



## Human Resources & Health and Safety



Do you employ staff?

### Is Your Workplace Secretly Sexist?

#### What Is Sexism?

It should be easy to define, shouldn't it? We're in an age where we all know what sexism is, don't we? Unfortunately not, for if that was the case it would probably be less prevalent than it is. It's not something many people want to talk about, but sexism is still rife in the workplace, possibly because some people don't recognise it when they see it.

Of course, there are some forms of sexism that all of us will know. Recruiting in a bias way because "this is a man's/woman's role" is obviously sexist, as are employees being overlooked for promotions or training due to their gender. Employee complaints of sexism being brushed under the carpet and or not taken seriously is also sexism. Name calling (examples will not be provided, for obvious reasons) and inappropriate language or jokes between friends are other obvious examples of sexism – just because two friends are talking between themselves does not mean their conversations are not being overheard by others or that the language involved is acceptable. We all know that these behaviours are sexist, but what about the more subtle behaviours that we encounter every day?

We all have perceptions of people, and unfortunately a lot of those perceptions are defined by the gender of a person. These perceptions come from characteristics, e.g. men are assertive, confident, and strong. Women are caring, emotional, and modest. These characteristics are outdated and old fashioned, but they are still regularly seen in the workplace. So what happens when someone starts acting in opposition of these characteristics? This is when subtle sexism happens. How many times has an assertive and powerful woman in the workplace secretly been labelled a "bitch"? Or how many times have you heard a woman who is confident in her abilities be referred to as "arrogant"? Similarly, how many times have you noticed people acting uncomfortably around a man who is seen to be caring and emotional? These subtle forms of sexism can be just as dangerous as the more obvious forms,

because they can have a detrimental effect on how someone is viewed in the workplace, and if someone is viewed negatively, they may not be treated as well as their colleagues.

### **What Are The Dangers of Sexism?**

Sexism in the workplace can be dangerous for many reasons. If an employee experiences sexism in the workplace they are likely to feel unhappy or uncomfortable in their employment. An unhappy/uncomfortable employee is more likely to have low levels of productivity and to leave the company once they are able to find an alternative role, or even take their case to an Employment Tribunal, if they feel strongly enough. If an employee is unable to leave when they are dissatisfied with their work environment, they may instead become unproductive and have a lower level of performance. When an employee is unhappy or searching for a new job they are likely to discuss work place issues with friends and family outside of the workplace, and this can lead to negative reputation for the company as a whole. A company with a negative reputation for sexism or inappropriate behaviour could then be at risk of losing custom due to the community not wanting to support that company, or other companies not wanting to be associated with said company.

The overall effect of not dealing with sexism in the workplace is a negative company culture. A culture where inappropriate behaviour is overlooked, not dealt with in time, or mishandled, is a culture that will foster resentment and disrespect for the leaders and managers, definitely a culture to avoid.

### **What Can We Do To Remove Sexism?**

So now that we understand the dangers of sexism in the workplace, what can be done to remove it? It's simple, the combination of a policy against sexism, policy adherence, a "no tolerance" attitude, and wide spread communication should do the trick. Some companies make the mistake of creating a policy and thinking that is enough, but you need to ensure that you adhere to your policy consistently. Make it known that complaints will be dealt with efficiently and objectively. Investigate every complaint, no matter how "small" it may originally seem or who it is against. If you do have instances of sexism, manage the situation in a way that educates the perpetrator, as previously stated in this newsletter, not everyone knows what behaviour can be considered sexist and education may help to prevent future behaviour. And most importantly, make sure that there is no bias when considering employee wages, promotions, training opportunities, and the communication of family friendly policies. If the company is seen to be operating equally, employees will hopefully follow suit.

### **How Can We Help?**

We regularly design policies and procedures for our clients, if after reading this newsletter you feel you would benefit from an Anti-Sexism/Equal Opportunities Policy, we can create this for you. If you have any queries relating to any of the subjects raised within this newsletter then please do not hesitate to contact us at [hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk](mailto:hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk)