

## HARVARD BUSINESS DEFINES “TOXIC WORKER”



**Summary:** Understanding who toxic workers are in the workplace will help companies understand how to avoid them and keep those they have under control.

**Every office has at least one.** The employee that bad-mouths others while standing around the drinking fountain. The boss that takes credit for everyone else's work. The sexist one that everyone avoids by taking the long way around to get to the bathroom or lying about their weekend plans. Unfortunately, these kinds of people are everywhere, making up the American enterprise.

The struggle is that these kinds of people can ruin the morale at work. But who are these people? A Harvard Business School working paper took data from 50,000 employees at 11 companies to find a good definition of the “toxic worker.”

The workers used for the study were all in front-line service positions and paid on an hourly wage. They had access to the employees' daily performance data as well as information such as job title, hire date, location, and termination date and reason if applicable. The information was then placed into a program designed by industrial-organizational psychologists. This gave the researchers a different view into the modern-day worker's mind.

The definition of toxic workers included those that are just annoying and are a bad fit for a company to those that harass, bully, steal, lie, or are even violent at work. The study specifically concentrated on those with the most extreme of the extreme behaviors that were fired for this behavior.

The overall findings are surprising. Toxic workers are **not always lazy**. They quite often are more productive than the average worker. Because of this mentality, they still thrive in the workplace even though their morals and ethics might be off course.

A second characteristic of this worker is their selfishness. As the researchers stated, “All things equal, those that are less other-regarding should be more predisposed to toxicity as they do not fully internalize the cost that their behavior imposes on others.”

The third trait is overconfidence, which is believed to lead to unreasonable risk-taking. As explained, “Someone that is overconfident believes the expected payoff from engaging in misconduct is higher than someone who is not overconfident, as they believe the likelihood of the better outcome is higher than it really is.”

The last trait that stands out in toxic workers is the necessity to not break the rules. The study found that the employees that were not willing to break the rules were often the ones that got terminated for breaking the rules.

In order for a company to avoid these workers, screening tests should be utilized by human resources departments to keep them from coming into their company and destroying it. If a toxic worker already exists at the company, don't be too worried as long as there are a low number of them. The study found that the more toxic workers there are in a company, the more likely they are to act out, much like how peer pressure works.

Source: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2015/12/15/beware-the-rule-following-co-worker-harvard-study-warns/?tid=paid\\_fb\\_keywee&kw\\_0=89555&kw\\_4=527440&kw\\_1=282818](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2015/12/15/beware-the-rule-following-co-worker-harvard-study-warns/?tid=paid_fb_keywee&kw_0=89555&kw_4=527440&kw_1=282818)

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