

# Evaluating Signs of Potential Organizational Cynicism in the Context of Virtual Work Settings: An Interactive Class Activity

**Mike Schraeder**

*Troy University, USA*

**Abstract.** Preparing business students for workplace success is a dynamic learning process that encompasses coverage of contemporary theories and concepts that are relevant in the ever-changing context of organizations. This learning process can be enhanced by guiding students through practical activities and exercises that not only incorporate relevant theories and concepts, but also relate them to situations/contexts they might encounter in the “real world”. One of the many emerging trends in organizations is the increase of virtual or remote work. While there are numerous benefits associated with virtual or remote work, there are also challenges that can emerge. Organizational cynicism in a virtual or remote work setting, which could have negative implications for organizations, is just one of the many challenges that students should be prepared to recognize as they enter the workplace. The proposed Interactive Class Activity outlined in this article is intended to help instructors guide students through a discussion-based exercise to evaluate and consider potential symptoms of cynicism in virtual organizations.

**Keywords:** organizational cynicism, virtual work, virtual teams.

## 1. Introduction

Business students engaged in the process of learning about the dynamics of behavior in organizations explore numerous topics that address well-established concepts, as well as emerging ideas. For instructors, developing learning experiences that align with emerging trends in business is essential to effectively preparing students to contribute and be successful in the “real world”. One of the many trends that continue to impact organizations is the growth of virtual or remote types of work. Consequently, helping students understand some of the nuances and unique challenges associated with virtual or remote work is a valuable endeavor that can improve their ability to effectively interact with coworkers in these organizations. One of the challenges that may be present in traditional or virtual work settings is organizational cynicism. However, the signs

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and symptoms associated with organizational cynicism may emerge a bit differently in virtual or remote work settings. Since organizational cynicism can have significant, negative implications for organizations and since the topic of organizational cynicism receives varying degrees of coverage in organizational behavior textbooks, there is value in providing students with supplemental content that specifically addresses cynicism. Further, considering the prominence and possible growth of virtual or remote work, discussing cynicism in the context of virtual work settings could bolster student learning and understanding. The enhanced understanding, in turn, will be valuable in shaping the interpersonal skills of students, preparing them to interact more effectively as a peer/coworker, or as a future manager. There is also value in helping students recognize potential signs of organizational cynicism in the workplace since the cynicism of an employee could possibly have a contagion effect, influencing them or others (Schraeder *et al.* 2016). This article proposes a discussion-based, Interactive Class Activity as a learning tool for instructors to assist them in guiding students through an evaluation of “signs” or “symptoms” that might be indicative of potential cynicism in virtual work settings.

## **2. Background**

The nature of work in organizations continues to change. Many of the changes are fueled by factors including technology development and globalization of business (Verma 2005; Walstra 2022). These factors, combined with other dynamics have contributed to a notable increase in the number of organizations utilizing some form of “virtual” work, where employees and leaders do some portion of their job in locations other than the traditional, face-to-face work environment (i.e., their home). Recently, the Coronavirus pandemic has compelled organizations to utilize virtual work options at an unprecedented pace (Shockley *et al.* 2021).

In the literature, hybrid work arrangements, virtual teams, remote work, and telecommuting are among the terms that represent some form of “virtual work”. Despite the prevalence of virtual work and the touted benefits, it has not been a complete panacea for all organizations or employees. Indeed, there are a variety of challenges and drawbacks that accompany virtual work. For example, from an employee’s perspective, perceptions of being isolated and becoming disconnected from coworkers can be associated with virtual work (Verma 2005). From an employer’s perspective, salient concerns associated with virtual work include, “...productivity, employee well-being and company culture, as well as leadership’s ability to assess and support these conditions” (Banham 2021, p. 28). To better prepare business students to appreciate employee well-being in the real world, one of the factors that instructors might want to focus on is helping these students recognize/evaluate signs of potential cynicism in the workplace since

“the effects of organizational cynicism on employee well-being are strong and rising” (Thomas & Gupta 2018; p. 18). This increased ability to recognize potential signs of organizational cynicism might also enhance the well-being of students entering the workplace by contributing to a better understanding of employee behavior dynamics, and as previously discussed, improve their ability to interact effectively with other employees, regardless of whether they are in a peer or in a management role.

The prominence of virtual work, including concomitant challenges that may emerge, reinforce the value of considering signs of potential organizational cynicism in virtual work settings. The intent of the proposed discussion-based, Interactive Class Activity is to help business students explore signs of potential cynicism in the context of virtual work settings with the hope of encouraging critical thought, as well as further discussion on the topic. Prior to outlining the proposed Interactive Class Activity, the following section provides a brief overview of the topic of cynicism in organizations.

### **3. A Brief Overview of Cynicism in Organizations**

Cynicism in organizations is growing and is readily regarded as an undesirable employee attitude that can have a variety of negative implications (Chiaburu 2013; Dean *et al.* 1998; Thomas & Gupta 2018). In their widely cited article, Dean *et al.* (1998) reflect on an array of ways that cynicism has been described in research, offering the conceptualization of organizational cynicism as “... a negative attitude toward one’s employing organization, comprising three dimensions” (p. 345). The three dimensions discussed by Dean *et al.* (1998) include beliefs, negative affect, and disparaging/critical behavior directed at the organization.

A full discussion of antecedents and outcomes associated with organizational cynicism is beyond the scope of the proposed Interactive Class Activity and related teaching/learning points. However, a meta-analysis by Chiaburu *et al.* (2013) provides some insights into practical antecedents and consequences of organizational cynicism worth noting. In their analysis, levels of perceived organizational support and perceptions of organizational justice were among the most significant antecedents of cynicism, while decreased job satisfaction, decreased organizational commitment, and increased intent to turnover were the most significant consequences of organizational cynicism. Frustration and disappointment may also be associated with organizational cynicism (Dean *et al.* 1998).

Antecedents and outcomes of employee cynicism are, indeed, important factors for business students to understand. However, the specific scope of this proposed Interactive Class Activity is focused on helping students recognize signs or symptoms that could possibly be indicative of organizational cynicism in

the context of virtual work settings. In a real work setting, this, in turn, would hopefully equip students interested in becoming future leaders with insight for further observation, monitoring and follow-up regarding these requisite signs to determine if organizational cynicism is, in fact, present and then undertake efforts targeted at addressing the cynicism. For those students who aren't in a leadership role, there is also value in recognizing signs of potential cynicism since cynicism could possibly spread and may have an undesirable impact their overall work environment. Even if the sign or symptom is associated with some source or catalyst other than cynicism, students who can thoughtfully consider the sign/symptom might be better equipped to interact more effectively with others, while also being more aware of the possible negative implications that might be associated with the observed sign/symptom, regardless of the source/cause.

## **I. Instructor Guide and Suggested Teaching Plan Outline**

### **A. Proposed Learning Objectives:**

1. Students will recognize the popularity and anticipated growth of virtual/remote work.
2. Students will gain an increased understanding of the concept of organizational cynicism.
3. Students will evaluate signs/symptoms of possible organizational cynicism in the context of virtual/remote work settings.
4. Students will demonstrate critical thought and insights in justifying their evaluation of signs/symptoms that might be indicative of organizational cynicism.
5. Students will create a plausible list of alternative causes or reasons for the signs/symptoms discussed. (Note: This is important since it could be challenging to precisely or definitively conclude that a specific sign/symptom is “in fact” organizational cynicism, without data from some type of employee survey or validated measure).
6. Students will identify additional information that would assist in more accurately evaluating the signs/symptoms as possible organizational cynicism.

### **B. Proposed Teaching Guide/Outline:**

1. The proposed Interactive Class Activity is presented in the form of a non-graded activity for students that can be used by instructors to augment course lectures and other learning activities. Depending on