

San Diego Grantmakers - Gender Equity Summit
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Handout

“NOBODY FUNDS RESEARCH”

One of the biggest obstacles to culture change is ignorance — sometimes willful — about what the problems are and what actually helps to solve them. In the past, [Jocelyn Frye, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress] said, “employers historically have been unwilling to do certain types of assessments because they feared it could be used [against them] in litigation.” And few employers’ harassment training providers have had the ability or volition to find out if their methods are working.

That’s why so few businesses have embraced an evidence-based approach to figuring out what actually works.

“The fact that there isn’t info is itself sort of the news,” said U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Commissioner (EEOC) Chai Feldblum, who co-chairs the commission’s Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace. She co-authored a 2016 report for that task force, asking, essentially, why the problem remains so pervasive and what can be done about it.

In a telephone interview, she told ThinkProgress, “The fact that the evidence hasn’t shown that the type of training done for a decade [to be effective] doesn’t say training isn’t important. It just says training — in a vacuum — doesn’t seem to have much of an impact.” What limited research there is suggests that some things do help: leadership can change office culture, management can hold people accountable, the organization can set clear policies that go beyond the legalistic, and workplaces can have meaningful training. “We have a sense of what can work... [But] we don’t yet have solid evaluations of each of these things. Certainly not of them as a total package.”

As with all research, money is a factor. “Nobody funds research,” [Linda Seabrook, general counsel and director of legal programs for the non-profit Futures Without Violence] observed.

Feldblum agreed and noted another challenge: “We’ve always had two issues: one was get the funding, two was get the subject of the research (the employer) to say yes” to research into their workplace. Unless an employer is willing to let researchers examine the climate of a workplace before and after trainings and other interventions, there is no way to really know if they worked.

Vicki Magley, a professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut, is one of the few people who has studied which interventions actually succeed at reducing harassment. She

observed that most of the assessment of training is done by the vendors themselves — and it is less-than-rigorous data. “I’ve talked to many, many training companies over the past few months who want to tell me all the wonderful things they’re doing with their training. They don’t sound terrible...” she said. “But when I ask, ‘how do you evaluate whether this is doing anything?’, they have no answer.”

“You can ask trainees at the end of a training how well they liked the training, with smiley faces. That doesn’t tell you anything about attitude change, culture change, perceived risk [for reporting harassment],” she said. Instead of a rigorous before/after assessment, participants are mostly asked if the experience was helpful and if the free cookies served were fresh. That sends the message to employees that the company doesn’t take such trainings seriously.

Magley also noted that many companies use online trainings which are even less evidence-based and can easily be completed by employees with “half an eye and half a heart.”

“If there’s a dearth [of research] on sexual harassment training, there is almost zilch on online training,” she says. “We really don’t know if it does anything.”

Excerpted from “This Is Why Workplace Harassment Training Is So Ineffective” by Josh Israel, THINKPROGRESS, July 25, 2018.

You can find the full article on the Kim Center Gender Equity Portal at <https://kimcenter.org/resources/this-is-why-workplace-harassment-training-is-so-ineffective/>