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Do Sexual Harassment Prevention Trainings Really Work?

Remarkably little research has been performed on the effectiveness of employers' efforts to raise awareness

By [Vicki J. Magley](#), [Joanna L. Grossman](#), November 10, 2017

Sexual harassment scandals abound. From media personalities to Hollywood directors to famous chefs, powerful men are getting called out for years if not decades of imposing themselves on women, and in some cases on men and children, with whom they work. These scandals are a sobering reminder that sexual harassment remains a persistent and pervasive problem in the American workplace. The incidents also prompt a return to old sociological and policy questions: What causes this behavior and what can be done about it?

On the latter question, the research points to a few areas ripe for change. For starters, nearly every employer nowadays has a policy prohibiting sexual harassment, and most also have internal grievance procedures in place designed to address such problems. U.S. law rewards these two measures by minimizing liability for employers who take them. But neither has much of an effect on the likelihood that sexual harassment will occur in the first place. Despite its ubiquity, the law offers no special reward for trainings to prevent and raise awareness of sexual harassment—and popular culture does nothing but mock the concept. But studies suggest that training can help, particularly if its goals reflect the knowledge gained from research.

Most training programs aim to educate employees about the employer's sexual harassment policies and procedures, as well as the conduct that is explicitly prohibited. A few studies of college students show that participants leave training more knowledgeable about the subject of harassment than when they began it. But in studies of working adults, in one sample, knowledge improved only among men, and in another, it improved only among white employees. Moreover, in a study of managers, who are increasingly required to undergo mandatory training, trained managers were no more able to identify proper responses to harassment after training than untrained managers and, post-training, they tended to identify scenarios as sexual harassment that really were not.

Training about sexual harassment often is also geared to increase employees' attitudes about the seriousness of harassment and increase belief that the organization also takes it seriously. Unfortunately, research does not support these effects. Neither students nor working adults showed any change after training in their personal attitudes about harassment or in their perceptions of organizational tolerance for it. Indeed, at least one study showed that a brief training intervention produced a backlash such that men were more likely to blame a victim of sexual harassment than were those who did not receive the training.

Ultimately, the “gold standard” for sexual harassment training is to reduce sexual harassment. To date, however, only one research study has looked at this outcome. And it found that the training was ineffective.

Two recent studies have taken a more complex view of prevention training by examining how organizational culture also factors into training effectiveness. First, knowledge *and* personal attitudes were changed for employees who perceived that their work unit was ethical, regardless of their personal sense of cynicism about whether the training might be successful. However, employees who already believed that their employers tolerated sexual harassment took that cynicism into training sessions and were less motivated to learn from it. That sense of futility affected their belief about whether training would be useful, more even than their own personal beliefs about sexual harassment.

Workplace harassment is pervasive—four in 10 working women report experiencing harassment within any two-year period—and existing law emphasizes preventative measures. But the studies we describe here are basically the sum total of research about whether these trainings are effective. Considerably more legal and psychological studies could help us understand how best to protect employees from sexual harassment. We suggest three areas of improvement:

1. **Institutional culture change is needed.** If workplace environments are influencing employees’ attitudes toward training and/or its actual effectiveness, then employers need to pay more attention to the cultural environment of their organization. The paucity of data on evaluating training effectiveness is a direct result of organizations lacking an incentive to conduct internal studies, or self-studies, of their prevention trainings. Specifically, if data reveal that training was ineffective, employers are concerned that these insights would enhance their liability—and, so, they just don’t gather these data. Such head-in-the-sand thinking needs to change. Self-study, as noted in a 2016 report from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, should be encouraged and lauded as an important part of improving the organizational climate around sexual harassment.
2. **Employers should institute training with clear goals in mind.** Is training expected to change employee attitudes? In some ways, it is not surprising that training does not alter long-held beliefs about and behaviors toward women. But training should not be crafted around a goal that is unattainable—or its content should be changed to increase the likelihood of achieving it. Is training supposed to convey the employer’s commitment to maintaining a non-discriminatory work environment? Or is it merely calculated to minimize the employer’s exposure to liability? There is no reason to expect that all sexual harassment prevention training will produce the same results, nor that those results will necessarily lead to a reduction in discriminatory behavior. As the 2016 EEOC report suggests, perhaps it is time to completely reconsider such training and replace it with respect-based interventions. Such interventions will, naturally, still require validation in research studies. Most importantly, though, training should have clear, decisive goals so that employees do not leave feeling confused and overwhelmed. Not

only can such confusion cause employees to ignore what they've learned, it can also lead to other kinds of discriminatory behavior such as men avoiding work of any kind with women to avoid transgressing some unclear boundary.

3. **Sexual harassment awareness and prevention training must be evaluated.** The legal regime governing employer liability for workplace harassment has placed far too much emphasis on the existence of preventative measures like training and not nearly enough on the effectiveness of these measures. Courts neither review the content of training programs nor ask employers to assess their validity internally (do they achieve what they are supposed to achieve?). They routinely allow employers to dodge liability despite clear evidence that preventative measures that were undertaken failed. Training programs, like anti-harassment policies and procedures, are symbolic evidence of legal compliance, and their potential role in actually reducing harassment is ignored. As a result, training programs are rarely evidence-based and often lack meaningful content. The law should create incentives for employers to conduct such evaluations, such as acknowledging that such evaluations are indicative of a sincere desire to truly change the way women are treated in the workplace.