

Sexual Harassment In the Workplace—

A Nagging Problem

Some people have trouble distinguishing between casual office banter and sexual harassment. They may make suggestive “compliments” or tell an off-color joke and think nothing of it. On the other hand, others may get so leery of small talk that they avoid socializing in the office altogether. They may not be sure what their coworkers consider innocent or offensive. Both groups of people could use some guidelines on proper social behavior in the office.

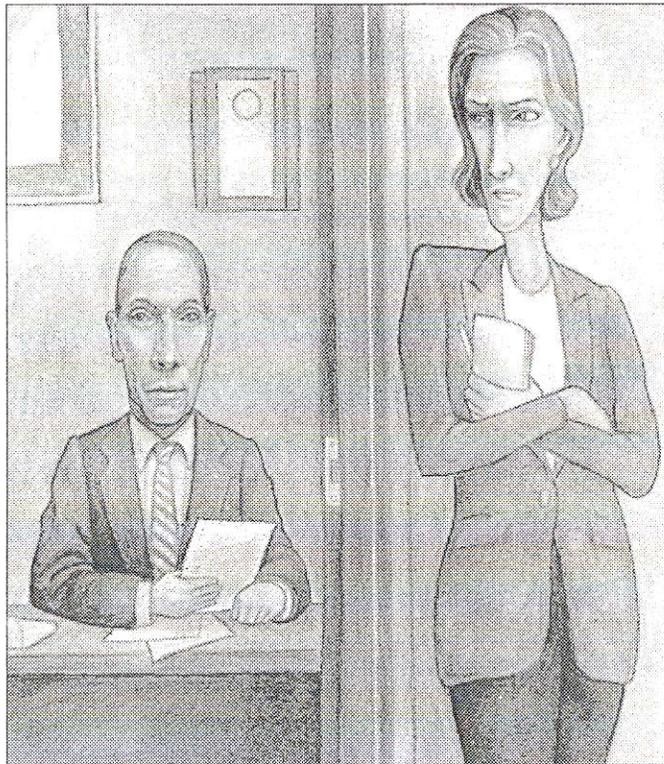
Can Sexual Harassment Be Defined?

Today the definition of sexual harassment has been expanded to include any gender-related behavior that offends, annoys, alarms, humiliates or causes discomfort to others.

Sexual harassment can result from differences in which men and women view each other's behavior. A Kansas State University study showed that men are likely to misinterpret a woman's pleasant manner as a sexual invitation, while women interpret the same behavior merely as friendliness.

One expert says that sexual harassment is “in the eye of the beholder” and that it doesn't matter what the suspected harasser's intent is. The impact of his behavior on the person being harassed is what is important.

What's more, just because someone may not object doesn't mean the harasser's behavior is acceptable. The person harassed may even give in to sexual advances and later state there was no choice.



If You Are Sexually Harassing Someone

Sexual harassment is against the law and can make your company liable for some hefty fines. Your performance evaluation and continued employment could also be in jeopardy. As rules of thumb:

- When in doubt, don't say it or do it.
- When in doubt, ask if it's alright.
- If a behavior is unwanted, stop it.
- Don't confuse friendliness with sexual interest.

If You're on the Receiving End of Sexual Harassment

Let the harasser know that you find his or her actions or comments offensive. If it doesn't stop, notify your superior. If your superior is the harasser, notify *his or her* superior. If the situation still does not improve, try to resolve the issue internally by talking to your Human Resources Department or to a union representative.

In order to prove that sexual harassment has affected your performance, you must show that its frequency created a hostile work environment. You

don't have to be fired, demoted or denied a promotion to file such a charge. Keep notes of each instance of harassment, who else witnessed it, how you responded and what response you got. Date each occurrence and make copies of your notes.

If the harassment problem still does not get resolved to your satisfaction, refer to your company's policy on taking further action. The sooner you do something about sexual harassment, the sooner it will stop.

**Need help? Contact your Employee Assistance Program
Outcomes, Inc. ❖ 243-7145 ❖ 1-800-677-2947**