Discuss how you think companies could/should manage behaviors like those described in the article? **Try to be as specific and realistic as possible**

**Taming the Workplace Bully**

It started during the training sessions for her new job. Elizabeth Santeramo, a cancer information specialist in New York, saw a woman across the room glance in her direction, whisper in the ear of a co-worker, and then snort derisively. The episode seemed so brazenly immature, as if plucked directly from Mean Girls, that Santeramo shrugged it off. “The work we were doing was to help people who were just diagnosed with cancer,” she says. “We’re all empathic, compassionate people, I told myself. I’m just being paranoid.” A few days later, the abusive snickering intensified.

One day Santeramo’s nemesis approached a cubicle near hers, where she removed a cutout picture of a golden-haired cat and propped it up so everyone in the room could see it. When Santeramo stood up, puzzled, the woman began to meow at her. Her colleagues around her joined in. Soon, a chorus of malicious meowing would follow Santeramo in and out of the office like a demented soundtrack. “To this day,” she says, “I remain mystified by the meows.”

The abuse, which led to an emotional meeting with her supervisor, is just one indication of how bullying, contrary to popular stereotype, has made its way from high school locker rooms and hallways to the office. “In a lot of workplaces, it’s just considered part of daily workplace culture,” says Joe Grimm, professor of journalism at Michigan State University. “Browbeating, intimidation, cutting people off, and being the loudest in the room with an opinion.” In a recent book he edited, The New Bullying: How Social Media, Social Exclusion, Laws and Suicide Have Changed Our Definition of Bullying, Grimm reveals how bullying has some professionals living in debilitating fear of the office, which may sound familiar for viewers of The Devil Wears Prada, the thinly veiled account of working at Vogue, or the junior analysts at Goldman Sachs ([GS](http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/snapshot/snapshot.asp?ticker=GS)) who were once forced to dress up like Teletubbies. “When bullies get out of school,” says Grimm, “they don’t stop being bullies.”

By some accounts, legions of Biff Tannens and Nurse Ratcheds are running rampant, inflicting cruelty on a large part of the American workforce. In August, CareerBuilder announced that 35 percent of employees surveyed claim to have been bullied at work, up from 27 percent the year before. The Workplace Bullying Institute, based in Bellingham, Wash., has 36 state chapters, a 10,000-person mailing list, and local, on-the-ground “targets” (the WBI doesn’t like the word victim) who now direct anti-bullying campaigns and serve as local points of contact. This year legislation making it easier for bullying victims to sue employers was introduced in 13 states.

The official definition of bullying, according to the WBI, is a “repeated, health-harming mistreatment” by one or more “perpetrators” that takes the form of “verbal abuse, offensive conduct/behaviors which are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating,” or “work interference-sabotage—which prevents work from getting done.” Here, WBI representatives make a distinction between a bully and someone who’s just mean. An overly demanding boss, explains a WBI volunteer, generally puts pressure on all underlings. Once a task is finished, however, verbal assaults stop. Bullies tend to single out an individual with an added level of personal malice. When a manager at a Direct Federal Credit Union a few years ago seized an underling’s diary and read excerpts to her co-workers, that was bullying.

In the corporate world, bullying tends to be about power, control, and career advancement. “Bullying can be a way of getting ahead,” says Stacey Kessler, assistant professor of management at Montclair State University. For decades researchers have used questionnaires known as Machiavellianism (or Mach) scales to measure an individual’s capacity to engage in the manipulative, amoral, and deceitful behaviors espoused by the 15th century ends-justify-the-means diplomat. Recently psychologists found that those who score high on the 100-point Mach scale are also among those likeliest to engage in office bullying. The employee “might bully someone at the job to keep them quiet or to get an individual to do more things for him or her,” says Kessler. The person could also be popular and want to maintain his or her status, or have low self-esteem and want to feel superior, adds Robin Kowalski, a psychology professor at Clemson University. “In workplace bullying,” she says, “you’re talking about adults who have a certain degree of self-control, so they are more devious and calculating.”

This raises the question: Should business become more like high school and impose strict rules protecting individuals from persecution? Gary Namie, a social psychologist, would say yes. Ever since his wife was bullied by a boss and fell into depression in the 1980s, Namie has been working to shed light on office bullying. He co-founded the WBI with his wife in 1991 but has been fighting a largely losing battle in the courts. He estimates that in almost 20 years he’s been involved in 30 bullying cases, five of which settled and 22 of which were thrown out. Only one went to trial. “I feel bad for the clients because they sunk money into these cases,” he says. “Nothing that employers do seems to be outrageous enough for the courts.” Much of this failure stems from employment laws that stack the deck in the bully’s favor. Many states preclude employees from taking actions against employers for emotional harm unless there’s a discriminatory or retaliatory component—in other words, unless race, gender, or whistle-blowing is a factor. “I lost another summary judgment in favor of employers just last week,” says Namie.

In a case cited by David Yamada, a professor and founding director of the New Workplace Institute at Suffolk University Law School in Boston, a physician in Arkansas abused an employee for two years, called her a “slut,” and told her repeatedly that women who work outside the home are “whores and prostitutes.” Making matters worse, he threatened to kill her if she quit. In its decision, an Arkansas court ruled that even if the allegations were true, they still didn’t add up to intentional affliction of emotional stress. “Many targets say, ‘I’m just being crushed at work,’ ” Yamada says. “And the lawyers are telling them this type of mistreatment is completely legal.”

Lawsuits aside, there’s at least one powerful incentive for companies to consider adopting anti-bullying measures. According to a landmark 2008 Gallup Poll of more than 1 million workers, the most common reason for quitting a job: an overbearing boss. “Bullying is hugely expensive,” says Michigan State’s Grimm. “It keeps people from the jobs they could best do. If you quit because of bullying, it would take a company twice your annual salary to replace you: flying in job candidates, hiring, and training.” And sometimes these conflicts are more easily fixable. After Santeramo complained to her supervisor about her tormentor, which had little effect, she decided to test the age-old theory that “bullies are cowards.”

“I approached her to befriend her,” she says. “And it worked.”