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OUR DOCTORS SAW SOMETHING ELSE. A MOTHER.

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Monday, March 20, 2006
By ANDREA GURWITT
HERALD NEWS

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He felt he had nowhere to turn.

No way was he going to confront his boss, the source of the problem, about his boss's bullying behavior. He worried if he went to his boss's boss he'd be fired. And the human resources person in his small company seemed too cozy with management for comfort.

The stress was so great he couldn't sleep and when he did he had nightmare after nightmare about his job.

"I was scared out of my wits at the time," he said.

The only place this employee thought he could safely go with no fear of reprisal was the Internet, where he searched for information on workplace bullying. By chance he found

www.AnonymousEmployee.com, a Web site that passes on anonymous messages from disgruntled employees to their managers.

"It sounded like a worthwhile phone call to make," said the worker, who declined to allow his name or his company's name to be printed for fear of being fired.

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"There were many of us who feel people higher up in the company don't know what's going on, and if we could get to them anonymously and let them know, they would definitely fix it."

AnonymousEmployee.com, which has been on line since last March, is a high-tech version of the employee suggestion box. Workers fill out an online form outlining their complaints and including suggestions about how to fix the problem. They provide the name and e-mail address of the person to whom they want their complaint sent, and the Web site then forwards the e-mail, which cannot be traced back to the writer, according to Christopher Knott, the Web site's 35-year-old president.

Workers can write about any problem on their mind, from personal complaints or complaints about a company's procedural problems to charges of harassment or fraud. The Web site does not require the writer's name. The writer may request a reply from the recipient, which is sent to the Web site.

The service is free. Knott said he does not have the exact numbers, but estimates the Web site has received several thousand employee complaints. The Web site is based in Toronto, Canada, but 80 percent of online traffic comes from the United States, Knott said.

People at the Web site scan through complaints and choose companies to call to pitch their services. Those services include supplying a mediator, setting up an employee hotline, and providing a summary of the worker complaints originating in each department of a large company.

Companies pay a pre-determined annual fee and then a fee for each service. For example, an annual fee might be \$200, plus the variable call-center fee of anywhere from \$1 for each company employee a year to \$10 an employee a year, Knott said. Mediators may cost a company \$150 an hour or more.

Five companies have signed on to the relatively new Web site for support services so far, Knott said.

The point of the Web site, Knott said, is not so much to address individual grievances but to improve the workplace as a whole.

Workplace experts -- and American culture -- advocate taking responsibility for your actions. If you think you are being mistreated, or you see rampant theft or illegal business practices going on, you ought to meet with your boss or with someone else in management and clearly and calmly explain your concerns. Managers should encourage this kind of open dialogue, and work to quietly ameliorate the problem while keeping an employee's complaint confidential.

After all, companies that are successful and profitable are businesses that have worked hard to set up easy and non-threatening ways for employees to make their complaints and concerns known within the organization, said Rudy Nydegger, professor of management and psychology at Union College and the Graduate College of Union University in Schenectady, N.Y.

"Companies run on information," he said. So if the problem is that the company has disgruntled workers, then that's information it needs to know. Because when worker morale is low, absenteeism, tardiness and employee turnover increases while productivity and profit decline, Nydegger said.

In some companies this approach works well. But in many others, workers don't

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have the confidence in their employers to even think about having a closed-door meeting with higher ups, or would never call an in-house hotline. The workplace culture may seem so poisonous or dangerous to employees that they may fear being fired for even mentioning their discontent or concerns.

So what may seem cowardly -- writing an anonymous e-mail of complaint that can't be traced back to the sender -- may be considered by the writer as the only way to both ask for help and keep a job.

Knott said he came up with the idea for the Web site when he was an unhappy employee himself at an online advertising company. He and fellow workers had tried to tell managers their concerns, but "it didn't go over well," he said.

"I am always going to be in favor of coming right out and saying what you know. Any boss, any manager, would want that," said Alice Peterson, president and founder of Syrus Global, an ethics and compliance solutions company in Chicago. But, "It's human nature to fear that something unknown or something negative could occur as a result of speaking out. You have to make people feel safe speaking up."

"If you're in a position of blue or light-blue collar and don't hold a lot of power in your position and you see unethical behavior going on, you may feel a pervasive fear that you might be subject to retaliation" or won't be believed, said Laura Hartman, professor of business ethics at DePaul University in Chicago.

And so anonymity has its place because it allows what might remain unsaid to be said.

However, Peterson and others said, that's only the first step. If a company does not have an internal system in place for quickly and efficiently acting on the problem, an employee might as well not have said anything at all.

Also, said Linda Stamato, co-director for the Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, there's a tradition among businesses that if something is sent anonymously, "we don't want to credit it." And, she asked, "What's a person supposed to do once they get it?"

"If your issue is specific to you, it's not going to work for you very well. You might as well go and holler outside," said John Putzier, author of "Get Weird: 101 Innovative Ways to Make Your Company a Great Place to Work."

And writing to an outside, third party to complain anonymously might create the feeling the employee is ratting out co-workers, Hartman said. It also allows for one employee to retaliate against another with false accusations, she said.

Knott agreed the company won't know if users are making up their complaints, but if an employee is found to be abusing the service the Web site can deny them access.

While some experts are skeptical of AnonymousEmployee.com's business approach -- cold calling a company to tell it about its problems -- they said that if companies are so dysfunctional and deaf to employees' needs that workers must go outside the business to take action, then the Web site could serve a purpose.

AnonymousEmployee.com's anonymous unhappy worker called the Web site in December, talked through his options and, he says, feels much better, even

though he has not yet chosen to write an anonymous letter of complaint about his boss.

It's now up to him, he said, how he would ask Knott to approach the parent company and tell them of the problems.

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