

Things You Should Know About Sexual Harassment

The media has reported on several high-profile cases of sexual harassment in the workplace recently. In these cases, high-ranking members of the company have been forced to step down or resign, and their organizations are now exposed to negative publicity and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, in legal fees and settlement payments.

Financial costs are just one of the many negative effects of sexual harassment. A study of sexual harassment of US government workers conducted by US Merit System Protection Board estimated that over a two-year period sexual harassment cost \$327 million. This figure includes losses due to job turnover, absenteeism, and individual and workgroup productivity, all of which are negatively impacted by workplace sexual harassment.

Dealing with Sexual Harassment

Federal law defines sexual harassment in two ways. The first is the quid pro quo: A harasser demands sexual favors in return for keeping or advancing in a job, receiving a salary increase, or other job-related matters. The second is creating a hostile work environment: A situation where behavior or words are of a sexual nature to such a degree that the workplace becomes intimidating, offensive, or hostile. One type of harassment can exist without the other, or they can appear simultaneously. Examples of a hostile work environment include sending offensive emails, displaying inappropriate photos, or conducting inappropriate conversations.

Develop an Enforceable Policy

Make sure that you have a policy that addresses the issue. The policy should define sexual harassment and outline acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Most importantly, the policy should state the consequences for those who violate it. Once the policy is in place, make sure that it is enforced. Lack of a policy or the failure to enforce it could be ammunition should a lawsuit occur. The opposing council could argue, for example, that your organization was negligent in not having or not enforcing a policy.

Implement a Reporting Procedure

Create a procedure by which employees can report sexual harassment. This procedure must not only be in place, but it must be made known to employees. To the greatest extent possible, the procedure should protect the confidentiality of the person who makes the report. The procedure should also, to the greatest extent possible, attempt to protect that person from reprisals. Investigation of complaints should occur as soon as possible.

Provide Training

On a regular basis, conduct training for your organization. Such training may deter those who are bent on engaging in sexual harassment by making them aware of the legal and career consequences. Such training can also benefit those who do not intentionally engage in such behavior by making them aware that their actions could be interpreted that way.

Monitor the Office

Keep in tune with what is going on in your office. In particular, watch for inappropriate behavior, photos, or email. If employees know that management is engaged in such monitoring, the chances that sexual harassment will occur will be lowered.

What This Means for Counties

Sexual harassment is a workplace reality that requires managers to be vigilant and well informed. Sexual harassment can hurt your organization, its culture, and your employees. CTSI Loss Prevention services provides training that can give you more you can do to prevent or deal with sexual harassment in the workplace. For more information, contact CTSI at 303-861-0507.

