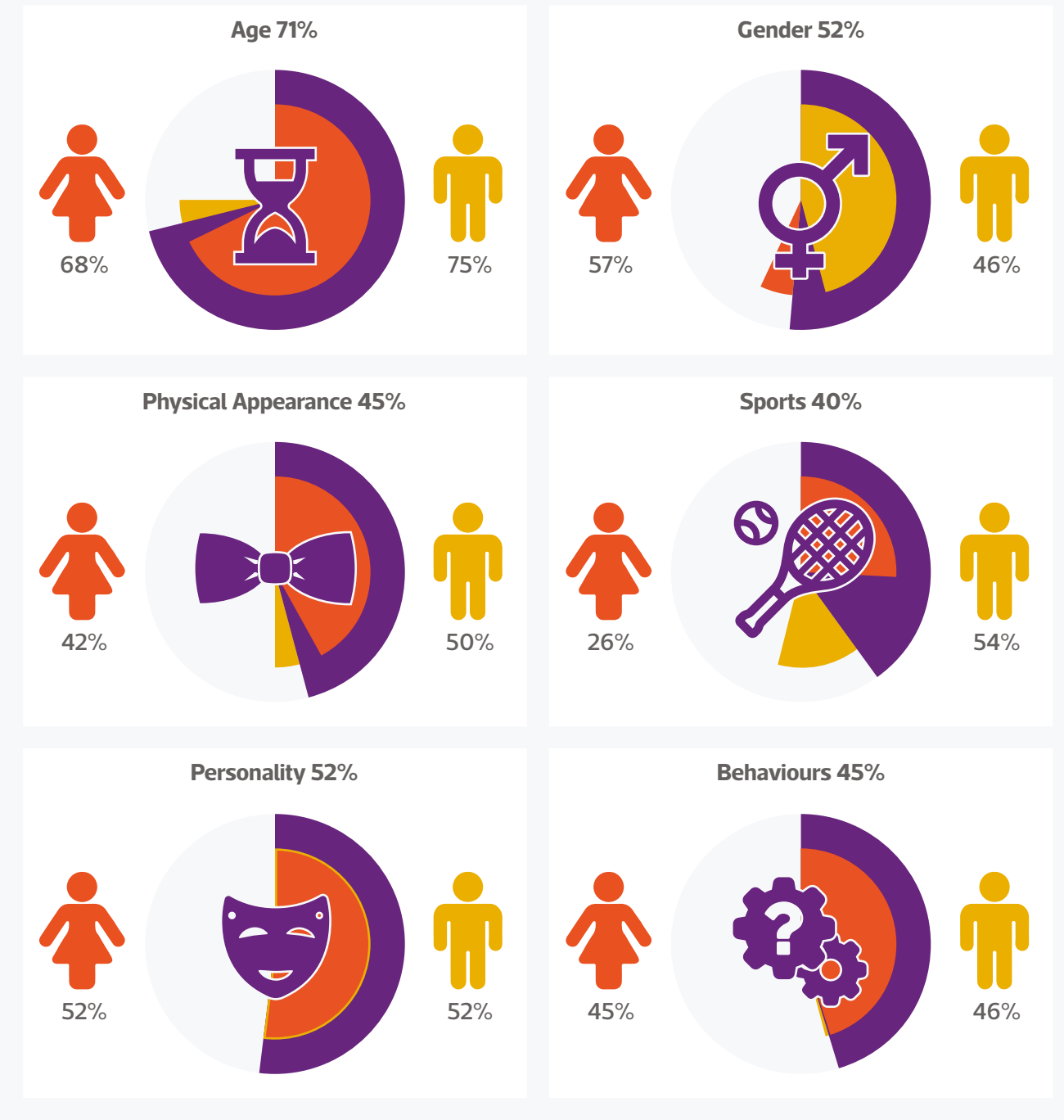


Figure 2. Most common topics for banter, shown through percentage of respondents and by gender



Gender differences on the positives of banter

The previous 'purpose of banter' statistics show men are slightly more positive about banter than women. Our research also finds that men are more likely to initiate banter where they made themselves the topic of the conversation (65% of men, compared to 47% of women).

Negative impacts of banter

Although our research finds that (overall), respondents felt that banter has an important role and can be used in positive ways within the workplace, this is not to say respondents did not identify its negative impacts too.

A significant minority (1 in 10) said they avoided certain workplace situations specifically because of 'unpleasant banter' (Figure 4). These are situations where employees are avoiding interacting with their colleagues. By excusing themselves from interaction and potential opportunities for collaboration, there may be serious negative consequences in terms of reduced productivity.

In the most extreme cases we found, people had actually left their jobs due to workplace banter; Some 4% of respondents (1 in 25 people) reported leaving their organisation entirely, while 2% felt the need to move somewhere else within their organisation.

Men and women experience embarrassment equally

An interesting finding of this research is that when it comes to embarrassment we find similar proportions of men and women experience embarrassment as a result of workplace banter (18% of men and 20% of women).

Figure 3. Topics that are viewed unacceptable for workplace banter (percent of respondents)

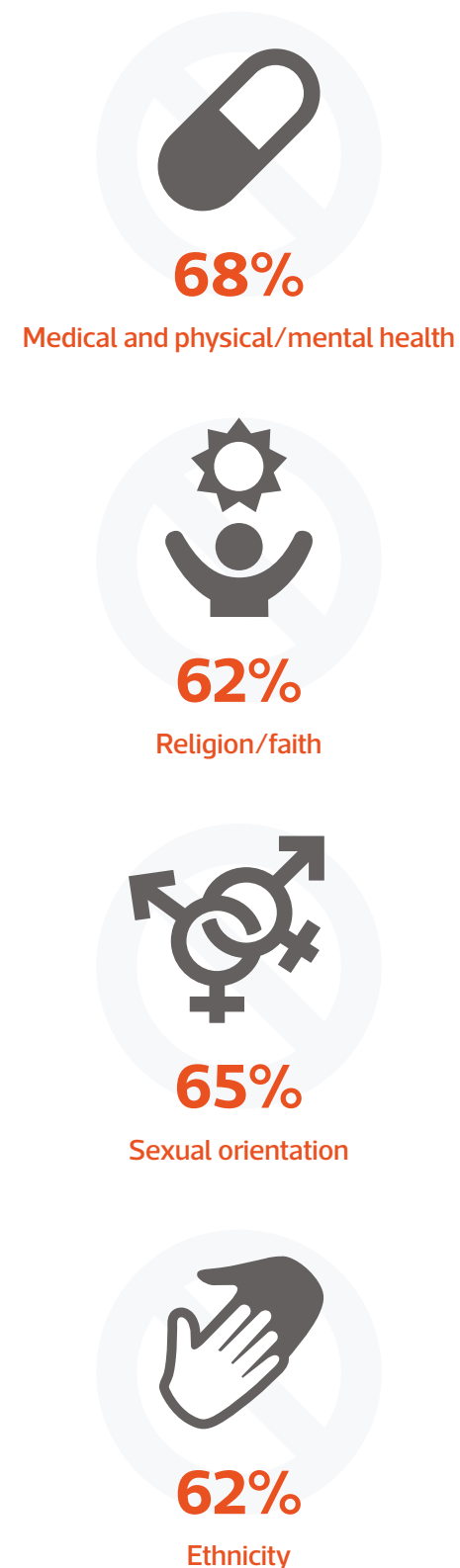
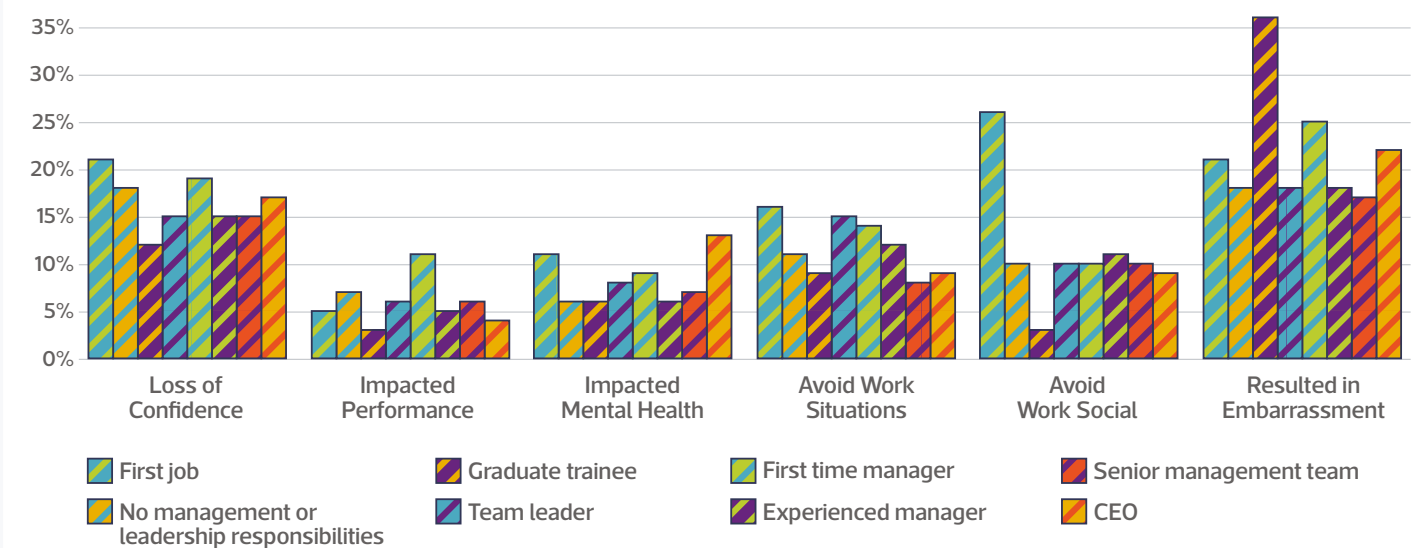
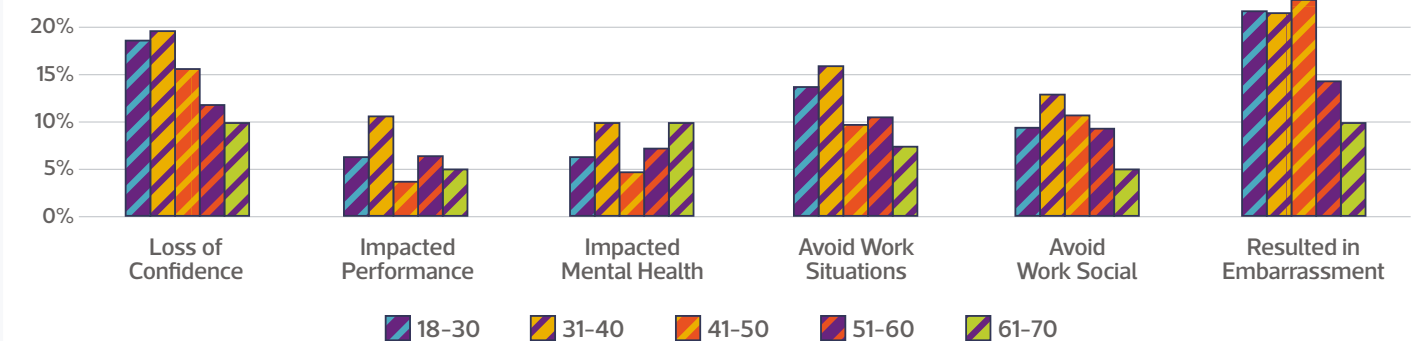


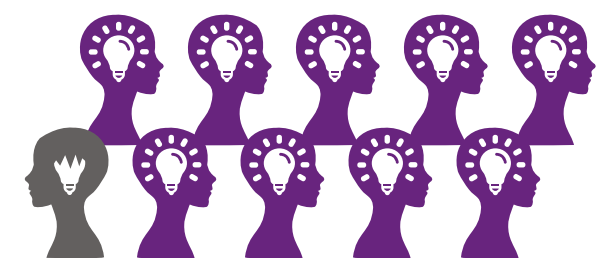
Figure 4. The negative impact of workplace banter



1 in 5 (20%) have been embarrassed by workplace banter



10% of women say banter has had a negative impact on their mental health (compared to 3% of men)



20% of women (1 in 5), 10% of men (1 in 10) report loss of confidence due to workplace banter



1 in 10 avoid workplace situations due to the impact of banter



1 in 25 left a job due to banter



Deeper impacts of negative banter show more obvious age and gender differences

Although embarrassment is suffered on equal terms, a key finding of this research is that negative banter has deeper effects that impact men and women differently, as well as the old and the young.

For instance, we find women report negative banter as having a larger negative impact on both their mental health and workplace behaviour than men. Some 20% of women (1 in 5) say negative banter has caused them to lose confidence in the workplace, compared to 9% of men; and 10% of women say banter has a negative impact on their mental health, compared to 3% of men.

From an age perspective, the data shows the young (graduate trainees in particular), are most likely to be demotivated by inappropriate banter (21% compared to the average of 10%), as well as those who are either in their first job or those promoted to their first significant area of responsibility (with 21% and 19% respectively stating they lost confidence, compared to 12% of graduate trainees). First-time managers reported the greatest impact on their performance with 11% stating their performance was affected negatively.

However, those at the mid-way point of their careers also seem to be negatively impacted by banter; when we looked at the impact of banter in different age groups we consistently found the 31-40 age group was more affected than any other age group in terms of loss of confidence (19.5%), drops in performance (10.5%), poor mental health (10%), avoiding work situations (16%), and avoiding work socials (13%).

Our data demonstrates that a significant proportion of the workforce, ranging from 10% to 25%, are negatively affected by inappropriate banter; a significant amount, if one considers up to one quarter of the workforce might be negatively affected.

Challenging inappropriate banter; it is age over youth that prevails

The extent to which inappropriate banter is challenged could be considered a surprising finding of this research. Even though young graduate trainees report being demotivated the most (21%), only 3% of this group actually say it would cause them to avoid work socials. This arguably suggests they do not like negative banter, but tolerate it to the extent that they choose not to change their behaviour

We find older staff (70%), or those in more senior positions (79% of senior managers and 71% of experienced managers), were more likely to challenge or report inappropriate banter than their younger (46%) or less senior colleagues (38% in their first job and 40% of graduate trainees).

It was men who were more likely than women to directly challenge the behaviour (73% compared to 55%). Women, by contrast were more likely than men to confide with family/partners (22% compared to 8%). Women were also more likely than men to confide in work colleagues/friends (22% compared to 14%); and friends outside work (14% compared to 7%). Interestingly though, more women than men said they would report negative banter to their manager (20% compared to 16%).



What our respondents had to say

Here are a selection of quotes from the respondents about their experiences of banter:

1) Reflections on workplace banter:

Banter appears to be a positive device for relationship building but can also have negative impacts if it becomes bullying as some of our respondents indicated:

Where Is The Line?

Above the line:

“Banter, when positive, develops relationships, reduces stress, diffuses tension and can support people working together. Negative banter can just be bullying by another name”

“I feel that it has been part of life from the playground to workplace; it is part of our culture and I have experienced this across the different countries that I have worked”

“I work with strangers nearly every time I go to work, and humour helps break the ice and encourage team spirit”

“A shared history which includes amusing incidents is important for team building, this may often be about an individual but should always be a topic that the individual also finds amusing and enjoys the joke even if at his or her own expense”

Below the line:

“Lots of men still make misogynistic comments in the workplace”

“I think if you and the other person feel comfortable in the situation it's fine. However, people should not be degraded or made to feel inadequate or embarrassed”

“I think it can be insensitive and/or demeaning in certain situations”

“It should be used to build relationships; if it isn't, it isn't banter it's something else”

2) Topics of banter:

“Banter I received was related to physical appearance – hair colour. I'm a male who started going grey very early (18 years old). I've been dying my hair since then as I felt I was too young to be going grey and wanted to hide it through embarrassment. Someone at my work noticed and started to joke about it which led to a knock in confidence and generally wanting to avoid conversation and socialising”

“I have been criticised for my religion and my work efforts”

“In the yachting industry, banter is widespread. It's considered 'fun' and majority of crew partake but I never see the point in it really. It made me feel uncomfortable and uncool! I felt maybe I was more sensitive or above banter, and have now left yachting to start a new career”

3) Tackling banter – what people say they've done:

“I've been in the position where I've suspended someone”

“I asked my line manager for help. The person had taken the jokes about my appearance and gender etc. too far. My line manager said that it was a personal matter between us, that I should fix it by "having sex" with the man involved as he was flirting with me. The guy made my work life hell and I considered leaving the company and industry over it.”

Conclusions

While there is widespread acceptance of banter, and reflections that it can be a useful tool within the workplace, there are a significant minority who are adversely affected.

The majority say they challenge, report or take other action when they experience or observe others engaging in inappropriate banter. Although younger and less senior colleagues are far less likely to challenge inappropriate banter.

The minority who report being negatively affected negatively by banter state that in the worst scenarios this has caused them to move jobs. While more people experience an impact on their performance, interaction with colleagues or health.

Despite the latter experiences, we must remember it is notable that the majority of respondents do not want banter banned from the workplace. However, it is important to recognise it can have serious impacts if used inappropriately.

Generally, our respondents expressed balanced views about the role and place of workplace banter, recognising its value for building relationships in the workplace and acknowledging that it can sometimes go too far.

The adverse consequences and impact of inappropriate banter is abundantly clear, and organisations would be wise to recognise this, most notably:

- 1 in 25 of the workforce will leave
- 1 in 5 lose their confidence
- 1 in 10 say negative banter makes them mentally unwell
- Over 10 % avoid workplace situations and socials
- Over 10% become demotivated
- Twice the number of female employees (compared to male employees) experience mental health problems, loss of confidence in the workplace, reduced performance, and avoid workplace situations

Recommendations

Our research provides evidence that banter can have an important role in the workplace; It can support the fostering of relationships and can contribute to making work more enjoyable. However, it is clear that use of banter cannot, and should not cross the line and become something much more damaging than simply getting to know people and having fun. When banter crosses this line there is a negative impact on working relationships, and work becomes a miserable place to be. In the light of our research we recommend that all organisations:

- Review their bullying and harassment policies, looking at how banter is addressed
- Foster a safe culture where staff feel comfortable raising concerns when they think a line has been crossed
- Ensure there are clear policies and procedures that provide clarity over how staff can raise concerns
- Make inclusivity and cultural awareness training part of the induction and onboarding process
- Appreciate the potential negative impact of inappropriate banter, especially with regard to inequality within the workplace
- Recognise the impact on the bottom line of banter that is closer to ridicule and so adversely impacts productivity
- Be particularly mindful of people in their first job and early careers, ensure they know they do not have to suffer in silence or, even worse, leave.

Estimates vary widely about the cost of losing and hiring a member of staff with the lowest estimate at £5,000 rising to as much as £30,000 (The Institute of Leadership & Management, 2016).

Methodology

The Institute of Leadership and Management surveyed 1,025 members on the topic of workplace banter in January, 2018. Respondents were asked a number of closed questions about the use of, and their experience of banter within the workplace. Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide free text responses reflecting on their own experiences of workplace banter. The survey collected demographic data enabling comparative analysis between gender, age group and career stages/experience.

The survey was conducted in line with the Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct. All responses were anonymous but respondents were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for PR purposes, and were also incentivised to take part in the survey.

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