

The new remote workday...time to revisit unlawful harassment and anti-bullying policies

By Carlene Brown

This is a challenging and dynamic situation we are involved in with COVID-19. Many of our members' employees find themselves out of their typical work environment and teleworking at home. Some for the first time.

When working remotely, email, phone conferences, along with video and chat services such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Webex, quickly become the communication methods of choice due to their ease-of-use and convenience. In order to keep everyone active and involved, and to ensure that nothing gets lost in translation, frequent emails, phone calls, and video conferences throughout the day may be part of the new routine. While doing so, a professional work culture still needs to be maintained.

Sometimes, communicating from afar can lead to miscommunication amongst co-workers and cause employees to take things the wrong way. In a more casual environment, it may be tempting for employees to share jokes, emojis, photos, and other non-work-related information. Cyber bullying can also be an issue when people are not communicating face to face. And unfortunately, teleworking will not prevent people from harassing others albeit from afar. In fact, it may be easier for employees to be disrespectful to other employees while in the comfort of their own surroundings.

Now is the time to set the expectations for all employees, starting with a reminder that harassment or bullying in any form will not be tolerated. Nor will other unprofessional behavior and improper use of agency equipment. Employees need to be advised and reminded that if they believe that they are or have been harassed, discriminated or retaliated against even while teleworking, they should follow agency protocol in notifying management or human resources of the issue. Managers and supervisors should be reminded that they are obligated to report unlawful discriminatory, harassing or retaliatory behavior even amongst remote workers, and can be disciplined if they fail to do so. In short, the same rules of behavior that apply inside the agency workplace, apply to remote work as well and employees need to be reminded early on into this new world of remote work.

During this time of remote work arrangements, consider requiring all employees to review and acknowledge the member's unlawful-harassment and anti-bullying policies, along with any social media and teleworking policies.

WCIA will be hosting a webinar on this topic in mid-April; watch your email for more information!

Also remember, for newer employees or for those who might need a refresher, WCIA offers an online training titled “Promoting a Workplace Free of Harassment, Discrimination and Retaliation” that is available to members on the WCIA Online Academy website. This training is presented by employment attorney Beth Kennar from Summit Law Group. This training and a list of all online trainings offered through the WCIA Online Academy can be located by going to <http://www.wciapool.org/education-training/virtual-classroom>.