

HR Insights

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Understanding and Reducing Harassment Risk Factors

Workplace harassment has significant negative consequences for an organization and its employees. It can damage employee morale and company culture, decrease productivity, and cause heightened employee turnover. It's also illegal.

Workplace culture has a significant impact on harassment. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), organizational conditions are the [most powerful predictors](#) of whether harassment will occur in a workspace. Understanding the factors of an organization's culture that may lead to harassment and how to mitigate them is crucial for employers to prevent workplace harassment. This article lists risk factors laid out by the EEOC and provides general guidance for how employers can reduce their risk of workplace harassment.

What Is a Harassment Risk Factor?

Harassment risk factors are metrics developed by the EEOC to identify elements that might put a workplace more at risk for harassment. The more risk factors an organization has, the greater the chances for workplace harassment. It's important to note that the existence of these risk factors doesn't mean harassment is occurring in the workplace. However, they indicate opportunities for harassment and should prompt employers to look more closely at how their organization can reduce the risk of harassment. Employers should review any risk factors in their organization and develop strategies to manage them.

What Are the Harassment Risk Factors?

The EEOC describes the following as [risk factors](#) for workplace harassment:

- **A homogeneous workforce**—A lack of workplace diversity can cause minorities to feel isolated. Employees in the majority might feel threatened by an individual they perceive as different, leading to inappropriate or discriminatory behavior. For example, this could occur in single-sex-dominated environments, leading to sexual harassment and discrimination.
- **Workers who don't conform to workplace norms**—Harassment is more likely to occur in workplaces where a minority of workers don't conform to workplace norms or societal stereotypes. This can lead to nonconforming individuals feeling devalued and leave them vulnerable to abuse.
- **Culture and language differences among workers**—Extremely diverse workplaces can be a risk factor for harassment. An increase of workers from a different culture or linguistic background can lead to segregation, exploitation and harassment.
- **Uncivil conversations outside the workplace**—Rough or heated conversations between employees outside the workplace can make inappropriate workplace behavior seem more acceptable to employees. This may happen if increasingly heated discussions of current events or other social issues frequently occur outside the workplace.



- **Young workforces**—Employing many teenage and young adult workers could lead to misconduct and harassment. Younger workers often don't know their rights and may struggle with self-confidence, making them more likely to be taken advantage of by older and more experienced co-workers. They may also be more likely to engage in harassment because they lack the maturity to care about the consequences of their actions.
- **"High-value" employees**—When employees are perceived as being high value to an organization, employers may be less likely to enforce workplace rules or consequences for those employees. This can cause these workers to feel immune to punishment, leading them to harass other employees.
- **Significant power disparities**—Workers in low-ranking positions may be exploited or vulnerable to harassment from other workers. The risk is heightened with gender-related power disparities; for example, women holding low-ranking positions in an organization are more likely to be subjected to harassment. There is also a greater risk among undocumented workers who may fear retaliation if they report harassment.
- **Reliance on customer service or satisfaction**—When employee compensation is directly tied to customer feedback, workers may tolerate unacceptable behavior or harassment to keep sales. Leadership may also tolerate customer harassment of employees to ensure customer satisfaction.
- **Monotonous or low-intensity work**—Employees who are bored or have excessive time on their hands may be more likely to harass one another out of frustration or to stay entertained.
- **Isolated or decentralized workplaces**—Physically isolated workplaces can increase the likelihood of harassment because

harassers have easy access to targets, and there may be no witnesses. The same applies to decentralized workplaces, where corporate offices are far removed from front-line workers. This may make managers feel unaccountable for their behavior or unwilling to call headquarters if they don't know how to handle harassment.

- **Workplaces that tolerate or encourage alcohol consumption**—Allowing or encouraging alcohol use during work hours can create problems for employees, as it lowers inhibitions and hinders judgment.

How Can Organizations Mitigate Harassment Risk Factors?

Many workplaces will have at least some of the harassment risk factors identified by the EEOC. Employers must proactively engage with their workforce to reduce the risk of harassment. The EEOC provides the following guidance for managing harassment risk factors:

- Increase diversity at all levels of an organization.
- Be aware of relations between and among work groups.
- Proactively foster a culture of civility and respect.
- Ensure the highest leadership members exhibit and support positive company culture.
- Educate culturally and linguistically diverse employees on laws, workplace norms and policies.
- Increase diversity at all levels of the workforce.
- Pay attention to current events and controversial news likely to be discussed in the workplace.

- Communicate to employees organizational standards for acceptable workplace behavior.
- Provide orientation to all employees, including information on how to notify employers of unwelcome conduct.
- Train supervisors on how to manage and report harassment.
- Be consistent and fair when enforcing workplace rules, no matter how high-ranking or valuable an employee is.
- Avoid the “customer is always right” mentality regarding harassment or unwelcome behavior.
- Vary or restructure job duties to reduce monotony or boredom.
- Restructure work environments and schedules to avoid isolating workers, if possible.
- Ensure isolated workers understand the procedure for filing complaints.
- Foster opportunities for isolated workers to connect and share concerns.
- Educate employees on how to intervene if they see inappropriate conduct.
- Prohibit or limit alcohol consumption during work hours.
- Provide anti-harassment training for employees at all levels of an organization.
- Ensure managers and supervisors know their role in preventing harassment.

the damage workplace harassment can have on a workforce and avoid potential lawsuits. Employers can create safe and harassment-free workplaces by understanding and reducing harassment risk factors in their organizations.

Contact us today for more workplace resources.

Conclusion

Workplace harassment can have a detrimental effect on employees' mental health, happiness and job satisfaction. It may also lead to lawsuits, increase employee turnover and harm employer branding. Prevention is the best way for organizations to mitigate