



Resource Type: **Workplace Tools**
Primary Audience: **Employers**

Workplace Environment Survey

Introduction

Each organization has its own culture, with its own attitudes, practices, values, and needs. Employees who experience domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or sexual harassment (DVSASSH) may fail to see their needs reflected in workplace policies or can experience harm and isolation because of how a specific workplace operates.

To ensure all employees have a healthy, respectful, and productive workplace culture that supports the safety of its employees, employers need to address the complex and deep-seated roots of sexual harassment and violence that may impact the workplace.

To solve the root causes of sexual harassment and violence, employers need to know what is or is not working in their workplace. Getting this information can be challenging. Too often, workplace policies can be reactive, created in response to specific incidents. Alternately, these policies can be vague and filled with dense legal language, or do not align with how an organization operates.

These types of policies, particularly when coupled with only sporadic trainings about challenging topics like workplace violence or harassment, fail to adequately address the core issues that cause sexual harassment or workplace violence. A well-executed workplace culture survey can lay the foundation for a tailored workplace violence response and prevention program.

What is a workplace environment survey?

Workplace environment surveys are a tool for gathering information and feedback about an organization's culture or work environment by asking employees a series of questions and collecting their responses.

These surveys can be broad, covering questions about overall satisfaction with a workplace culture, or targeted to gather feedback on a specific policy, or practice.

Why do a workplace environment survey?

Workplace environment surveys enable employers to ground their approach to addressing sexual harassment and workplace violence in relevant data. These surveys also allow employers to better understand the experiences of their employees.

Workplace environment surveys are an important step in the ongoing conversation about workplace expectations and culture. The data these surveys generate can be used to identify gaps in support for employees, address reported system failures, and engage employees in collaborating on how a workplace culture can be improved.

Thorough and holistic workplace environment surveys signal a commitment to improving workplace systems and addressing practices that may unintentionally facilitate harassment, violence, or the misuse of power.

Conducting a well-designed workplace environment survey also signals to your employees a commitment to a healthy workplace culture. It can communicate expectations about what behavior is or is not acceptable, and it can signal to those who cause harm that any behavior negatively impacting the workplace culture will not go unnoticed.

Developing the Survey

1. Establish A Safe Place

Employees must feel safe, supported, and informed to provide the most accurate picture of the workplace environment.

It is important to be trauma-informed in delivering the survey to employees. Remember that victims recognize and contextualize incidents in varying ways, and are often understandably reluctant to disclose intimate, sensitive, or difficult experiences. This reluctance can be addressed by ensuring survey-takers are taking the survey in a psychologically safe environment.

Here are some ways to create psychological safety for survey takers:

- Work with a group of employees that represent a broad and inclusive range of the organization's workforce to develop the survey questions.
- When developing the questions for the survey, consider phrasing the questions so that employees in a variety of organizational roles can respond or see themselves reflected in the question.
 - If a series of questions is directed at employees in a certain role, specifically state the intended audience of the specific question.
- Assure employees that participation is voluntary.
- Offer the survey to all employees.
- Communicate the goals of the survey and how the information will be used.
- Communicate that completing this survey during worktime is appropriate and encouraged.
- Take proactive steps to make sure that responses will be anonymous and confidential.
 - If the survey is collecting feedback about supervisors or people with positional power in the workplace, make sure the way in which the feedback is shared will protect the anonymity of the people taking the survey. If a department is small, anonymity will be particularly challenging.
 - Draft questions focused on generating quantitative data, rather than qualitative.
 - Remove all identifiers in the survey responses ahead of sharing any collected data with supervisors.
 - Assure employees that these surveys will not be cross-referenced to identify participants, and no disciplinary action will be taken because of the information provided in the survey.

- If feasible, consider retaining a neutral third party to receive and compile the surveys.
- Alert employees that the survey will cover difficult topics and encourage them to take breaks or stop the survey as necessary.
 - Consider including [RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline](#) – 800.656.HOPE (4673) – for the benefit of participants who may need assistance and support.
- Provide an overview of your workplace sexual harassment response procedures in case the survey prompts a victim to report.
- If possible, provide a timeline by which employees can expect a discussion about the data that is collected and any anticipated next steps.

2. Frame Broad and Inclusive Questions With Examples

It may seem as if the easiest part of developing a workplace environment survey is ascertaining the frequency and nature of workplace incidents of sexual harassment and violence. But without specific examples of sexually harassing or violent behavior, studies show that sexual harassment goes underreported. In framing questions, provide specific examples of inappropriate workplace behaviors.

Why is it important to use specific examples?

Often, employees do not connect their lived experiences with a vague legal phrase like “sexual harassment.” Examples provide concrete behaviors that the survey takers can respond to or report on.

According to a [Select Task Force of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#), anywhere from 25% to 85% of women report having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. This wide range of responses was due to *how* the questions about sexual harassment were framed for the people taking the survey.

In the case of a random sample survey, 25% of participants reported having experienced “sexual harassment.” This percentage rose to 40% when participants were asked if they had experienced one or more listed

examples of “specific sexually-based behaviors, such as unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion.”

When a survey was offered to a non-random sample, 50% of participants reported having experienced “sexual harassment.” This percentage skyrocketed to 75% when examples were offered.

Using specific examples increases the likelihood that the workplace environment survey will generate accurate information and guide what interventions are needed.

3. Determine Your Assessment Categories & Assess for a Range of Problematic Behaviors

Sexual harassment is a complex concept. Broadly defined, sexual harassment can be conduct of either a sexualized nature, or non-sexual conduct based on an employee’s perceived sex, their mannerisms, or their physical body. It can also be based on an employee’s pregnancy, stereotypes about childbirth, or related medical conditions. Sexual harassment can take the form of sexist comments, demands or pressure for sexual favors, acts of sexual violence, discussing or displaying visual depictions of sex acts or sexual remarks in work settings, and bullying or targeting someone based on sex.¹

To account for these complexities, workplace environment surveys should address the wide range of behaviors that constitute sexual harassment and violence, including behaviors that may be more easily recognized as domestic violence or stalking. Workplace environment surveys should also account for how individuals from different cultural groups or who have a variety of lived experiences may be subjected to sexual harassment and violence at higher rates. These are the same individuals who are more likely to experience barriers to reporting their experience or having their experience taken seriously.

¹ Enforcement Guidance on Harassment in the Workplace,” EEOC-CVG-2024-1, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2024). Retrieved from https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/enforcement-guidance-harassment-workplace#_Toc164807997 (last accessed on April 1, 2025).

Example

In the past 12 months, how often did someone at work:

- Make unwanted attempts to establish a sexual relationship with you, or engage in sexual activities with you, despite your efforts to discourage these attempts or express disinterest?
- State or imply that engaging in sexual behavior would result in better treatment at work or more professional opportunities?
- Make you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative (e.g., by mentioning an upcoming review)?
- Touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable?

Response Options: Never / Once / Once a Month or Less / Two-Three Times a Month / Once a Week or More / One or More Times a Day

Example

In the past 12 months, how often did someone at work:

- Repeatedly tell sexist stories or jokes that were offensive to you?
- Make offensive remarks about your appearance, body, or sexual activities?
- Refer to people of your sex in insulting or offensive terms?
- Put you down or act in a condescending way toward you because of your sex?

Response Options: Never / Once / Once a Month or Less / Two-Three Times a Month / Once a Week or More / One or More Times a Day

Example

In the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following behaviors? If so, please indicate whether you believe the behavior was motivated by your sex, appearance, or mannerisms.

- I was subjected to negative, or offensive, comments or remarks.
- I was subjected to offensive jokes.

- I was touched in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.
- I was physically threatened or assaulted.

Response Options: Never / Once / Once a Month or Less / Two-Three Times a Month / Once a Week or More / One or More Times a Day

Harassment based on other protected characteristics: Sexual harassment is not the only type of harassment that can occur in a workplace. Employees can also experience harassment because of sex, color, national origin, disability, religion, or age or any combination thereof.²

Example

In the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following behaviors? If so, please indicate whether you believe the behavior was based on any of the characteristics listed.

- I was subjected to [negative comments or remarks] [offensive jokes] [touched in a way that made me feel uncomfortable] [physically threatened or assaulted].
 - If Yes, indicate whether you believe the behavior was based on your:
 - Sex
 - Color
 - National Origin
 - Religion
 - Disability
 - Age
 - Other: _____

Discrimination: Discrimination occurs in the workplace when an employee is treated differently because of a legally protected characteristic.

An anonymous and confidential workplace environment survey presents an opportunity to learn more about the health of the organization for all

² Id.

employees. Workplace cultures that routinely sideline, isolate, intimidate, or speak over women, or other groups of people who disproportionately experience discrimination, indicate an organizational culture that does not prioritize the health or safety of its employees.

A workplace environment survey should ask questions about discrimination to ensure that its policies are being applied fairly to all employees. Asking about discrimination ensures that no one is being treated unfairly because of a protected characteristic.

Under Title VII's legal definition, and the case law established by the Supreme Court of the United States, these characteristics are race, color, religion, sex (including gender expression, and sexual orientation³), national origin, disability, age (age 40 or older), or genetic information.⁴

Discrimination can look like being passed over for a promotion, being excluded from certain professional events or opportunities that other employees in the same role can access, being forced to do more menial tasks outside of your written job description or being subjected to harmful or offensive stereotypes.

As a result, discrimination in the workplace creates a conducive ground for sexual harassment and other acts of sexual violence to occur.

Example

In the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following behaviors? If so, please indicate whether you believe the behavior was based on any of the characteristics listed.

- When participating in work meetings, events, or activities, I was talked over by others.
 - If Yes, indicate whether you believe the behavior was based on your:
 - Sex
 - Color

³ *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 590 U.S. 644 (2020).

⁴ "What is Employment Discrimination?" U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved from: <https://www.eeoc.gov/youth/what-employment-discrimination> (last accessed April 1, 2025).

- National Origin
- Religion
- Disability
- Age
- Other: _____

4. Include Questions About Job and Workplace Satisfaction

Measuring employee satisfaction is important in a workplace environment survey because employees who are satisfied with their job and feel supported in the workplace are more likely to report incidents of violence, stand up for their coworkers, and engage in prevention-oriented activities.

Example

How satisfied are you with the following? (Respond to each item.)

- The kind of work I do
- My job security
- The direction/supervision I receive
- My work environment
- My coworkers

Response Options: Very Dissatisfied / Dissatisfied / Neither Dissatisfied nor Satisfied / Satisfied / Very Satisfied

5. Assess How Opportunities for Advancement Are Perceived

Employees are more likely to stay at a workplace and follow workplace policies when they see opportunities for growth. A healthy workplace has pathways for professional growth and advancement based on job performance.

Asking employees how opportunities for advancement operate in a workplace will tell an employer how merit-based their promotional process is perceived to be by their workforce. Asking about advancement opportunities will also help employers identify which supervisors or

managers are not prioritizing ability or talent in their promotional recommendations or mentorship.

Example

In the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following behaviors? If so, please indicate whether you believe the behavior was based on any of the characteristics listed.

- I was passed over for a promotion.
 - If Yes, indicate whether the behavior was based on your:
 - Sex
 - Color
 - National Origin
 - Religion
 - Disability
 - Age
 - Other: _____

6. Include Questions on Psychological Safety

Assessing the level of psychological safety in a workplace is important for a workplace environment survey because employees must feel heard, believed, and safe from retaliation to report inappropriate conduct when it enters the workplace.

Example

How would you describe your perceptions regarding your coworkers and supervisors? (Respond to each item.)

- My coworkers treat each other with dignity and respect.
- My supervisors care about my well-being.

- Employees are encouraged to speak out frankly even when critical of well-established ideas and approaches.
- Agreeing with management is the best approach.

Response Options: Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Agree / Strongly Agree

7. Measure Organizational Accountability

It is important to include questions that ask employees about their experiences with the organization holding perpetrators of sexual harassment and workplace violence accountable.

Those who harass an employee or coworker must know that if they do so, they will be caught, and – when caught – there will be consequences. Employees pay close attention to how their workplace handles allegations of sexual harassment and violence.

Consider the following scenario:

A junior employee has reported a senior manager (and high performer) for sexual harassment. It is the third report made against this senior manager within the last ten years. The two prior instances caused the victims to resign and the senior manager was reprimanded in writing.

After a brief investigation, the senior manager is required to undergo counseling, and the junior employee is transferred to another work site. Once other employees notice that the junior employee has been transferred and the senior manager remains, rumors abound that the senior manager is “protected” because of his high value to the company.

In this example, the workplace has lost the confidence of its employees while emboldening harassers. To avoid this outcome, ascertain employee confidence in how allegations are addressed as a basis to open a dialogue on improving responses.

8. Demonstrate a Commitment to Being Victim-Centered

Victims of sexual harassment and workplace violence should be taken seriously and treated with compassion. By asking questions in the workplace environment survey that measures how an organization responds to disclosures of sexual harassment or violence, the organization can determine if additional training or a policy change is required to increase the effectiveness of their workplace.

When disciplinary actions and investigations are taken on behalf of a victim but without the consultation of that victim, those who experience harm in their workplace do not have an opportunity to express their needs following an experience of harm.

Example

How comfortable are you discussing a behavior or experience that made you feel uncomfortable with any of the following: (Respond to each item)

- The person involved
- A non-supervisory coworker
- A supervisor
- Human Resources
- Management

Response Options: Very Uncomfortable / Uncomfortable / Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable / Comfortable / Very Comfortable

9. Ask Specifically About Perpetrator Accountability

The insight gathering in workplace environment surveys can tell employers if reports of sexual harassment or violence are not being appropriately escalated. These insights help employers identify clear gaps in their reporting or accountability mechanisms.

Perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence constantly test boundaries. The greatest deterrence to repeated or escalating misconduct is early and meaningful accountability.

Example

Did any of the outcomes listed below occur as a result of the making of an oral and/or written complaint? (Respond to each item.)

- No action was taken.
- Someone talked to the harasser to ask them to change their behavior.
- My work station location or duties were changed to avoid the person.
- I was encouraged to “drop” the issue.
- The person stopped the behavior.
- My leadership punished me for bringing it up (e.g., denial of promotion/training, transfer, reassignment to a less favorable work site or duties, scheduling changes).
- There was an adverse action taken against the harasser for their behavior (e.g., demotion, loss of pay, termination).

Response Options: Yes / No / Don't Know

10. Assess Satisfaction with the Complaint Process

It is important to include questions around how employees experience an organization's process for investigating complaints about sexual harassment and workplace violence.

Complaint processes that lack transparency for the impacted employees or complaints that are permitted to languish for months without tangible actions being taken, can signal to employees that filing complaints is not worth their time.

Employees need clear instructions on how to file complaints; regular updates as complaints are processed; and timely conclusions to complaint investigations that prioritize their safety and needs.

When policies and practices fail to hold perpetrators accountable, victims may become increasingly uncomfortable reporting incidents.

Example

How satisfied were you with: (Respond to each item.)

- The availability of information on how to file a complaint?
- Your treatment by the personnel handling the complaint?
- Being informed about the status of the complaint?
- The amount of time it took to address the complaint?
- The outcome of the complaint/investigation?

Response Options: Very Unsatisfied / Unsatisfied / Neither Satisfied nor Unsatisfied / Satisfied / Very Satisfied

Example

Have you opted not to make an oral and/or written complaint about experiencing inappropriate behavior or misconduct?

- If Yes, what were your reasons for not doing so? (Respond to each item.)
 - The behavior or misconduct stopped on its own.
 - I confronted the person myself.
 - I did not know how to file a complaint.
 - I did not want anyone else to know.
 - I was ashamed or embarrassed.
 - I wanted to forget about it and move on.
 - I did not think I would be believed.
 - I did not trust the complaint and resolution process.
 - I did not think anything would be done.
 - I thought that the person who did it would get away with it.
 - I thought it might hurt my career.
 - I was concerned for my physical safety.
 - I feared losing my job.

Conclusion

Workplace environment surveys are a useful tool in determining how effective an employer's current workplace practices and policies are. When done well, these surveys give your employees a safe way of helping their employer improve the workplace culture, identify gaps in a workplace practice or policy, and develop a framework for moving towards a healthier and more productive culture.

If you want support in developing or conducting a workplace environment survey, or with assessing the results of a completed workplace environment survey, Workplaces Responds is ready to collaborate with you in developing a thriving workplace culture that prioritizes safety, accountability, and fairness.

**Example questions were patterned after National Park Service Work Environment Survey featured in Technical Report, National Park Service (NPS) Work Environment Survey, January-March 2017, CFI Group (September 29, 2017), available at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/upload/NPS-WES-Technical-Report-20170929-Accessible.pdf> (last accessed May 30, 2025).*

Workplaces Respond provides technical assistance to workplace stakeholders seeking to better prevent and respond to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and sexual harassment impacting the workplace. Scan this QR code to access the Resource Center.



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