

False Assumptions of Sexual Harassment Training Effectiveness: A Closer Look at Recent EEOC Trend Data

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Preventing sexual harassment in the workplace has been a perennial focus of organizational training over the past decade. As such, it seems that these investments have had a positive effect, given the recent EEOC data that reported an overall decrease in the number of charges filed over the past decade. However, within that larger trend are conflicting data that appear to have been overlooked and should be cause for alarm. For example, in the same period of time, the number of claims filed by men has actually increased and now constitutes over 16% of the total claims. In addition, the total number of claims filed that were determined to have “*no reasonable cause*” increased over 11%. What this suggests is that sexual harassment training may have been effective at making employees who receive sexual harassment training more aware of the applicable laws and prohibited behaviors in general, but it may not have enabled them to fully understand at a conceptual level what sexual harassment is, how to recognize it, or how to effectively respond within their organization.

As such we analyzed a random sample ($N = 57$) sexual harassment training PowerPoint presentations obtained through a keyword search of the internet. Effectiveness of training content was then qualitatively assessed to determine whether each presentation a) specifically provided some form of cognitive cue, b) addressed the contextual and cultural framework for sexual harassment, c) included the specific term “*reasonable person standard*”, d) included some knowledge-based assessment, and e) included examples of sexual harassment scenarios. Results showed that the vast majority of training presentations were highly deficient in all of these criteria. These results and their implications will be discussed.