

ONLINE HARASSMENT



Online harassment isn't new. But with more people working off-site using digital platforms, it's being reported more often.

Harassment is prohibited under human rights and health and safety laws. Workplace policies and collective agreements often prohibit harassment, too. However, different laws, collective agreements and policies define harassment in different ways.

Defining harassment

CUPE defines harassment as **offensive behaviour that a reasonable person would consider unwelcome**. This also applies to online harassment. Although online harassment might not involve direct physical assault, it can seriously harm mental and physical well-being.

What is online harassment?

Online harassers use digital networks like social media, blogs, email and messages to target others. Harassers can hide their identities more easily online.

Online harassment often targets personal traits like gender, race or sexual orientation. It can involve repeated actions or a single severe incident which affects the target.

Like all harassment, what matters is the effect, not the intention. If the target finds the behaviour offensive and unwelcome, and a reasonable person would agree, the behaviour is most likely going to be considered harassment.

Forms of online harassment include:

- **Cyberbullying:** Spreading rumours, gossip, personal information and hate speech.
- **Doxing:** Sharing personal details like workplace or address.
- **Cyberstalking:** Stalking someone online as a form of bullying.
- **Catfishing:** Using a fake identity to target victims.
- **Trolling:** Provoking with offensive messages.
- **Cybermob attacks or dogpiling:** Group targeting, often with threats.
- **Denial of access:** Group reporting to remove a victim from a platform.
- **Phishing:** Sending messages to extract personal information, including banking.

Dealing with online harassment

Don't engage. Responding will encourage the harasser and may lead to you being disciplined for poor online behaviour if the situation escalates.

Save evidence. Print or take screen shots of harassing comments. Keep a timeline for your records. Document all harassment on and offline.

Assess the threat. Is the comment benign or is there room for interpretation? Is it an obvious attack or threat? This will guide your response. Depending on the threat level, you could take the following actions:

Contact the authorities. If you get a harassing message threatens you, your family or someone else, report it to the authorities.

Tell your employer. If the harasser is a coworker, your employer may have a responsibility to prevent the harassment. This is especially true if the harasser is using work equipment to commit the harassment. Involve the union if the harassment is work-related.

Report to platform. Use the platform's reporting tools to report offensive or harassing content. Most social media platforms have anti-harassment policies. Refer to the platform on which the harassment is taking place for more information.

Speak in person (if safe). If you know the person harassing you and it is safe, talk to them about what you found inappropriate. Sometimes people write or interpret things in the wrong way. If it's a simple misunderstanding, it can be resolved.

Block the harasser. Blocking stops their posts from appearing. Capture or print messages before blocking.

FOR UNION-RELATED ONLINE HARASSMENT

Report. Use the methods outlined in the previous section.

Resolve informally. Members from the same local should attempt to address issues informally before filing a formal complaint.

Formal complaint. If informal discussions fail, file a complaint with the local recording secretary. The complaint will be forwarded to the respondent and the national president. More information can be found in the CUPE Trial Procedure Handbook.

Self care

Like all forms of harassment, online harassment can cause mental harm. Members who have experienced harm should reach out to their support networks, as well as to loved ones, trusted colleagues or peers. You can also access employer and family assistance plans, where they exist. Your local may be able to direct you to other resources. For severe cases of harassment, visit cupe.ca for information on critical incident stress and a full kit of material on workplace violence and harassment prevention.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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