Sexual Harassment: Cost and Consequences



Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

Sexual harassment, and any kind of harassment in the workplace, can have devastating and profound emotional, physical, and financial effects on the victim and the workplace as a whole.

A workplace made hostile or poisoned by sexual harassment can cause morale to take a dive as the victim or victims, and their co-workers deal with the act and the aftermath of harassment. Turnover can skyrocket, it can be hard to recruit new employees once the word gets out that it's a hostile environment, not to mention the fact, sexual harassment lawsuits can be long, time-consuming, and costly.

What You Should Know

As we go through these harassment effects, think about how each one can ripple out and cause a wave of damage throughout your entire organization.

Sexual harassment effects are classified in three general categories: emotional consequences, physical consequences, and psychological consequences.

Most victims of sexual harassment experience at least a few of these symptoms, and many victims find harassment traumatic enough to interfere with work, leisure, and relationships.

Emotional

1. Humiliation
2. Fear or anger
3. Embarrassment
4. Increased stress
5. Shame (degradation, powerlessness)

Physical

1. Headaches
2. Stomach pain (ulcers, nausea)

3. Changes in appetite and sleep disturbance (insomnia, nightmares, inability to sleep)
4. Drug or alcohol use
5. Sexual dysfunction

These physical issues can be extremely costly to a victim’s career and disruptive to relationships, and their quality of life in general.

Psychological

1. Depression
2. Difficulty concentrating
3. Anxiety or panic disorders (anxiety or panic attacks)
4. Social withdrawal
5. Intimacy and trust issues

The psychological consequences of sexual harassment are often longer lasting than the other two types of consequences and can be debilitating to the victim and their family. These consequences, together or on their own, can cause the victim to:

- Miss work more often.
- Show up late to work and meetings.
- Have poor work performance, and ultimately with the victim either leaving the job or requesting a transfer.

Which in turn means a possible loss of or decrease in income and benefits – which only adds to the feelings discussed above.

What You Should Do

An organization must have a clear and comprehensive sexual harassment policy in place. In cases of alleged sexual harassment, the policy will alert all parties to their rights, roles and responsibilities.

To minimize the costs and consequences of harassment, everyone in the organization should be aware of the existence of the sexual harassment policy and the steps in place for resolving complaints. This can be done by:

- giving policies to everyone as soon as they are introduced or updated;
- making all employees aware of them by including the policies in any orientation material;
- training people, including people in positions of responsibility, on the contents of the policies, and providing ongoing education on human rights issues.

Final Word

It is important to realize the extent of damage and harm that sexual harassment can cause to victims, co-workers, and an organization. Without this understanding, the ripple caused by one incident can quickly turn into a tidal wave of accusations, complaints, distrust, and costly litigation.