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HR Managers Predict More Sexual Harassment Complaints in 2018, Finds New Poll Conducted by HR Certification Institute

#MeToo Movement and Increased News Coverage of High-Profile Sexual Harassment Allegations Have Businesses Emphasizing More Prevention and Handling of Complaints

ALEXANDRIA, Va., March 12, 2018 — Seven in 10 human resource professionals said that sexual harassment complaints at their workplaces will likely be "higher" or "much higher" in 2018 compared to previous years, based on an HR Certification Institute® (HRCI®) poll of more than 200 HR business leaders at U.S. organizations.

News coverage of high-profile sexual harassment allegations has businesses stepping up plans to mitigate incidents and risk. For example:

- 79 percent of HR professionals said that sexual harassment prevention training will be considered a "high priority" or "essential" moving forward, up from 40 percent prior to the 2017 news coverage.
- 84 percent of HR professionals said that how the company handles sexual harassment complaints will be considered a "high priority" or "essential" moving forward, up from 65 percent.

"Recent allegations and the #MeToo movement have . . . triggered action to stamp out sexual harassment in the workplace."

"Recent allegations and the #MeToo movement have raised awareness and, more importantly, triggered action to stamp out sexual harassment in the workplace," said HRCI CEO Amy Dufrane, Ed.D., SPHR, CAE. "Greater awareness is likely to mean an increase in the number of reported cases over the short term. Long term, organizations are placing more emphasis on prevention and, hopefully, the eradication of sexual harassment from the workplace. Everyone, including employers and coworkers who witness unwanted behaviors, must step up to the challenge."

Both reported and unreported acts of sexual harassment remain common, based on the poll: 63 percent of HR professionals said that acts of sexual harassment "occasionally" or

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"sometimes" occur in their workplaces and 30 percent said that such acts "frequently" occur. Only 7 percent said that such acts "almost never" or "never" occur.

Most often, said 60 percent of HR professionals, the sexual harassment complaints are of the hostile work environment type. A hostile work environment, as defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ([EEOC](#)), is an environment in which an individual or individuals are subjected to unwelcome verbal or physical conduct. Six percent said the quid pro quo variety of sexual harassment, when a supervisor or manager asks for sexual favors in return for some type of favorable employment action, is more likely; 32 percent said that either type of sexual harassment is most likely.

Nearly all HR professionals — 96 percent — said that sexual harassment grievances are "very difficult" or "difficult" to handle.

Recent news reports show how HR, for example, can be caught in the middle of "he said, she said" scenarios when investigating charges. At the same time, many acts of sexual harassment go unreported, putting HR and an organization in a precarious "should have known" position and requiring the investigation of not only charges, but even investigation of rumors and gossip. Understandably, alleged victims often request confidentiality, but confidentiality cannot always be promised during the investigation of a complaint. HR professionals also must ensure that employees who make complaints are protected from retaliation.

"The complaint process should describe multiple avenues for reporting harassment and provide assurances of discretion, even though confidentiality cannot be guaranteed," said Sandra M. Reed, SPHR, the author of [A Guide to the Human Resource Body of Knowledge](#), published by HRCI. "Investigations of allegations should be prompt and impartial and, if the investigation finds that harassment did indeed occur, the policy should provide — and the employer must take — immediate corrective action."

"Skilled and knowledgeable HR professionals are required to stem the tide of sexual harassment," Dufrane added. "This is one of the many reasons why respected and credentialed HR practitioners are vital to healthy corporate cultures. Awareness, zero-tolerance policies, training and open-door policies for handling complaints are the keys to prevention."

Reed agreed: "A competent HR professional must be able to navigate the case-by-case nature of many complaints. Rarely is there a one-size-fits-all solution to harassment in the workplace. In fact, an employer response to one case may not be appropriate for another. Having anyone other than a trained HR practitioner handle the process may increase risk and reduce positive outcomes for employees."

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