

Preventing sexual harassment in your law office

Reports of sexual harassment have unfortunately become a daily staple within the news media. From respected journalists to powerful movie executives and elected politicians, there seems to be a growing movement of awareness and accountability for acts of sexual harassment. Whether the salaciousness of these stories keeps you glued to the television, or running away in disgust, these incidents should make you think about your own law practice and what you are doing to prevent sexual harassment among your employees. The following are tips from human resource experts about creating a work environment with no tolerance for sexual harassment.

1. **Lead by example.** Your employees and staff members look to you and the leaders of your practice to set the firm's culture. Even when you do not know you are being watched, chances are that someone is paying attention. Make sure that you are not engaging in any questionable behaviors. Remember that what you see as a simple joke, can create a hostile work environment for one of your employees and a costly legal battle for your firm.
2. **Make your expectations clear.** It is vitally important to have a clear and concise sexual harassment policy in place. According to an [article by Nolo](#), your firm's policy should plainly communicate a zero tolerance for sexual harassment. It should also include examples of what is considered harassing behavior and provide employees with instructions on how to make a formal complaint. As explained by industry experts, your policy should also include a prohibition against retaliation for reporting harassment and clearly state the potential consequences if allegations are proven to be true. If you are uncertain about creating a comprehensive policy, consult with an HR professional or employment lawyer for assistance.
3. **Provide employee training.** It may not be enough to have a policy, you should also ensure that your firm members understand it. Anti-

harassment training courses are an effective way of teaching employees to recognize what sexual harassment actually looks like. It may seem obvious to you, but that does not mean that it is clear to everyone within your practice. Training courses deal with real world scenarios and drive home the definition of unacceptable behavior within the workplace. If you decide to provide training, make sure that all members of your firm attend. From the partners to the receptionist, no one should be exempted from something so important.

4. **Give all complaints proper consideration and review.** If you do receive a complaint about alleged acts of sexual harassment, make sure that you follow your own policy, as explained by HRHero.com. Quickly launch an investigation, questioning the complainant, the accused and any witnesses. Make sure to properly document your efforts and take measures to separate the involved employees during the investigation. The article also reiterates the importance of confidentiality and consistency when handling various allegations. Once the investigation is complete, take decisive and appropriate measures in accordance with your firm policy.
5. **Don't forget about clients.** Within a law firm setting, the problem of a client alleging sexual harassment against a member of your firm is also an unfortunate possibility. The confidentiality of a lawyer-client relationship may create an environment where the client is vulnerable to the acts of the attorney. This scenario should also be addressed within your sexual harassment policy. Clearly state your expectation that all attorneys and staff members will act in an appropriate manner when dealing with law firm clients. Also ensure that you have a process in place to consider any complaints made by clients.

Hopefully, you will never have to deal with a sexual harassment complaint within your law office, but would you drive around without car insurance in hopes of never being in a car accident? That is essentially what you are doing when you fail to implement a preventative plan against sexual harassment within your law practice.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written

messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.