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## IBA Newsletter

February 2018 ISSUE: **The "Great Awakening" Wake-Up Call**

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Ipswich Bay Advisors will be speaking at North Shore Chamber of Commerce on February 16, 2018. For more information or to enroll in this upcoming seminar, read more [here](#).

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## The "Great Awakening" Wake-Up Call

Over the past several months, the subject of sexual harassment has become a leading topic of conversation across America. As a result of continuous high-profile scandals in the worlds of entertainment, business, sports, news media and politics, people have been gathering around dinner tables, water coolers, and social media to discuss what it means to them and to the country as a whole.

This “Great Awakening,” as it is sometimes termed, has been seismic and, along with conversations started by movements like Me Too and Time’s Up, has served as a wake-up call for HR professionals, senior leaders, company shareholders and customers alike.

Because they had well-established policies and practices in place, many employers believed they had adequately addressed sexual harassment in their workplace. However, as we are now witnessing, companies that became complacent or take a “not us” attitude are setting themselves up for potential disaster. In addition, ongoing changes in demographics and the coinciding need for better cultural awareness contribute to many of the issues companies are struggling with today.

How a company addresses a complaint—or even a whisper—of sexual harassment has significant impact. Depending on the facts of a case, including whether it is litigated or settled, out-of-pocket costs for a company can range from \$100,000 to millions of dollars, which does not include reputational costs associated with loss of clients, customers and investors, as well as the opportunity cost associated with attracting and retaining talent.

Still, much of the sexual harassment that employees experience or observe still goes unreported. In fact, a recent study showed that 76% of nonmanager employees who experience sexual harassment did not report it for many reasons, including fear of retaliation or a belief that nothing would change. As great as this current national discussion surrounding sexual harassment is, it will be meaningless if nothing changes.

So, what is a company to do? As mentioned, ignoring claims or those whispers about any form of harassment will—not may—have severe ramifications for any company. Dismissing or discounting employee accounts of harassment sends a message of accepting unacceptable behavior which then permeates the company culture, rewards the wrong individuals and legitimizes the conduct, while also further stigmatizing the victim.

As the EEOC has stated in the past, “Prevention is the best tool to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. Employers are encouraged to take steps necessary to prevent sexual harassment from occurring. They should clearly communicate to employees that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.”

What does prevention look like? These are the best practices to follow:

1. Develop, implement and consistently practice a good anti-harassment policy. If you do not have one, you need to get one. If your policy has not been reviewed in a few years, it is time for a HR professional to revise it, adding examples of unacceptable conduct and consequences of violations.
2. Provide your employees with regular training that not only familiarizes them with appropriate behavior guidelines—and the consequences of violating these rules—but also equips them with the tools to identify and respond to inappropriate conversations, sexual conduct, or harassment when it occurs in the workplace. Executive and leadership participation is also crucial in creating and maintaining a healthy office culture. When the executive board makes it clear that preventing

sexual harassment is a top priority, the rest of the business will follow.

3. Have a multi-option complaint policy. Companies should have two or more ways that employees can complain about harassment, discrimination or retaliation. For instance, if your policy only states to go to your supervisor, and that individual is the harasser, your policy is meaningless to that employee.
4. Even if you do not have an official complaint (those whispers, again), do not hesitate to properly investigate the alleged misconduct. Contact a Human Resources firm or contact an attorney for guidance.
5. It is essential that if the evidence warrants, you take action, even if the person is your top salesperson or a CEO. Sexual harassment is inexcusable regardless of who the harasser is.
6. Do not become complacent (i.e. “not us”), but become proactive. Bring in a third-party expert to conduct a diversity audit or assessment. Educate your workforce. Training on sexual harassment is a start, but it is not enough. Companies also need to educate their employees on issues of communication, team collaboration and implicit bias.
7. Have uncomfortable discussions. Far too often, businesses only mention “harassment” when it is time to review their annual compliance training, but these conversations need to happen much more frequently. Managers should regularly discuss appropriate or inappropriate workplace conduct in team meetings. Also, employee behavior should be factored into performance reviews and hiring discussions.
8. Take the time to carefully examine your organization's culture, policies, practices, and training curriculum as a whole because they are all interconnected.

As a result of the aforementioned scandals spotlighting this issue, 32% of organizations made changes to their sexual harassment prevention training in 2017 and more than 22% have plans for changes in 2018. To join in with companies taking a proactive stance against sexual harassment as well as to learn more about how you can create a safer, more welcoming environment for your workforce, please contact Ipswich Bay Advisors about our harassment and sensitivity trainings and offerings.

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