

Column: Employers must take sex-harassment complaints seriously

By R. Makana Risser Chai • Today • Updated 12:42 am

If you were an employer and sexual harassment was happening in your organization, would you rather know about it — or not?

The advantage of not knowing is that ignorance is bliss. Maybe it will go away on its own.

But if you don't know, there are many more disadvantages. The employees who are harassed — women and men — may just leave the company. The costs of turnover can be enormous, with advertising, interviewing, lost productivity, lost knowledge and retraining. If the harassers harass the new employees — and many are serial harassers — new employees will leave, too, and you'll have a revolving door.

Whether or not employees leave, they may confide in friends and family. Your company will be known on the coconut wireless as a bad place to work. If you're really unlucky, they will post on social media.

The more victims there are, the more liability the company could have. Look at Fox News. The new movie, "Bombshell," is about sexual harassment that occurred there in 2015-16. But according to a lawsuit filed on Dec. 10, nothing has changed. Fox Nation host Britt McHenry alleges that when she reported harassment in 2019, management and the human resources department ignored her.

Hawaii employers that want to avoid being the lead story in the local news can best protect themselves by encouraging employees to make reports of sexual harassment, so that they can address it.

What are the best ways to encourage reports?

A recent survey of Hawaii employees by Safe Spaces & Workplaces found that harassment was less likely to occur when employers demonstrated that they took it very seriously. There are at least three ways that employers can prove to employees that they take the issue seriously.

>> Update and distribute anti-harassment policies and procedures. Most employers have policies prohibiting harassment, but they may be buried in old employee handbooks that haven't been updated in years. Making sure policies reflect current realities, and distributing those policies to every employee annually, show an employer's commitment to listening and responding to reports.

>> Train all employees on creating a respectful workplace. This kind of training can't be done effectively online. Everyone agrees we should treat each other with respect. The trick is giving employees the time and space to reflect on their own behavior. They also need to be able to practice how to intervene if they see it happening to co-workers.

>> Train all managers and human resources staff on how to handle reports. They not only need to know the legal requirements, but also to understand how powerful their initial reactions can be. Fox's McHenry alleged that when she reported harassment, she was told, "That's just how he is." Not only is that not helpful, that's an admission that can be used against the company in court.