



MK LEVEL PLAYING FIELD INSTITUTE

HOW-FAIR 2003: Executive Summary

In the past, much of the focus on fairness in the work place has been directed at illegal discrimination. The conversation about discrimination—including bias, harassment, and general inappropriate behaviors directed at groups or individuals—has become mired in a legal framework where many employers focus only on liability, rather than fairness. Few would consider this to be a successful approach. Time and experience have shown that the law is a rather blunt instrument to address situations involving subtle behaviors, perception, and nuance. However, the fact that many inappropriate workplace behaviors are subtle does not mitigate the devastating human and financial consequences for individuals, businesses, and the economy as a whole.

Through studies like HOW-FAIR, the Level Playing Field Institute seeks to promote the development of a new framework to address discrimination in the workplace. By extending the conversation beyond today's legalistic model, LPFI hopes to further the dialogue and enhance employees' experiences in the work environment and beyond.

In 2003, Level Playing Field Institute with the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut conducted its first HOW-FAIR (How Opportunities in the Workplace and Fairness Affect Intergroup Relations) Study. This extensive study of U.S. employers and employees is the first major survey to take an in-depth look at the role that inappropriate (or productivity-killing or demoralizing) behavior, such as stereotyping, bullying, and public humiliation play in the workplace. Four hundred employers and 2,435 employees from across the nation participated in the survey. To receive more information about the report, please contact the Level Playing Field Institute at info@lpfi.org.

Here are some of the key findings from the report:

Work Place Values

Everyone cares about having a discrimination-free workplace; however, “discrimination-free” is generally not equated with “diverse.” While avoiding discrimination and harassment is very important to employers, “helping employees balance work and family” and “creating a diverse work environment” were ranked much lower. While employers and employees rank these two values lower than others, employees believe their employers “should” rank them higher. These “softer values” are treated and prioritized differently than the more basic notion of avoiding discrimination.

Employers' and Employees' Attitudes on Advancement

Despite their concerns about lack of fairness in specific areas, most employees believe that they will get ahead in the workplace as far as their skills and talents will take them—77% of employees believe that this is true, and there are not significant racial or gender-based differences.

Being a “team player” is of paramount importance in the workplace, according to both employers and employees. Being perceived as a team player is considered more important than doing a good job, being intelligent, being creative, making money for the organization, and many other “good” qualities in terms of getting ahead in the workplace.

Subtle Discrimination Replaces Overt Discrimination

Stereotyping is the “inappropriate” behavior (unwanted comments, unwanted touching, bullying, etc) that is reported most in the workplace by people from every ethnic and racial group. 53% of employees of color and 42% of white employees report having been stereotyped at work in the past year. While employees of color experienced more stereotyping, unwanted jokes and remarks, social exclusion, yelling, unwanted sexual teasing, pressure for dates, and bullying, all employees surveyed experienced a fairly high rate of these behaviors—74% of all employees experienced some kind of offensive behavior in the past year.

Women and employees of color indicate that the fact that “only certain people are part of the important social groups at work” is a bigger obstacle to fairness in the workplace than overt discrimination—“allowing race and gender to matter when they should not.” 36% of white women, 37% of women of color, and 33% of men of color identified the fact that only certain people are part of important social groups at work as the greatest obstacle to fairness in their workplaces.

Not ‘Fitting In’ Today’s US Corporation

Gay and Muslim employees were rated very low relative to other racial, ethnic, and religious groups in terms of “fitting in” in the workplace, with gay employees ranked lower than Muslims. 10% of respondents gave the lowest possible fit rating to Muslim employees and 13% gave the lowest possible fit rating to homosexual employees.

Other Findings

Employees of women-owned companies seem to be significantly more likely to have positive workplace experiences and to experience less “harmful behavior” in several dimensions. Women employees rate their expectations of company values higher than do their male counterparts.

Young people in the workplace (Gen Y) seem to have more negative workplace experiences and negative perceptions of their employers than do older workers.

Conversely, “mature” workers seem to perceive very little offensive behavior in the workplace.

Employees who experience inappropriate behavior at work and employees who believe that they are treated unfairly are less likely to have positive perceptions of their employer, including willingness to recommend their employer as a good place to work to others, or to recommend their employer to clients and customers.