

## Drawing the Line: How the Workplace Shapes Perceptions of Sexual Harassment



What is sexual harassment? Turns out, this is not an easy question to answer. Actions that some employees find deeply disturbing or even patently illegal, others barely notice. Failure to identify transgressions means that incidents go unreported, enforcement is frustrated, and offenders are emboldened. It's important to know why this happens. And what, if anything, can be done about it.

To address these issues, the authors created seven scenarios depicting clear-cut cases of four common types of sexual harassment: unwanted sexual attention, ambient (i.e., pervasive) harassment, demeaning harassment, and sexual coercion. They then surveyed 408 working adults (57% male, 73% White), asking them to indicate whether, in their view, each scenario was indicative of sexual harassment ("yes" or "no"). Additionally, respondents rated the extent to which various harassment-oriented HR practices were prevalent at their workplaces.

Previous researchers have found that individual characteristics, notably gender and race, play a part in determining alertness to instances of sexual harassment. This study confirms these findings. But it also shows that, beyond these factors, two previously unstudied institutional features – industry norms and firms' HR practices – are far more significant.

### THE CHALLENGE

Clearly, recognition is a problem. Since the seven scenarios were explicit, the mean number of "yes" responses should have been 7.00; all respondents answering "yes" to all scenarios. But that wasn't the case. Overall, the mean number of "yes" responses was 3.76; the median number was 4.00.

Recognition varied depending on industry experience. Across the board, respondents currently working in high sexual harassment (HSH) industries were far less likely to recognize wrongdoing in the scenarios than were those currently working in low sexual harassment (LSH) industries (see Figure 1 on page 3). (The researchers used Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Charge data to distinguish between HSH and LSH industries.) Respondents with previous employment in HSH industries were especially likely to miss the misconduct illustrated in the scenarios. These findings strongly suggest that exposure to HSH environments, especially over time, normalizes this type of aberrant behavior to the point



that many employees either don't recognize it or simply blow it off. Which, in turn, means that firms in HSH industries may be especially prone to unreported incidents and that the number of reported incidents may just be the tip of the iceberg in terms of the actual harassment that is taking place but going unreported.

## THE ANTIDOTE

Fortunately, an antidote is at hand: an HR strategy designed to facilitate the ability and inclination of employees to recognize and pursue incidents of sexual harassment. The strategy has three complementary components:

1. A clearly stated, highly publicized policy that unambiguously elucidates the organization's definition of sexual harassment and commitment to a harassment-free workplace, coupled with a vigorous pursuit of alleged incidents and strict enforcement of violations.
2. The availability of formal and accessible means for individuals and/or groups of employees to pursue questions, concerns, and charges of sexual harassment easily and without fear of retaliation.
3. Special attention to invest in workplace practices that may reduce the workforce configurations known to foster incidents of sexual harassment; in particular, staffing and organizational design practices that limit situations where males predominate in positions of power, especially if they have large concentrations of female employees and/or large cadres of women who work part-time and/or as temps. (All part-time and temporary employees should be explicitly included in Parts 1 and 2 of the strategy.)

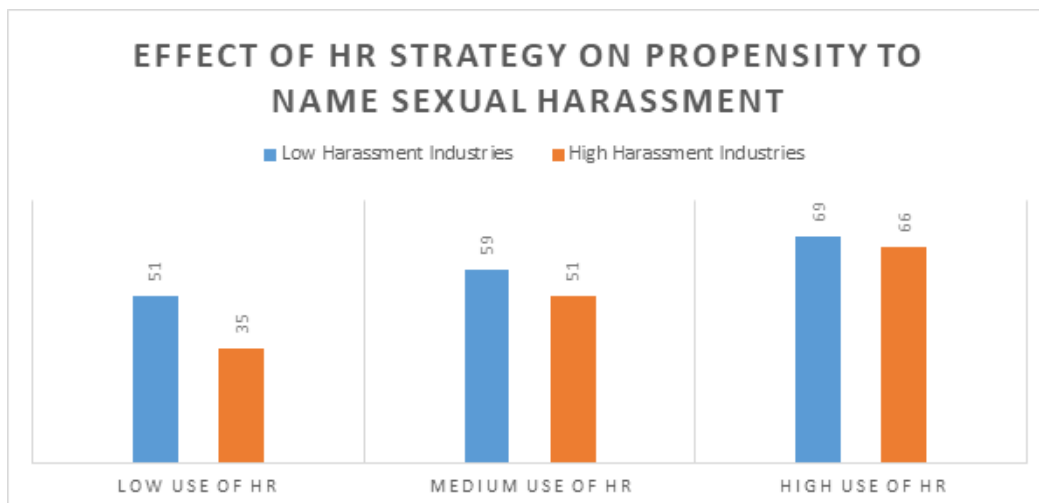
A robust HR strategy includes all three components, each fully implemented. Mediocre and weak strategies prevail when one or more of the components is missing or poorly implemented. Referring again to Figure 1, it is apparent that employees in industries where a robust HR strategy exists are significantly more alert to incidents of sexual harassment than are employees in industries where firms have mediocre and, especially, weak strategies. Further, and most important, note that when a robust HR strategy is in place, employees in HSH and LSH industries are about equally likely to identify incidents of sexual harassment. Broadly, then, a robust HR strategy goes a long way toward overcoming employee tendencies to ignore or even accept sexually harassing behaviors. And fortunately, the strategy is particularly efficacious where it is needed most – where incidents of sexual harassment are frequent and often ignored, repressed, and, thus, unreported.

## THE IMPLICATIONS

Obviously, recognition is the first step on the arduous path toward eradicating sexual harassment. If employees are unable or unwilling to identify, label and pursue violations with some degree of confidence, firms – even those with many active cases – can be certain that the incidents they're aware of are but a fraction of those they aren't. Firms in or recruiting from, HSH industries are in a particularly bad spot in this regard. One solution to this



Figure 1



situation, we now know, is to implement a robust HR strategy to heighten awareness all around. The strategy works, even in HSH industries where the need is the greatest and the challenges particularly difficult to overcome.

But is a robust HR strategy the best possible solution? An answer to this question awaits further study. Especially important are field experiments pitting the robust HR strategy against other viable options in real world settings, comparing changes in outcomes ranging from employee awareness to prevailing organizational climates regarding sexual harassment. HR professionals who are interested in pursuing such studies are encouraged to contact CAHRS to explore the intriguing possibilities.

**This ResearchBrief by the three authors below is based on a conditionally accepted paper for publication.**



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