

In era of #MeToo, majority of employees say their employers fail to take new steps addressing sexual harassment

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The spotlight on workplace sexual harassment since fall 2017 has led to high-profile resignations, terminations and lawsuits. And while the revelations and consequences have prompted ongoing, national conversations about appropriate behavior, only 32 percent of working Americans said that their employer has taken new steps to prevent and address sexual harassment in the workplace, according to a survey by the American Psychological Association.

According to employees, the most common action taken was simply reminding employees of existing sexual [harassment](#) training or resources (18 percent).

[Workplace Sexual Harassment: Are Employers Actually Responding?](#) from APA's Center for Organizational Excellence was conducted online by Harris Poll from Feb. 15-March 1, 2018, among 1,512 U.S. adults who are employed full-time, part-time or self-employed. The data were collected as part of APA's 2018 Work and Well-Being Survey.

While the lack of meaningful change is not entirely surprising, it is disappointing, said David W. Ballard, PsyD, MBA, director of APA's Center for Organizational Excellence.

"The #MeToo movement has given business leaders an opportunity to finally take real action addressing a complex problem that has been

pervasive for generations," Ballard said. "Our survey—as well as anecdotal reports—shows that too few employers are making comprehensive efforts that can have significant impact. Avoiding the issue is bad for employee well-being and business, but so, too, is a narrow, compliance-based approach. We know from psychological science that relying solely on mandated training designed primarily to limit the organization's legal liability is unlikely to be effective."

Only 10 percent of U.S. workers said their employer has added more training or resources related to sexual harassment since the recent increased media and public attention on this serious [workplace](#) problem. Just 8 percent said their employer implemented a more stringent policy related to sexual harassment, and only 7 percent reported that their employer hosted an all-staff meeting or town hall to discuss sexual harassment.

Research has shown training to recognize and report sexual harassment isn't enough to change employee behavior or a workplace culture where harassment is more likely to occur. Instead, psychologists recommend a comprehensive approach that incorporates fair policies that are clearly communicated, ongoing training, leadership support of a civil and respectful culture, and the hiring and promotion of women into senior leadership roles.

The survey showed the difference when women have representation in upper management. Employees in organizations that have women in senior leadership roles said they were more likely to report sexual harassment at work if they experienced it (56 percent) or witnessed it (55 percent), and confront a coworker who is engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior at work (53 percent), compared with employees in organizations that don't have women in senior leadership roles (39 percent, 41 percent and 34 percent, respectively).

The survey also found links between increased efforts to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment and better employee and organizational outcomes more broadly. When new steps had been taken, employees were more likely to say they were in good psychological health (90 percent vs. 79 percent) and that their employer provides the necessary resources to help employees meet their mental health needs (76 percent vs. 36 percent) and manage their stress (63 percent vs. 31 percent). They also reported higher job satisfaction (86 percent vs. 60 percent) and motivation to do their best at work (89 percent vs. 64 percent) and were more likely to say they'd recommend their organization as a good place to work (79 percent vs. 51 percent), than those who said their [employer](#) had not taken any new steps.

"Sexual harassment at work occurs within a broader context," Ballard said. "For training to produce long-term changes, the organization's workplace practices need to align with and support the individual attitudes and behaviors it's trying to promote. Leaders in a psychologically healthy workplace model civility, respect, fairness and trust. In an organizational culture where every [employee](#) feels safe, supported and included, people can be their best, and that's good for people and profits."

While most employers have been slow in taking new steps to address harassment, the ongoing headlines and resulting conversations may be encouraging individual employees to take action. About half of U.S. workers say they are now more likely to report workplace [sexual harassment](#) if they experience it (50 percent) or witness it (51 percent), and that they are more likely to confront a coworker who is engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior at work (47 percent).

Provided by American Psychological Association

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