

Workplace violence and harassment

Workplace violence is the exercise of physical force by a person against a worker in a workplace that causes or could cause physical injury. It includes any attempt or threat to exercise physical force. A threat can be a statement or behaviour that a worker reasonably interprets as intimidating.

Workplace harassment is defined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* as “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker, in a workplace, that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.” Vexatious means causing annoyance or worry.

Explain dangers

Workplace violence and harassment can be verbal, physical, visual (e.g., gestures), or environmental (e.g., posting derogatory or sexually oriented posters).

It can include bullying and gossip as well as domestic violence that spills over into the workplace.

Workplace violence or harassment negatively affects workers and the work environment.

- It can damage people’s physical and mental health.
- It can decrease productivity and undermine the company culture.
- It can hurt a business financially because of work disruptions, decreased productivity, and the costs of violence-related injuries, government fines, and potential legal action.
- It can negatively affect the relationship between co-workers and between workers and employers.
- It can ruin the company’s reputation with clients and undermine hiring efforts.

Identify controls

Companies are legally required to have a written workplace violence and harassment policy and a program to support that policy. The policy statement must be posted in a conspicuous location at the workplace.

Companies must also protect workers from workplace violence and harassment. This includes conducting investigations and advising workers if there is a risk of workplace violence from a person with a history of violent behaviour.

You cannot always control the behaviour of others, but you can control your own behaviour.

- Act respectfully toward others while at work and during work-related activities.
- Do not engage in or put up with workplace violence or harassment, intentionally or unintentionally. Remember that harassment is often about perception rather than intention.
- Respect the diversity of the workplace. Learn to appreciate the unique qualities and strengths of a diverse workforce.
- Comply with all company policies and co-operate with any efforts to investigate and resolve matters arising from a report of workplace violence and harassment.
- Actively participate in any workplace violence and harassment training required by the employer and by law.
- In the event of a workplace violence incident, take care of your own immediate physical safety first and then report the incident to HR, to a manager, or to the police, whichever the situation warrants.

Demonstrate

Review your company’s workplace violence and harassment policy with your workers. Show them the location where it is posted. Be clear about who the policy applies to (i.e., subcontractors, temporary workers, etc.) and what the consequences will be if they violate it.

Go over the steps to report an instance of workplace violence and harassment, explain how the investigation will be handled, and point out that workers are protected from any reprisal as a result of a report made in good faith.

NOTE: If your company does not have a workplace violence and harassment policy in place, download a sample from the **Workplace violence and harassment toolkit** at IHSA.ca.