

safety bulletin

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Preventing Harassment at Your Practice

Harassment in the workplace is defined as any unwelcome conduct from a supervisor, coworker, volunteer, vendor or client whose actions, communication or behavior mocks, demeans, puts down, criticizes or ridicules another individual. By law, all businesses—including veterinary hospitals and clinics—must strive to create a hostility-free workplace. A key component of a practice owner's responsibilities is striving to maintain a safe professional environment for all employees and visitors.

Given the wide nature of personal attributes that can be used as ammunition for harassment, it is safe to say that anyone can be the subject of workplace harassment. Race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, and more can all be exploited as grounds for unprofessional conduct. While the most extreme examples of undesirable conduct are physical assaults, threats and intimidation, harassment can also occur as offensive jokes, name-calling, inappropriate nicknames, and distasteful pictures or objects. Practice owners must stay vigilant and keep an eye out for harassment occurring in any form and must take all reports and allegations seriously.

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What Does Harassment Look Like?

- ✓ Use of abusive, insulting or offensive language
- ✓ Aggressive yelling or shouting
- ✓ Unwarranted physical contact
- ✓ Negative comments about appearance, lifestyle, family or culture
- ✓ Inappropriately teasing
- ✓ Spreading misinformation or malicious rumors
- ✓ Circulating inappropriate or embarrassing photos or videos
- ✓ Discounting a person's input in group settings or unfavorably comparing one person to others
- ✓ Maliciously interfering with personal property or work equipment
- ✓ Blaming a person for problems they did not cause
- ✓ Taking credit for another's contributions
- ✓ Purposefully excluding, isolating or marginalizing a person from normal work

Sexual Harassment

In recent years, national attention on sexual harassment has increased. Defined as any unwanted action or behavior of a sexual nature, sexual harassment occurs as lewd and unwanted touching, gesturing, joking and complimenting, as well as sexual gossip, innuendo and rumor-spreading. By law, there are two definitions of sexual harassment: quid pro quo and hostile work environment.

Quid pro quo sexual harassment involves an individual being coerced into performing a sexual favor to evade negative consequences or gain opportunities.

Hostile work environment is an alternative form of sexual harassment in which behaviors, actions or speech are used to make an individual feel ill at ease.

Similar to other forms of harassment, practice owners must take a strict zero-tolerance stance on sexual harassment in all forms.

Technology and Harassment

While many business owners envision harassment as face-to-face encounters, hostile workplace behavior readily occurs over the internet. Accessing offensive websites, sending inappropriate links, and spreading rumors via text or social media are just a few examples of the digital face of harassment. If an employee is engaging in any of the aforementioned behaviors outside of work and directing the behavior towards a fellow employee, their actions can still constitute workplace harassment. While owners cannot regulate employee behavior outside of the clinic, having easily available harassment reporting metrics and investigation processes can assist in mitigating the damaging effects that such behavior can have. Conversely, digital harassment that occurs within the workplace can be easier to manage. To avoid both deliberate or accidental incidents of harassment that involve the use of employees' personal devices, create policies that define appropriate use of cellphones, tablets and laptops at the clinic.

Get Started with the PLIT Workplace Harassment Module



AVMA PLIT is now offering **anti-harassment training** to all AVMA LIFE and PLIT insured as well as AVMA members. The goal of the module is to teach veterinary employees how to recognize workplace harassment while also providing them with ways to respond in the event that they witness or experience inappropriate behavior from colleagues, vendors or clients.

Ready to Begin?

[Click here](#) to register yourself and your practice staff and [get started today](#).

Employment Practices Liability (EPL)

EPL coverage protects businesses against costly allegations of wrongful employment practices. Secure an EPL policy today to get protected from the following:

- wrongful or compelled termination
- workplace and sexual harassment of employees
- federal law violations (minimum wage, overtime, etc.)
- violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- harassment or discrimination alleged by third parties (clients, vendors)
- discrimination against employees on the basis of race, religion, age, disability or pregnancy

To receive additional information or an Employment Practices Liability coverage quote, [click here](#).

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