MACHLIS MUSINGS

By Sharon Machlis, Executive Editor, Data & Analytics,
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OPINION

R community blasts DataCamp response to exec's 'inappropriate behavior'

RStudio, satRdays, and some instructors themselves are cutting ties with the online education
company because they say DataCamp's response to the incident has been inadequate.

A significant portion of the R community is in an uproar over how online training
company DataCamp has handled an executive's 'uninvited physical contact' with an
employee, and calls are growing on social media to shun the platform.

RStudio removed links to DataCamp from its website, requested DataCamp stop using
its employees' names and photos, and "indefinitely suspended discussions" to renew a
content license agreement. Some DataCamp instructors are urging people not to take
their courses. satRdays organizers said they will no longer allow DataCamp to sponsor
its worldwide R events. And the R-Ladies Global team posted "ideas about how you
can show your disapproval of DataCamp's response."

The fury erupted after DataCamp acknowledged that one of its executives "made
uninvited physical contact" with an employee in 2017 — "an incident of inappropriate
behavior...that should never have happened." DataCamp offered up the admission in a
blog post earlier this month.

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you how.]**

The statement came after more than 100 of its instructors signed a letter urging
management to change how the incident was being handled. (DataCamp's blog post
says the move came "in response to feedback from our instructor community.") But the

statement fell short of what instructors had sought.

Criticisms include:

- The executive was given sensitivity training, coaching, and "a strong warning," according to the post. There was no mention of support for the victim, though — or a significant penalty paid by the executive. The victim no longer works at DataCamp.

- An investigation was conducted "by a third party not involved in DataCamp's day-to-day business," according to the statement. That led to questions whether that "third party" is in fact involved with DataCamp, just not on a day-to-day basis. For instance, a venture capital investor with financial interest in the company could meet that description even if not involved in daily, hands-on work.

- Somie details included in the statement were blasted as "victim blaming" and attempts to minimize what took place. For example, the company noted the incident occurred at an off-site event on a dance floor (not in the office) and wasn't reported immediately.

- Although DataCamp's statement said, "We are sincerely sorry that this incident occurred" and apologized for "how this has affected our community," there was no apology to the victim.

- The statement was released before notifying the victim, and signed by "The DataCamp Leadership Team." No individuals put their name on it or took personal responsibility for what happened.

"It is such a failure of leadership," said Julia Silge, creator of the popular tidytext R package and co-author of Text Mining with R. She also did contract work developing content for DataCamp, and said she has collaborated with friends who work there. "I'm so disappointed in the outcome that we are getting to. It did not have to be this way.... Even with an incident of sexual misconduct, it did not have to play out this way."

In a move that inflamed critics, DataCamp's April 4 blog post initially included an HTML "no-index" tag that blocked search engines like Google from including it in their results. The tag was removed from the page this week.

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The no-index tag was discovered and first publicized by Noam Ross, a volunteer editor at rOpenSci doing R package peer review; Ross developed the DataCamp course Nonlinear Modeling in R with Generalized Additive Models as a freelance contractor. "It's one line of code," Ross said of the search-engine-blocking tag. "But it's one line of code [showing] that the leadership did not want to take responsibility for this."

I asked both Silge and Ross this morning about the tags removal. "We don't yet know whether this is a prelude to a meaningful response, but I hope it will be," Ross said.

"If the choice to remove the tag is the beginning of a substantive change in DataCamp's overall approach, I am happy to see it," Silge said. "I hope to see real steps toward accountability soon."

Asked for comment about the incident and the aftermath, a DataCamp spokesperson answered via email: "When we became aware of this matter, we conducted a thorough investigation and took actions we believe were necessary and appropriate. However, recent inquiries made us aware of mischaracterizations of what occurred and we felt it necessary to make a public statement. As a matter of policy, we do not disclose details on matters like this, to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

"We do not retaliate against employees, contractors, instructors or other members of our community, under any circumstances, for reporting concerns about behavior or conduct."

Growing frustrations

Silge said she had been working on this issue with DataCamp for about nine months, in part because of what she called "first-hand knowledge" of the incident. "I have been frustrated, but also befuddled," she said. "In my opinion, they're not acting in their own interest."

She said she initially expressed concerns within the company. Management refused to put anything in writing and one-on-one calls didn't prove fruitful. The company also at first resisted engaging with instructors who had connected over the issue as back-channel discussions about the matter grew, she said.

"Eventually, they did agree to have an online group meeting with instructors," Silge said. But that meeting ended up being a one-way, webinar-like presentation from the company to instructors. "We were not allowed to speak during this meeting," she said. "We were not allowed to see who else was in the meeting" – or what other questions were being asked via text chat."

Meanwhile, rumors spread. Silge described being approached at conferences by strangers saying, in effect: I heard something bad happened at DataCamp. You're associated with DataCamp. What happened?

It was "damaging to instructors," Ross said. "Our own reputations [are affected] when DataCamp acts like this."

A small group of instructors, including Silge, wrote a group letter to management, sought out email addresses for all the instructors listed on the DataCamp site and sent each a copy of the letter, asking if they would sign on. "Over 100 instructors signed the letter across the Python and R communities," she said.

Silge said the letter did not threaten DataCamp with going public or call for the executive to be fired. Instead, it said the situation was wrong and needed to be addressed.

As the letter was meant to remain within the company, it hasn't been publicly released.

"We wanted this to be internal," Ross said. "Instructors really tried not to make it a public fiasco for DataCamp." Among the requests, he said: Evidence that there were enough consequences for the executive to be a deterrent. Increased transparency within the DataCamp community. And redress for the victim.

The letter was sent to DataCamp management on April 3, Silge said. The next day, DataCamp published its public blog post, including an apology "for how this has affected our community."

Reactions

Instead of settling the issue, though, DataCamp's statement inflamed it.
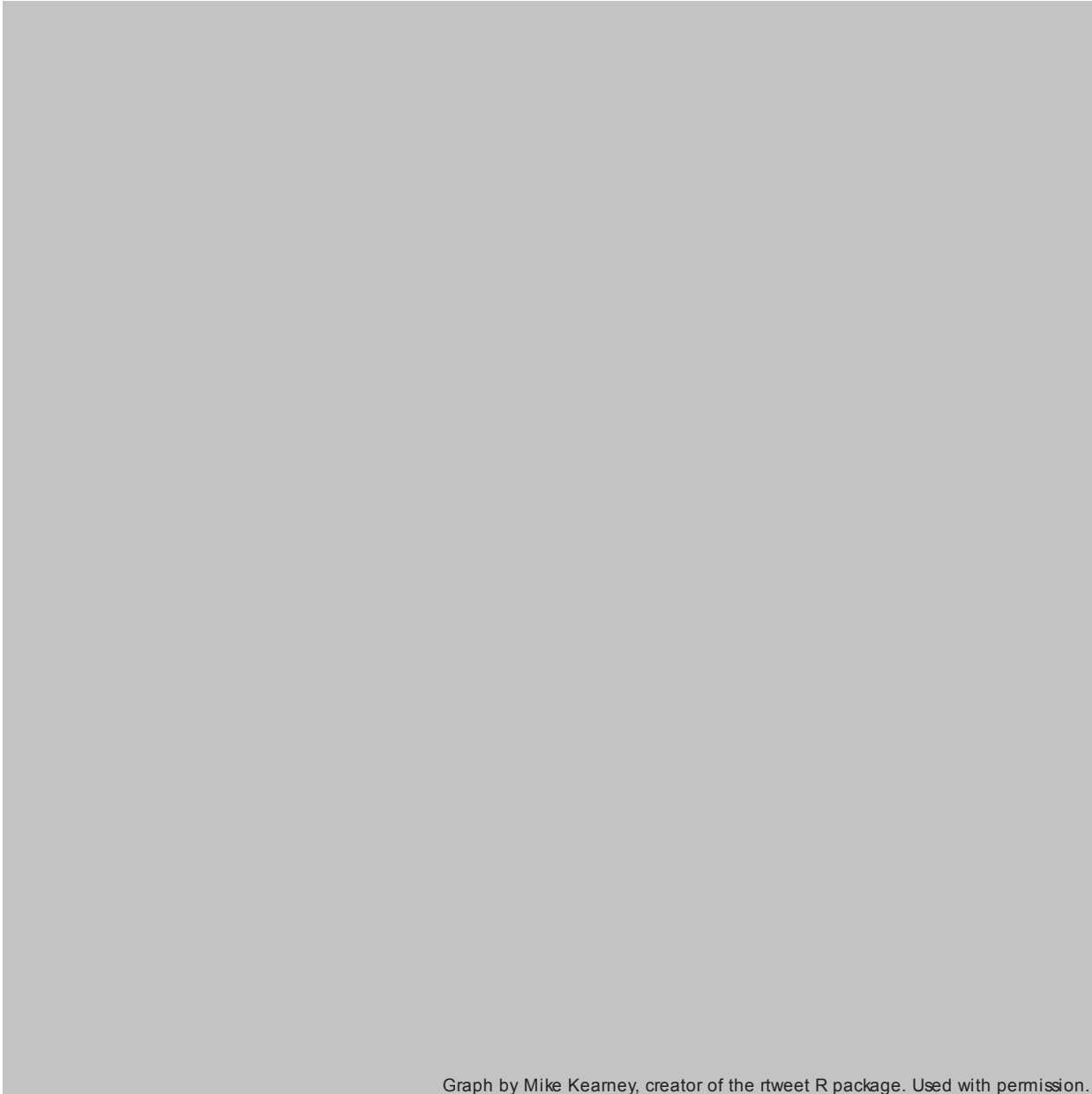
Graph by Mike Kearney, creator of the rtweet R package. Used with permission.

Uptick in tweets mentioning DataCamp's Twitter handle @datacamp.

"I'm disappointed they think that's what we asked," Silge said, noting "how it uses victim-blaming language. How it tries to use details in inappropriate ways." The company took pains to "add in every detail they think apparently might cast them in a

better light," she said, while leaving out details that would not.

"That action is in line with what I have experienced from DataCamp over the last approximately a year," Silge said. She believes the way the statement was published, including the initial no-index tag, demonstrated no real effort at accountability.

The now-former DataCamp employee who reported the harassment, Kara Woo, went public on Twitter after DataCamp published its statement. "This story is out in the open now, so I guess I might as well say that the unnamed employee in the DataCamp post was me," she tweeted. "I haven't talked publicly about this experience before. That's been a complicated decision, but for me it's been the best way to try to move on with my life.

"The [DataCamp] post takes care to note that I didn't report what happened until months later," Woo said on Twitter. "Nor did many of my colleagues who saw what happened. I'm sure I don't need to explain the reasons people don't report things like this immediately."

In an emailed statement to *Computerworld*, Woo added: "All I have to say currently is that I am very moved by the outpouring of support, and I hope anyone else in a similar situation knows that people in this community will have their back." She offered similar thanks on social media.

Ross was one of the first to publicly call for people to stop using the platform. "Please don't take or pay for my @DataCamp course. The company let its executive off the hook for sexual misconduct. We can't change behavior without incentives, and for companies those incentives are financial," he tweeted.

When asked what might be an appropriate response short of firing the executive, Ross suggested perhaps a demotion or unpaid leave — something beyond a warning.

Others soon joined, including Kyle Walker (Analyzing US Census Data in R), Jake Thompson (Bayesian Regression Modeling with rstanarm), and G. Elliott Morris (Analyzing Election and Polling Data in R).

"I dearly hope that the heads of the company will take additional action soon and I will again feel comfortable endorsing my participation in my course," Morris tweeted. "That is not how I feel at this time, so please, don't take my course."

Some are also suggesting alternative resources, or pledging to post equivalent content that will be freely available online.

Most freelance instructors receive payments based on how many students complete their DataCamp courses (some also get advances). So, contractors who encourage people not to take their courses are in effect cutting into their own income.

Many critics of DataCamp have acknowledged that not everyone working with the company can, financially or otherwise, act against it. "It is up to you to decide what you want or can do, given your personal situation," the R Ladies Global blog said. "We feel for anyone who finds themselves in a difficult situation regarding their involvement (whether as employees or content developers) with DataCamp. Please be assured that our criticism is directed at the leadership team of DataCamp who made these decisions and who have the opportunity and power to rectify this situation."

Some who depended on the platform as teachers or users also said publicly they were suspending use. Emilie Vallee at Massey University in New Zealand tweeted that they will stop using the DataCamp classroom, "even if we were right in the middle of a course, and removed all links from our website.... We set high standards for our partners."

José Pereira, a medical student in Portugal, tweeted a picture of a 486-day active streak as a user, along with: "As much as I like @DataCamp (using them almost since the beginning), today I am cancelling my subscription and my daily streak ends with it. I waited to see if they would gain some courage and solve the situation but it seems hierarchy trumps over human decency. Shame!"

"Most things I know about R and Python – I know because of DataCamp. I was an early adopter and a huge fan of the product. So huge that I even applied for a position with them I'm not suited for – just to be a part of the team. Today, I'm saying bye-bye to @DataCamp. #DataCamp," tweeted data analyst Taras Kaduk from Florida.

Except for its statement to *Computerworld*, DataCamp has been mostly silent as the controversy has grown. That could be for legal reasons or a belief either that critics are a minority of its user base or the current blowback will end. But from outside, it looks like a curious form of crisis management.

"We are all puzzled," Ross said. "We have really tried our best to give second chances, to give DataCamp the opportunity to do the right thing, to own the narrative."

"I don't expect the companies or people I work with to be perfect, and in fact, I myself work for an imperfect company," Silge wrote in a blog post yesterday. "What I do need to maintain a continuing relationship with a company and/or people is trustworthiness and accountability. I am an optimist and still hold out hope for the folks at DataCamp to demonstrate that I (and the broader community) should trust them."

Even so, she has called for people to avoid her courses on DataCamp if possible.

Right now the instructor community "feels used," Ross said. DataCamp is "not responding as if the community is valuable to them."

"There remains a viable path for them," Ross added, "but it's not the one they're on."

Sharon Machlis is Executive Editor, Data & Analytics at IDG, where she works on data analysis and in-house editor tools in addition to writing and editing. Her book Practical R for Mass Communication and Journalism was published in December 2018.

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