



# BUSINESS EXCHANGE

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## Research Probes Growing Problem of Weight-based Bullying at Work



*Associate Professor Grace Lemmon | Photo by Kathy Hillegonds*

“*In diversity, inclusion and equity conversations, we need to include the idea that weight is a diverse attribute.*”

*– Associate Professor Grace Lemmon*

While business organizations have made progress in reducing race, gender and religious discrimination in the workplace, bias against larger-bodied workers is a growing problem, according to [Associate Professor Grace Lemmon](#) (BUS '06). With her DePaul research team, [Associate Professor Jaclyn Jensen](#) and Assistant Professor Goran Kuljanin (CHS '05), she studies employees who suffer from weight-based bullying at work, as well as those who mistreat them.

“In the past decade we’ve seen great increases in stigmatization toward those with larger bodies,” says Lemmon, a [management and entrepreneurship faculty member](#). “People in larger bodies are not offered jobs at the same rate, even though they have the same qualifications as someone in a ‘normal-sized body.’ Larger-bodied people are not offered promotions as frequently and are downgraded on performance reviews.” The cost is both economic and psychological, she adds. “Mistreated workers lose professional confidence. They stop using their voice and leaning into challenges at work.”

Lemmon and her research team surveyed 2,000 self-identified larger-bodied employees, and 89% reported mistreatment at work because of their size. “They experienced a range of aggressions—people swearing at or insulting them because of their size, withholding critical resources or expressing an insult wrapped in a comment, like saying, ‘Have you ever thought of having a salad for lunch,’ Lemmon says. Holding a leadership position offered no protection from mistreatment; the intensity of bullying increased as a person gained leadership status.

The research team also studied the motivations of perpetrators of weight-based mistreatment. Lemmon thought it would be difficult to get respondents to self-identify as perpetrators. The contrary results astounded her: “Ninety-two percent said they had a negative thought about a co-worker’s body and acted on it within the last six months.” Perpetrators, she adds, predominately justified their behavior in two ways: “‘it’s going to sting, but this person needs to hear it,’ and ‘I have a right to express my opinion.’”

After accounting for decrements to performance, engagement and mental health associated with weight-based mistreatment, Lemmon concludes that organizations cannot ignore this issue. First, organizations must acknowledge weight-based mistreatment is happening even if it isn’t a typical complaint, Lemmon says.

She notes that only a tiny fraction of mistreated larger-bodied people formally report the infraction, overwhelmingly due to shame. She further advises, “In diversity, inclusion and equity conversations, we need to include the idea that weight is a diverse attribute and deserves as much protection as other attributes. Finally, we need to call it out. When we see this type of predation at work, we need to stop normalizing it and, instead, speak up.”

*By Robin Florzak*