



Workplace Harassment Affects Us All

By Nancy A. Haas

Why are we talking about workplace harassment in 2004? It is because harassment it is still prevalent in our workplace despite the laws protecting employees from discrimination. Those laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) who focuses on the elimination of illegal discrimination from the workplace. For 2003, the EEOC received over 81,000 charges. Of that number, 35% were race-based and 30% were sex-based discrimination.

What is workplace harassment? It is defined as conduct with the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. In other words, making life at work very uncomfortable, and preventing us from concentrating on our jobs. Harassment can include any form of written, verbal or physical abuse that a reasonable person would find intolerable in the workplace, and is severe or pervasive. It can include offensive jokes, threatening or coercive behavior, or oral, written, or electronic communications that are threatening or abusive. Workplace harassment is discrimination, and includes sexual harassment.

We don't leave our social identity at the door when we come to work, but we can control how we interact with our co-workers. Employees are protected by Federal law against discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, pregnancy, age, and disability. Federal laws cover employers with 15 or more employees unless the state laws are more stringent. In the state of Connecticut, the laws prohibiting discrimination apply to all businesses of 3 or more employees. Also in Connecticut, besides the local offices of the EEOC, employees can seek assistance from the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CCHRO).

What about the costs? Workplace harassment affects not only the individuals directly involved, it impacts businesses, customers, productivity, morale, employee recruitment and retention, and it can be very costly. In 2003, monetary benefits paid by the EEOC totaled over \$236M, with sexual harassment payments alone reaching \$50M. What could your business do with \$50M? But that isn't the end of it. Not included in those figures are the attorney fees, mediation costs, and the impact of lost business when customers and clients react to the headlines. Yet, these costs are totally preventable.

Every employee has the right to work in an environment that is free from harassment. We all play a role in ensuring such an environment, but it is the employers' obligation to protect its employees at work, and that obligation is supported by the law, union contracts, and their own policies. An employer can create a work environment built on respect that is free from intimidating, hostile or offensive behaviors by developing awareness among their employees. Developing, and implementing a policy that clearly states your position in prohibiting discrimination is a start. A good policy includes a definition of harassment, clear examples, a complaint process, stresses confidentiality, describes the investigation procedure and appropriate disciplinary action, and prohibits retaliation, which is also illegal. Post your policy where employees can see it, in a break or lunch area for example. In addition to a policy, employees



should be given the tools to recognize harassment through education. Knowing how to prevent harassment from occurring, recognizing inappropriate workplace behavior, and stopping harassment when it occurs, are key to creating an environment that is supportive, inclusive, and highly productive.

Your management team, at all levels, must be fully committed to a harassment-free work environment. They play a key role in prevention, and as representatives of your organization, they are held strictly liable. They should be well-briefed on your policies, armed with the knowledge of how to react when they observe inappropriate behavior, and know what to do when allegations are brought forward. When a manager ignores harassing behavior, they are viewed as condoning and approving such behavior. This is not the message you want to send to your employees. Taking steps toward prevention will help your managers send a clear, consistent message that harassment will not be tolerated by your organization.

Workplace harassment is fully preventable. To prevent harassment in your workplace, start with these 3 key elements: a fully committed management team, a clear policy, and an educated workforce. The rest will come naturally.

Nancy A. Haas is President of Haas Consulting Services, LLC, providing consulting and training in human resource and workplace issues. She can be reached at 203-426-0298, nahaas@haasconsultingservices.com or www.haasconsultingservices.com

[The News-Times](#), December 2004.