

Calling it Quits

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Inappropriate -- but not illegal -- behaviors too often prompt employees to find other jobs. The offensive behavior is sometimes so subtle that managers fail to realize the problem, and sometimes includes diversity-promoting efforts that prompt unintended results.

By Scott Flander

Unfairness in the workplace is not just about lawsuits anymore.

It's also about people walking out the door.

A new study has found that employee turnover due to unfairness -- real or perceived -- costs American employers \$64 billion a year.

The study by the Level Playing Field Institute in San Francisco estimates that more than two million professionals and managers quit their jobs each year solely because of slights, both large and small.

"Overt and illegal discrimination is no longer the largest threat to recruiting and retaining 'the best and the brightest,'" the study reports. "Unfairness, in the form of everyday inappropriate behaviors, such as stereotyping, public humiliation and promoting based on personal characteristics, is a very real, prevalent and damaging part of the work environment."

The study found that people of color are three times more likely to quit solely because of workplace unfairness than heterosexual Caucasian men are, while gay and lesbians are twice as likely to leave.

"What drives people out is the cumulative effect" of the unfairness, says Freada Kapor Klein, founder of the institute and lead author of *Giving Notice: Why the Best and the Brightest Leave the Workplace and How You Can Help Them Stay*.

For example, she says, certain blacks, Latinos, gays and others at some organizations always seem to be the ones sent to diversity job fairs and community-relations events.

"They're always asked to be the face of diversity," says Klein. But that often takes a great deal of time and effort, and those people can find themselves falling behind in their careers.

"They say, 'Guess what? I'm not getting the best assignments, I'm not getting the experience I need, and when it comes time for promotions, I don't have the experience,'" says Klein.

At one "prominent" business school, she says, three people -- an openly gay professor, the only white woman full professor and the only tenured black professor -- continually find themselves at the same table at recruiting events.

They've told Klein, "We're tired of being the diversity trio."

While women, minorities and gays appreciate that they're helping an organization become more diverse, says Klein, their attitude is, "If you want me to do a good deed -- if you're asking me to help your bottom line -- you

should put that in my paycheck. I shouldn't have to choose between helping you get customers and my own career."

Klein cited two other examples of the kind of unfairness that drives people from their jobs:

* At a law firm, a supervisor called a black female attorney by the name of the only other black female attorney in the firm, though they don't look at all alike.

* Every time a Chinese-American woman, born in the United States, had a typo in her writing, her supervisor pointed it out by saying, "I think we have an English problem."

Klein says she believes workplace unfairness is getting worse.

"Businesses are focusing on the wrong things," she says. "They're focused on protecting themselves against discrimination lawsuits." Companies need to do more to identify and root out the kinds of "hidden bias" that can lead to workplace unfairness, she says.

Janet Crenshaw Smith, the author of *58 Little Things That Have a BIG Impact: What's Your MicroTrigger?*, says employees who have been treated unfairly don't always leave – they may simply become less productive.

Often though, managers may not even realize they're offending an employee.

"It's the subtle things that are not pure discrimination, but are incredibly harmful," says Smith, president of the Ivy Planning Group in Rockville, Md., a management consulting and training firm that focuses on diversity, strategy and change management.

Many companies don't take these kinds of slights seriously, she says.

"They think it's petty, it's small. They think that if you can't clearly define it, then it's not harmful. They're wrong."

When employees leave or become disengaged because of unfairness, companies get hurt, she says. "This is not only a business case based on avoiding lawsuits, it's a business case based around building the best talent."

Tammy Seals, the vice president for diversity at Kelly Services Inc., the Troy, Mich.-based staffing, recruiting and outsourcing firm, says the problem of unfairness can affect all employees, including those who are not minorities.

The larger issue, she says, is "whether employees feel valued."

Workers who don't feel valued will become disengaged. It's essential, she says, that companies have training that's tied to their values, so that supervisors "are aware of the unconscious behaviors they're displaying, and the impact of the behavior."