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Initial post

by [Nima Osman](#) - Tuesday, 4 February 2025, 5:35 PM

## Case Study: Abusive Workplace Behaviour

This case study explores Max, a technical leader in an interactive technologies team, widely acknowledged for his brilliance in augmented reality but also infamous for his abusive behaviour. Max has earned a reputation for berating team members, particularly targeting women by removing their names from journal manuscripts as a form of punishment. This reflects a longstanding culture of sexism within the organisation, which has now permeated the online platforms following the transition to remote work. The increased use of technology for communication has blurred the boundaries between personal and professional lives, with platforms such as chat technology becoming a "double-edged sword" (Tenório & Bjørn, 2019). While these tools can foster collaboration, they can also exacerbate toxic behaviour, as seen in Max's conduct.

A new team member, Diane, became a victim of Max's tirades after a minor coding error, resulting in her exclusion from a key presentation. When she reported the incident to her manager, Jean, her concerns were swiftly dismissed. Max's actions and Jean's lack of response exemplify a broader issue within the workplace regarding the mishandling of abusive behaviour. According to the ACM Code of Ethics, Max's conduct violates multiple principles, including: 1.1 (Contribute to society and human well-being), 1.2 (Avoid harm), 1.3 (Be honest and trustworthy), and 1.4 (Be fair and take action not to discriminate). His verbal abuse and exclusionary practices directly harm the psychological well-being of employees and foster a hostile work environment. Jean's failure to act breaches principles 3.3 (Manage personnel and resources to enhance quality of working life) and 3.4 (Support ethical policies), as she neglected to address a serious issue that impacted the welfare of the team.

Max's behaviour extends beyond verbal abuse. He frequently takes sole credit for the work done by his team members, particularly in the context of publishing articles or citing their work. This tendency to omit contributions and claim full ownership of team efforts undermines the professional integrity of his colleagues, as they are often left unacknowledged for their contributions. Such actions violate ethical principles, including the BCS Code of Conduct, particularly 2f (Avoid unfair criticism) and 4e (Respect contributions of others). These actions not only diminish the work of others but also contribute to an atmosphere where collaboration is stifled, and mutual respect is absent. The failure to credit colleagues further underscores Max's disregard for the ethical responsibility of recognising and respecting the contributions of others.

Max's abuse also extends to online forums, where he engages in behaviour akin to cyberbullying. In these digital spaces, his actions often target vulnerable team members, contributing to a toxic work culture. This type of behaviour violates the principle of dignity and respect, as outlined in the ACM Code of Ethics. As Gosse et al. (2021) suggest, online harassment in academic settings can have severe consequences for the victims, damaging their reputation and emotional well-being. Max's actions not only undermine his team members' confidence but also reflect a broader issue of power imbalances within the organisation. The online harassment that takes place in forums like these is often harder to escape, as it transcends the boundaries of the physical workspace and can affect the victims' private lives (Tenório & Bjørn, 2019). Such behaviour is not only unethical but potentially illegal, as it could constitute workplace harassment and discrimination under anti-discrimination laws.

Diane's experience demonstrates the difficulty in confronting this issue within the existing power structures. Max holds a senior position within the team, and his abusive actions create an environment where reporting such incidents is intimidating. As discussed by Navick et al. (2024), power dynamics within the workplace can heavily influence the perception of workplace technologies and the willingness of employees to report incidents of harassment. The rise of remote work has exacerbated these challenges, as employees are increasingly dependent on digital platforms to communicate. While these platforms offer greater visibility and the potential for documentation, they can also perpetuate abusive behaviour if not used responsibly. This highlights the need for organisational leaders to be proactive in addressing toxic behaviours that arise in both physical and digital spaces.

Max's actions violate not only the principles of fairness, honesty, and respect outlined in the ACM and BCS Codes of Conduct, but also broader societal norms regarding workplace dignity and respect. According to Tenório and Bjørn (2019), technologies designed to enhance collaboration can also extend harassment beyond the physical workspace, creating new avenues for a

visibility and persistence afforded by online platforms should be seen as tools to prevent harassment and support victims, yet in Max's case, these affordances have been misused. The failure to address these issues, both through individual action and organisational policy, further perpetuates a culture of silence and complicity, making it difficult for victims to seek justice or resolution.

This case demonstrates the need for organisations to create environments where ethical principles are upheld and where technology is used to promote fairness, respect, and accountability. By recognising the impact of power dynamics and leveraging technology responsibly, organisations can foster a safer, more inclusive workplace culture. Furthermore, as Gosse et al. (2021) argue, addressing online harassment in remote work environments requires organisations to reconsider how they use digital tools, ensuring they foster positive interactions while preventing abuse.

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#### Peer Response

by [Amrol Miah](#) - Wednesday, 5 February 2025, 10:55 PM

Dear Nima,

Thank you for your comprehensive analysis of abusive workplace behaviour. Your writing is articulate and engaging, suggesting that you could elaborate extensively on this case study, perhaps even producing a full-length scholarly work.

Your post examines the figure named Max, a technical leader distinguished by his expertise in augmented reality but yet known for his abusive conduct, particularly towards female colleagues. He engages in behaviours such as berating team members, excluding them from critical projects, and appropriating their contributions, thereby fostering a culture imbued with sexism within the workplace. Diane, a new employee, becomes a target of his abusive tactics following a minor coding error; her grievances, however, are met with dismissal from her manager, Jean, reflecting a systemic failure to confront harassment effectively. This indicates that Max endeavours to exhibit his dominance and superiority over others. Furthermore, it can be argued that individuals in authority may lack sufficient support or training from the organisation to address abusive behaviour effectively.

Max's behaviour contravenes the established ethical guidelines outlined in the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the British Computer Society (BCS) Codes of Conduct, as your post effectively clarifies and compares these standards. In particular, his actions harm the well-being of team members and perpetuate a toxic work environment. Furthermore, his cyberbullying practices on digital platforms specifically target vulnerable colleagues, worsening the existing power imbalances inherent in workplace dynamics. Your post emphasises the critical necessity for organisational leaders to implement proactive measures against abusive conduct, particularly within remote work contexts, where digital communication serves the dual purposes of fostering collaboration and enabling harassment.

One can argue that Max is a manifestation of his environment, suggesting that his conduct may be deemed acceptable in light of the absence of ethical business practices. According to Arifin (2024), the leadership team is instrumental in fostering a positive organisational culture and mitigating any risks that could compromise ethical standards. Senior management can significantly influence a constructive culture by promoting transparent communication, establishing trust, and maintaining accountability. As your post delineates, Diane's manager exhibited a lack of accountability, prompting a critical evaluation of whether the organisation should reassess its ethical practices. To address this, the organisation should consider implementing regular ethics training for all employees, establishing a clear reporting system for misconduct, and holding all levels of management accountable for their actions. Failure to do so could result in negative publicity regarding such behaviours, potentially damaging the company's reputation and adversely affecting future investment opportunities or inducing financial repercussions.

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#### Peer Response

by [Oi Lam Siu](#) - Friday, 7 February 2025, 1:28 AM

Hi Nima,

Thank you for presenting a comprehensive analysis of Max's abusive behaviour (ACM, n.d.), particularly focusing on how he exploits power imbalances. Your observation that his aggression extends beyond the physical workplace into online forums raises significant questions about leadership accountability and managerial intervention. As Avey et al. (2011) note, ethical leadership fosters healthier team dynamics, reducing anxiety and turnover. Furthermore, the situation with Diane whose complaints were disregarded, highlights the importance of having policies that ensure confidentiality and protection, aligning with Berry's (2004) emphasis on the need for clear reporting channels.

To prevent such misconduct, organisations could adopt various strategies. For example, establishing confidential reporting systems (Berry, 2004) and offering leadership training can help discourage unethical practices. Additionally, creating an inclusive workplace culture, underpinned by trust, respect, and guided by the BCS principle of public interest (BCS, 2022), can help minimise power abuses and strengthen teamwork.

Beyond the implementation of confidential reporting channels, another proactive measure involves regular training in ethical leadership, coupled with enforced policies that protect employees. CIPD (2019) underscores this approach by recommending ongoing ethics training and clear organisational guidelines to foster a positive workplace culture. By taking these steps, organisations can maintain a healthy working environment.

Overall, your post provides an insightful perspective on workplace misconduct and underscores the critical role of frameworks that uphold fairness, respect, and accountability.

Best regards

Helen

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