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THE REGISTER CITIZEN

MARKET MATTERS: Bottom line on bullies in the workplace

By Reese Mitchell
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Photo: Contributed Photo; Reese Mitchell

Bullies aren't just a problem in the schoolyard. They can be bothersome and disruptive in the workplace and can impact the bottom line.

The costs attached to workplace bullying are numerous and include possible litigation as well as costs associated with a loss in productivity.

Today, as the world faces a crisis due to the coronavirus, this health threat can be just one issue that can cause or exacerbate bullying in the workplace.

In Connecticut, bullying in the workplace can fall under laws that prohibit discrimination, harassment and retaliation. There is a law in Connecticut that says that employers must maintain a safe work environment for employees. Bullying can create an unsafe workspace.

An employee also can bring claims against an employer for a variety of reasons, including being targeted by a supervisor for demeaning work assignments or demoted based on race or sex. If you're subjected to repeated acts of verbal and/or physical abuse by a coworker or supervisor based on your sexual orientation, religion or country of origin you can bring a claim against an employer.

Other reasons an employee can sue an employer include:

- If you have to endure sexual advances or comments about your appearance.
- Repeated comments about your pregnancy status designed to make you quit or transfer to a different position.
- Not receiving a reasonable accommodation for your disability.

Then, there are types of workplace bullying that are legal.

For example, there isn't a law preventing a co-worker from criticizing your work with excessive profanity unless it is to such an extent it creates a hostile environment. If a co-worker spreads erroneous rumors about you, you can attempt to file a lawsuit against the employee for defamation. An employer could face vicarious liability under respondeat superior (let the boss answer).

Other costs associated with workplace bullying include losing productivity because skilled employees can't take it anymore and quit, or repeatedly call out sick. Bullying also may lead to more workers' compensation claims and a damaged reputation to the company.

Victims of workplace bullying suffer from stress, which leads to many health problems that affect their ability to perform well at work. Those health problems can include depression and anxiety, difficulty sleeping, heart problems and more.

There is evidence that those who witness bullying — regardless of whether they are targeted — also suffer from stress, and people who work in a workplace where bullying occurs have less job satisfaction and decreased morale. They also tend to lack motivation and fear offering suggestions for improvement.

There are times the target of bullying is so fearful of losing their job that they never take time off. But that has negative consequences, too, because the worker is not typically an “engaged” worker, and not as productive as they would be if they were happier.

Bullying also can damage a company’s reputation. People talk. Bullying rarely stays “in house,” which makes it harder to attract quality employees.

The bottom line is that companies need to have policies stating that this type of conduct won’t be tolerated. The workplace policy needs to include information about how to report bullying and needs to make it clear that anyone who reports bullying won’t face retaliation. Employers also should document and investigate every report of workplace bullying that comes across their desk — bullying can easily develop into the kind of harassment that could result in expensive, public legal action.

But that’s not all. Companies need to provide training, education, information and awareness on workplace bullying for all employees.

Like in the schoolyard, where a teacher monitors behavior and issues a “time-out” to a bully, everyone in the workplace should be attuned to this behavior, too.

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