



# **Sexual Harassment:** How to Prevent a Claim at Your Workplace



# Why Prevention Education Is Critical for the Workplace

## Introduction

Legally, employers are responsible for maintaining harassment-free workplaces, but it also makes good business sense. When sexual harassment thrives, it negatively impacts your employees and your bottom line.

In this e-book, we are going to review the high costs of sexual harassment in the workplace and outline effective prevention strategies you can implement right now.

## Impact

### *How Does Sexual Harassment Negatively Impact Your Business?*

#### You Can Spend Tens of Thousands of Dollars to Settle Claims

- In 2016 alone, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received over 6,758 claims of sexual harassment, resulting in \$40.7 million in direct settlements.
- A study of 50 sexual harassment cases in Chicago settled before magistrate judges resulted in an average \$53,000 settlement.
- Another study of 232 sexual harassment cases where the plaintiff won the case recorded an average payout of more than \$217,000.

Of course, these figures don't reflect any of the associated legal costs. So, even if the case doesn't result in a settlement to the plaintiff, it can still cost your business tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars.

#### Your Employees' Productivity Significantly Drops

Sexual harassment is closely associated with job dissatisfaction and disengagement, and routinely leads to:

- Tardiness
- Absenteeism
- Project neglect
- Employee distraction

One study of 262 women who had reported being harassed found that nearly 75 percent of them felt that the effects of the harassment undermined their job performance. The women cited decreased motivation to work and an inability to concentrate on their work due to the presence of sexual innuendos.

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## Your Employees' Mental Wellbeing Declines

According to research conducted at Cleveland State University, [between 90 and 95 percent of women who have been sexually harassed](#) experience debilitating stress reactions including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sleep Disorders
- Lowered Self-Esteem
- Nausea

Also, just observing harassment in the workplace causes employees to [experience lower psychological and physical well-being](#). The driving factors of this mental and physical toll were:

- Empathy for the Victim
- Concerns about a hostile work environment
- Fears of becoming the next target

## You Can't Keep or Find Quality Candidates

Turnover is one of the largest costs associated with sexual harassment because [employees are less likely to stay in a toxic environment](#). And replacing those leaving staff members can prove equally problematic.

A 2008 study found that employees were [less likely to work for a company with perceived sexual harassment](#), while an [earlier survey](#) uncovered that 58 percent of respondents who witnessed "unfairness" in the workplace in the last year would "to some degree" discourage potential employees from joining the company.

## Your Customers are Less Likely to Buy from You

When consumers witness or find out about "incivility" directed at an employee, they can develop "[rapid, negative generalizations](#)" that make them "less likely to repurchase from the firm." Additionally, employees who have experienced an "unfair" workplace might actively discourage potential customers from purchasing products or services from their employer.

# Prevention

## How Can You Prevent Sexual Harassment in Your Workplace?

### Establish Clear Policies and Processes

Draft easily-understood anti-harassment guidelines that comply with federal, state, and local laws. The guidelines should also outline what types of behavior are inappropriate for your employees, customers, and even vendors, and the steps that managers should take if any harassment is reported.

Also, make it clear that employees should not be concerned about retaliation, including the loss of their job, inconvenient shifts, or further harassment. Design your corporate policy to treat retaliation as severely as harassment.

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## Offer Training to Your Employees

An effective training program is one of the most significant steps you can take to prevent sexual harassment. Plus, the courts have established a clear precedent that companies can [reduce their risk of liability](#) by establishing sexual harassment training and reporting policies.

Furthermore, this past summer, the EEOC released a study on harassment in the workplace that stated “[training is an essential component of an anti-harassment effort](#).”

### ...Especially Your Managers

You should train all your employees, but managers especially need sexual harassment training. Offer training courses that will enable managers to more readily identify potential problems and to determine what the appropriate actions might be to prevent harassment before it occurs.

They also need to know how to respond proactively to any inappropriate behavior they witness— even if a formal complaint hasn’t been filed.

Plus, you must make it clear to mid-level managers and front-line supervisors that they will be held responsible for unchecked harassment. Reinforce that this responsibility will be part of their performance reviews.

A well-trained management structure can serve as your first—and best—line of defense against sexual harassment.

### Continually Reinforce the Message

A one and done training course isn’t enough. You must routinely educate your workforce on company harassment guidelines.

According to research compiled by the [EEOC in its harassment in the workplace study](#), when employees are asked if they had experienced “sexual harassment” in the workplace without further defining the term in the survey, only 25 percent of women responded that they had.

However, in similar questionnaires when employees were asked if they had been subject to specific inappropriate behaviors, such as unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion, the rate jumped to an alarming 40 percent of women.

This gap indicates that many people who encounter sexual harassment do not have a clear understanding that’s what they are experiencing—even if they view the behavior as problematic or offensive.

### Cultivate an Anti-Harassment Culture

You can have policies and training in place, but they won’t be as effective if sexual harassment is part of your unspoken company culture.

Leadership needs to make the commitment to do more than just “talk the talk;” they need to “walk the walk” as well. That means they need to set an example and show that sexual harassment, in any form, will not be tolerated.

Additionally, management must respond quickly to complaints and treat employees with respect during an investigation.

However, it’s not only up to senior leadership. Everyone is responsible for ensuring:

- They communicate professionally, even in electronic communication or at work-

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- Know when to draw the line when it comes to political or religious discussions
- Keep their work areas professional and free from sexually explicit materials

Sexual harassment creates a toxic workplace culture that hurts everyone involved in your business. The most effective tool you have for stopping sexual harassment in your workplace is an effective prevention strategy that includes written guidelines, a robust training program, action from senior leadership, and a commitment from your workforce.

Once you master that, you will be well on your way to creating a harassment-free culture.

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