

## THE PROBLEM

Ghosting is eroding professional relationships, loyalty, and morale.

## WHY IT MATTERS

When relationships break down, companies break down.

## THE SOLUTION

Creating corporate cultures built on respect and accountability—and far fewer emails.

# HOW NO ANSWER BECAME THE ANSWER

Ghosting has escaped the realms of dating and come to haunt the workplace. Be afraid, be very afraid.

BY MEGHAN WALSH

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**W**arjan Riazi, a 35-year-old event producer in New York City, was laid off about a year ago when her role was eliminated. Her direct supervisor offered to write her a letter of recommendation, but when Riazi followed up a few weeks later, they never replied. Riazi reached out several more times over the next few months. No response.

Riazi had been ghosted. Not by a fellow millennial she met on a dating app, but by a coworker senior in both age and rank. “It’s one thing if you don’t want to do it or you change your mind,” Riazi says. “I could have accepted that.” But having her emails and texts ignored by someone she’d worked with daily was the shocker. “It was so disappointing and disheartening. It was really hurtful.”

Once a marker of the vagaries of online romance, ghosting—unilaterally cutting off communication without explanation—has, in very dramatic and painful fashion, made its way into all varieties of relationships, including those at work. The *New York Times* has called the phenomenon “an epidemic of unsatisfactory conclusions and unexplained rejections.” It’s hard to put numbers to trends that occur in the intimate corridors of relationships, but data suggests that professional ghosting has increased considerably since the start of the pandemic. Three-quarters of employers claim to have been ghosted by a new hire over the last year, while a slightly higher percentage of job seekers report that potential employers have done the same thing dur-



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ing the interview process. And it’s not just those twentysomething Gen Zers slipping away silently: 70 percent of millennials and 61 percent of Gen Xers report quitting a job within the first six months without giving notice. Then there are the countless emails to colleagues that go unanswered, the networking attempts unreciprocated, and the client-provider relationships unrealized without explanation.

But pulling a disappearing act with potential, current, and past colleagues is very different from doing so with one-off social relationships. Indeed, experts warn, ghosting in the workplace has the potential not just to hurt individuals but to corrode entire corporate cultures. “What starts as a phenomenon becomes the normal,” says Francis Weir, a British business psychologist who supports people strategy and operations for firms. “When you’re exposed that much to a thing, it changes your brain chemistry.” And since there is no separating mind from body from emotion, when the brain reconfigures, it alters our very nature. “The wider issue,” she says, “is that ghosting goes against what we need as humans.”

**G**hosting in the workplace can take many forms. You might have an engaged conversation with someone at a networking event and express mutual interest in staying connected, but they don’t respond to your follow-up email. A prospective customer might ask for multiple discovery calls, only to disappear. Or a manager might leave a team member off meeting invites without telling them why. There is also so-called “soft” ghosting, when colleagues delay responding or give brief,

unsatisfactory answers. Over time, the responses may become even slower and shorter, until the communication ceases altogether. “Ghost coasting” is when a relatively new hire quits without giving notice. Then there are the ubiquitous recruiters who fail to notify applicants when they don’t get the job.

If we’re being honest, most of us will admit that we’ve been both the ghosted and the ghoster. While the term “ghosting” first appeared in the dictionary in the late 2010s, the practice, of course, has been around as long as humans have been communicating, whether it’s the unreciprocated cave painting, letter, telegram, phone call, or email. But like so many of the social phenomena that define the current moment, ghosting in the workplace is very much a byproduct of the digital age and COVID-19. After all, it’s hard to pull a disappearing act when we have to physically see someone at the office every day.

Technology has made it easier to avoid having uncomfortable conversations, which has, in turn, made us rusty at them. When we have a poor experience at a restaurant, we no longer speak to the manager; we leave a bad review. Rather than say “No, I’m not going to write you a letter of recommendation, and this is why,” we just ignore the email request. We’ve become more fragile and less empathetic, explains Gretta Perlmutter, host of the podcast *Coping With Ghosting*. Multidimensional people with feelings and needs have been reduced to avatars and names in a deluge of applications. (This is why job candidates in Europe include photos with their résumés; Weir says applicants should always include links to their LinkedIn profiles).

At the same time, technology has vastly increased the volume of communication. We’re inundated across a variety of media, and the pandemic added additional strain. As communication went entirely online

and social circles shrank, often workloads increased and life became more stressful. It's simply too much to keep up with. "A huge part of this is overwhelm and burnout," Weir says.

Weir explains further that when we go straight from one meeting, email, or conversation to the next, we subtly check out. Memories become less defined. Everything and everyone blurs together. "The interaction is no longer real," she says. We become ghosts to one another. And in this vaporous state, etiquette that was once considered common decency falls by the wayside.

While technology has made ghosting easier, and overload has made us more susceptible to it, there are many other reasons why we do it—and not all of them, surprisingly, are unsympathetic. YeJin Park Roberts, a PhD candidate at NYU Stern School of Business who has studied our motivations for disengaging

without disclaimer, explains that there are three main types of ghosting: the accidental, the self-interested, and the overly caring. The accidental ghoster may have planned to respond but, for one reason or another, was waylaid. As time stretches on, the situation becomes awkward, causing more internal resistance, and, all of a sudden, they've unintentionally ghosted. The self-interested ghoster may have narcissistic motives, or they may be protecting themselves from a response they don't think is going to go well. And then there is the overly caring ghoster, who is trying to shield the other person from pain. In fact, a study that Roberts coauthored found that the more other-oriented someone is, the more likely they are to ghost someone. "Sometimes it's intentional and those intentions are negative, but others it's neither of those," Roberts says.

The part that's so difficult about ghosting is we'll never know which it is.

Tom Hoof, a C-suite-level marketing executive in sports, entertainment, and higher education, began talking to a prospective employer in collegiate sports in late 2023. Over the months that followed, he had multiple meals with multiple people on the hiring team. He sat for two panel interviews. Despite his hesitation to do so, he offered ideas for a marketing campaign (those ideas, he says, were used). Meanwhile, he was having regular conversations with a public-relations consultant who works with the organization. More than eight months into the process, Hoof learned from a friend at the company that they had hired someone else. Hoof never received an email from the consultant, from the human-resources manager, or from the executive director he'd been in talks with.

"I had never faced anything like that," says Hoof, who during his 30-year career has worked at some of the most esteemed companies in the world. "It was really shocking. I'm wondering, 'What happened? What did I do wrong? Were they just wasting my time?' It's almost like a loss."

Traditionally, the employer, as the one with the power, has been more likely to ghost than the applicant. The trend began to shift during the pandemic, with mass resignations and the advent of younger folks disillusioned by the transactional nature of the employer-employee relationship. Experts say potential hires are treating job hunting as they do dating. They are quick to swipe left at the slightest miscue, or if something better comes along. And with an abundance of options,

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## YOU WILL BE VISITED BY THREE GHOSTS

Experts say there are three main types of ghosters, and the difficulty is that the ghosted doesn't know which kind they're dealing with.

### The Accidental:

A colleague may have been planning to respond but, for one reason or another, was waylaid. Time stretches on and things become awkward, causing more internal resistance.



### The Self-Interested:

This person may be motivated by self-protection—for example, a manager protecting themselves from a response they don't think is going to go well—or narcissism.

### The Overly Caring:

The ghoster might be hoping to shield another person from pain. One study found a direct relationship between how other-oriented a person is and how likely they are to ghost someone.



they don't feel the need to keep prospects in the pipeline, which is a sentiment that goes both ways. Recruiters are inundated with applications through platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed. The hiring process, with its algorithms and digital interfaces, has commodified humans in the same way dating apps have. "There is a feeling that people are disposable," Perlmutter says.

The impact of ghosting by a recruiter versus by a colleague we interact with daily may be different, but both fray the professional social fabric. Ghosting is a type of ostracism that threatens a person's basic needs for belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control, explains Gili Freedman, a social psychologist and associate professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland. But unlike some other means of rejection, ghosting generates uncertainty, which creates prolonged suffering. "Ghosting is defined by the lack of closure and control," Freedman says. "You don't know what's happening, and that's a very uncomfortable feeling."

**W**hy can't we just let it go and move on? That's not how the brain is wired. Without resolution, we tend to ruminate, which psychologists call the Zeigarnik Effect. We will keep trying to make sense of what has occurred, dwelling on what is unfinished or unexplained, rather than engaging in other relationships that are in good standing. Without a why, we will create our own narrative, which is often a reflection of our deepest insecuri-

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ties. "The hurt is not just a small imperception," says Roberts, the NYU ghosting researcher. She said she was shocked to learn the intensity with which people are affected by this. "It has huge emotional baggage attached."

It turns out, though, that biology can be karmic, because it's not only the person who has been ghosted who experiences the Zeigarnik Effect: The ghoster does as well. Freedman's research has found that the ghosted and the ghoster have equally negative experiences. They're just negative in different ways. When people recall being ghosted they feel sadness, anger, and loneliness—whereas after ghosting, they feel guilt and shame. Everyone loses. Empathy is eroded. Distrust becomes contagious, quickly spreading among colleagues. Meanwhile, uncertainty triggers a survival response in the nervous system, affecting job performance, morale, and mental health.

So how do we subvert an ominous corporate future devoid of connection? Those prone to ghosting can practice having hard conversations and embracing awkwardness. A simple apology, even if months or years late, can go a long way. From the other side, those who have been forsaken can throw a lifeline to someone who may have inadvertently ghosted them by sending a brief, friendly follow-up message. But the reality is that often once it has



## YOU GOT GHOSTED

We need to ruminate and suffer when we are ghosted. Some ways to recover from being ghosted at work:

**Remember, it isn't personal.**

You're not responsible for another person's unprofessional behavior.

**Don't ghost yourself.**

This is a time for self-care and self-compassion.

**Focus on the facts.**

Try not to create a story around what happened.

**Accept the ambiguity.**

Know that you can move on without answers or accountability.

**Make meaning.**

Ghosting creates space to build relationships that are reciprocal.

occurred, there is no good way to address ghosting at work. It almost never ends well to confront someone directly or go over their head to leadership.

Alas, it all starts from the top, as business psychologist Weir says. The shared fate of the commons comes down to leaders setting manageable workloads and building cultures of respect and accountability. What really needs to happen, Weir argues, is for hiring managers to call people up and say, "I'm really sorry, you didn't get the job." "There can be a world where we do that," she says. "Things will need to change, but it's possible." ■