Making Anti-Harassment Training a **Positive Experience**

Why Traditional Training Fails, and How to Create Programs that Meet Organizational Goals

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Executive Summary:

- **Employees tend to have negative reactions to the topic of harassment and to harassment training.** These negative reactions stem from not knowing what counts as harassment, the awkwardness of the topic, stale training materials, lack of purpose, and the belief — which tends to be well-founded — that anti-harassment programs just aren't effective.

- Still, there is a dire need to build anti-harassment programs in the workplace, **as harassment is both rampant and costly.**

- Creating a better anti-harassment program requires **a more holistic approach that goes beyond mere compliance and aims to change the company culture.** Because there are multiple aspects involved, having a single-solution provider makes it easier for organizations to build, measure, and sustain such a program.

Most states require companies above a certain size to provide anti-harassment training for their workers. But despite widespread adoption of programs over the course of decades, workplace harassment has not gone away. There is even evidence that it is intensifying.

As organizations strive to create environments where every employee feels safe, valued, and free from harassment, anti-harassment training remains a critical tool. However, not all anti-harassment programs are created equal. Simply having anti-harassment training for legal compliance is not enough, and successful programs must have the aim of combating undesirable behavior, rather than simply avoiding legal liability.

What this difference comes down to is the actual employee experience. It's no secret that employees commonly view anti-harassment training in a largely negative light. It's time to understand why that is and how it can change.

Is Anti-Harassment Training Really One of the More Negative Experiences Employees Have?

Most people are uncomfortable discussing topics like sexual harassment to begin with. That doesn't just make training difficult; it makes dealing with the problem itself a huge challenge. **In fact, the percentage of employees who do not even report harassment when it occurs is estimated to be as high as 70%. And when it is reported, the victim often experiences retaliation — one study found this number to be as high as 72% of reporters.**

Emotions tend to run high when harassment is the topic. Organizations see everything from evasiveness and discomfort to defensiveness and frustration when it is discussed. But it doesn't have to be this way: Most of these negative reactions occur because employees' experiences with traditional anti-harassment training have been largely negative.

Here are the 5 main reasons employees have negative experiences with traditional anti-harassment training...

70%
of employees
do not report harassment

72%
of victims
experience retaliation

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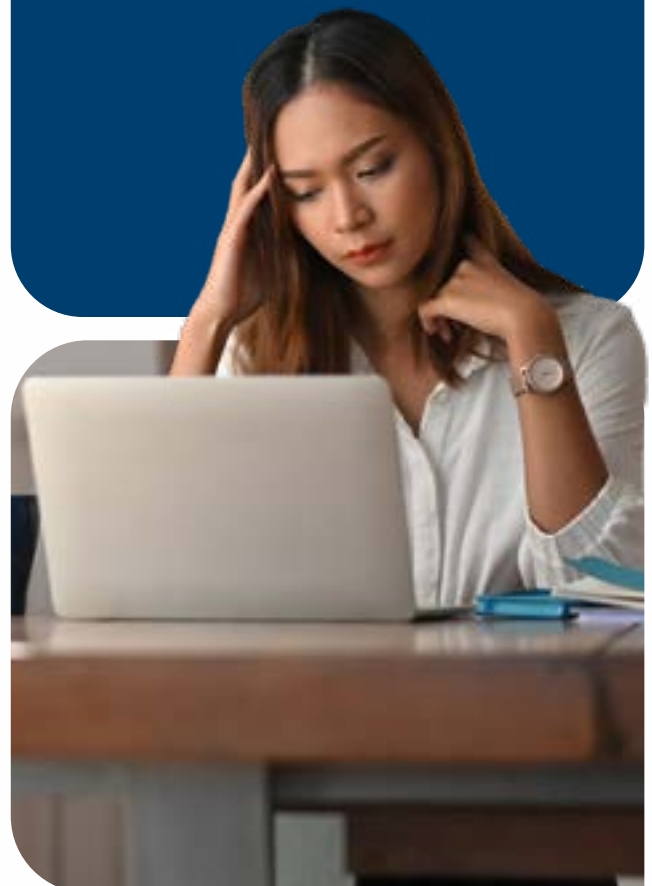
1 Employees Feel Unsure About What Counts as Harassment

Creating a new program or new training around anti-harassment naturally makes people wonder which behaviors are no longer acceptable, and they fear that the line will be drawn arbitrarily. For example, they might start to wonder: "Is the company cracking down hard on this? Will I get in trouble for any little thing I say?" This might lead them to prematurely discount a new program to allay some of that fear.

It's telling that the most searched-for terms when it comes to the topic of harassment involve questions about what counts as harassment and whether common but negative behaviors like yelling at a subordinate or making a joke would count as harassment. Not knowing where the line is puts employees on the defensive.

2 The "Cringe Factor" Causes Employees to Avoid the Topic of Harassment Altogether

Discussing bad behavior is already a delicate topic, and sexual harassment doubly so. It needs to be handled in a very professional, yet empathetic, manner. **Some of that credibility is eroded when training is done using outdated materials or pre-canned scripts.** Watching a video filmed in the 1980s with novice actors sporting outdated hairdos while recreating a harassment scene only makes the topic that much more cringeworthy. Even Starbucks drew criticism not too long ago for providing anti-harassment training that was out of touch.

3 When Training is Repetitive and Stale, Employees Will Not Care About It

If your company that keeps up with anti-harassment training consistently but uses the same materials, your employees may be thinking, "Ugh, this training again?" It is all too easy for material to feel familiar, and once something feels familiar, people tend to pay less attention to it. **Once employees tune out, that training is no longer the refresher that it needs to be.**

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4 If Your Training Lacks Purpose, It Will Lack Effectiveness

When compliance training is stale and treated like a checkbox item, your employees will surely wonder, "Why is this necessary? This seems like an obligation HR has to uphold to meet some kind of standard, and we have to suffer through it."

In fact, a *Harvard Business Review* piece suggests that **compliance training is ineffective precisely because the metrics used to gauge harassment fail:** While compliance training is documented as technically completed, the appropriate actions are not taken when harassment is reported. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) found that "Much of the training done over the last 30 years has not worked as a prevention tool — it's been too focused on simply avoiding legal liability."

In short, employees understand when they are simply being asked to jump through a legal compliance hoop. Without a greater purpose or goal, training is easily dismissed as unnecessary and ultimately forgotten.

5 Research Finds Typical Harassment Training Courses Ineffective

A study published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences confirmed that most employee training for harassment, "which most often uses legalistic forbidden-behavior curriculum, shows null or adverse effects." This was especially the case for training where employees were treated as possible perpetrators, and not as allies working toward a common goal.

Indeed, there have been many other studies showing that **traditional anti-harassment training is problematic for a number of reasons, including a tendency to ignore power dynamics, an emphasis on symbolic acts over substance, a tendency to create backlash, and the perception that what is being regulated is normal sexual behavior, not harassment.**

Traditional Anti-Harassment Training is Problematic

- A tendency to ignore power dynamics
- An emphasis on symbolic acts over substance
- A tendency to create backlash
- The perception that what is being regulated is normal sexual behavior, not harassment

So What Should Organizations Do?

What should organizations do in light of these reasons and the mounting evidence that traditional anti-harassment training does not work as intended?

Keep in mind that harassment of all kinds, including sexual harassment, is still a huge problem in many workplaces. According to the American Psychological Association's 2023 Work in America survey, **more than 1 in 5 (22%) workers said they experienced harassment at work** in the past 12 months. This is up from 14% reporting harassment in 2022. **A similar percentage reported having experienced harm to their mental health at work.**

All of that workplace harassment is costly, too. An organization can expect to pay anywhere **between $750,000 and $150,000,000 in legal fees and payouts** when workplace harassment goes unchecked. Even if a lawsuit is not brought forward, having a culture where harassment runs unchecked can squash productivity. Workplace harassment has been shown to correlate with job dissatisfaction, employee disengagement, tardiness, absenteeism, project neglect, and employee distraction. One study by Deloitte estimated the **productivity loss from sexual harassment at $2.62 billion** in 2018; that number likely is even larger today.

These numbers indicate that there is still a problem to be solved. The answer, then, is not to abandon the idea of anti-harassment training, but to make such training better. Training programs that simply focus on what behaviors are forbidden, that use the same outdated material year after year, and that focus on doing the legal minimum rather than creating a culture that is safe, are bound to fail.

So why not create training programs that are better?

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of workers have been harassed at work in the last 12 months

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$750K - $150M
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$2.62B
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Creating an Anti-Harassment Program that Gives Employees a Positive Experience

HR departments have the potential to create workplaces that are safer with a better culture. To genuinely cultivate a stronger organizational culture, instead of just providing compliance training as a formality, **you will need the right tools to ensure the training remains effective and ingrained over time.**

1 Use Training as an Opportunity to Bring Clarity to the Topic

Use training to define harassment, to explain what does and does not count as harassment, and to be clear on the consequences of this behavior. Explicitly stating what kind of behaviors will and will not be tolerated sets the bar for how you expect your employees to behave. It also helps employees get their questions answered and settle their doubts.

Don't just focus on employee behavior, however. **Effective programs also give managers the tools they need to spot harassment when it happens and to take appropriate action.** When managers and team members feel like allies rather than potential perpetrators in the fight against harassment, it paves the way for positive cultural change.

2 Fight the "Cringe" Factor

You can't control how employees will feel about your training, but you can decrease the odds that it will be off-putting.

Part of this is simply investing in fresh content so that materials do not look dated. Anti-harassment content needs to be current anyway to ensure that it complies with the most recent federal, state, and local laws. Look for content with an updated look and feel, too.

Quality content should also open up the possibility for further group dialogue. In fact, supplementing recent, relevant anti-harassment training with frank conversations in an open, safe, and judgment-free environment will help to lessen any awkwardness and begin to cement important takeaways in the minds of participants.

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3   Fight Repetition by Investing in New Content

Repetition is easy to combat by providing new content and new ways to interact. This means not restricting your program to using only traditional training materials. Also consider using things like:

Gamification: Use a points system or leaderboard that urges employees to discover more about anti-harassment-related topics on their own, at their own pace.

Scenario-Based Learning: Present real-life scenarios and case studies related to compliance issues. Participants can discuss these scenarios, identify problems, and propose solutions.

Collaborative Learning: Use collaborative tools or platforms that allow participants to discuss topics and share what they are learning.

4   Instill Purpose and Make Anti-Harassment Part of the Culture

This will require abandoning the "checkbox mentality" and weaving your anti-harassment program into the very fiber of your company culture. Most companies provide anti-harassment training only during the onboarding process, and then semi-annually after that as a refresher. **A better process is to conduct climate surveys throughout the year and tailor several topics to match current employee concerns.**

Abandon the "checkbox mentality"

Equally as important, every employee needs to understand that they must help maintain a safe and welcoming environment; HR's job is simply to give them the tools that will empower them to do so. Management training, especially for recognizing and addressing harassment, is key here.

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5 Tie Everything Together into a Single, Cohesive Program

Anti-harassment programs are doomed to be ineffective if they are divorced from the reality of the workplace they are meant to change. To put a finer point on it: Why did learning theories ever conclude that having employees watch a single video periodically, or take a day-long course off campus, would find applicability to anyone's day-to-day reality?

This is why we've emphasized the need for an anti-harassment program, and not just anti-harassment training. Calling it a program forces us to take a more holistic approach to the problem and encourages us to use a diverse set of tools, over time, to change things for the better.

That said, the idea of putting together an entire program can be daunting. This is why it pays to bring in a single-solution provider that can oversee the various aspects of the program. Instead of a medley of content from different sources, using different platforms, and handing out different materials, you can benefit from a program that has a cohesive aim and feel.

HSI's Anti-Harassment Training Program

As a first step, consider exploring HSI's anti-harassment training program. We provide an array of up-to-date courses on anti-harassment topics, as well as tools like our best-in-class learning management system, quizzes, social learning, and more.

To get started, visit our Harassment Training page, where you can sample a training video and even request a demo of our complete solution.

Remember: Combating harassment is more than just ensuring compliance or diminishing liability. It's about creating a culture where harassment does not take root in the first place. The companies that realize this will gain an edge in productivity, diversity, and — most important of all — true employee engagement.

About HSI

HSI is your single-source partner for EHS, Compliance, and Professional Development solutions. HSI provides integrated e-learning content, training solutions, and cloud-based software designed to enable your business to improve safety, operations, and employee development. Across all industries, HSI helps safety managers, and technical employees, human resources, first responders, and operational leaders train and develop their workforce, keep workers safe, and meet regulatory and operational compliance requirements. HSI's focus is on training, software, and services for safety and compliance, workforce development, industrial skills, and emergency care. HSI is a unique partner that offers a suite of cloud-based software solutions including learning management, safety management, chemical SDS management, and more, integrated with content and training so businesses can not only monitor and manage multiple workflows in one system, but train employees via one partner.

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