Sexual Harassment Issues in the Hospitality Industry.

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Sexual harassment issues in the hospitality industry

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Sexual, racial and other forms of harassment may create a devastating impact on individuals affected and can lead to a severe loss of morale and efficiency. Examines issues surrounding this sensitive area which relate to legal definition, organisational policies in general and the hospitality industry specifically. Provides evidence of the current views on sexual harassment of hospitality industry personnel directors. Examines the problematic issues of hospitality service staff encouraged to sell "sexuality" or "flirt" as a job requirement.

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Definitions of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is not easy to define. Individuals have different perceptions as to what constitutes sexual harassment and a definition is almost impossible to construct. (*Federal Register*, 1980). The following provides some insight into what constitutes sexual harassment.

The European Commission Code of Practice defines sexual harassment as:

> Unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men at work. This can include unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) – a federal agency in charge of enforcing sexual harassment guidelines in the USA – provides a threefold guideline of sexual harassment, interpreted from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

1 unwelcome sexual advances;
2 requests for sexual favours;
3 other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature where:
   - submission to it is explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment;
   - submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or
   - such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

In the UK, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 renders racial, sexual and other forms of harassment in the street, at home, and at work, a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment – up to six months – and/or a fine not exceeding £5,000. The Act creates a new offence of intentional harassment, and covers other forms of harassment on grounds such as sex, disability, age and sexual orientation.

> A person is guilty of an offence if he or she, with intent, causes another person harassment, alarm or distress by: using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or disorderly behaviour; or displaying any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting.

In addition to prosecuting the harasser under criminal law, a UK employee can also seek redress from an Industrial Tribunal, as sexual harassment can amount to unlawful sex discrimination against males or females under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

An understanding of harassment

Recent research by Head *et al.* (1995) examines the variable factors that may have a determining impact on the perception of sexual harassment – specifically, gender and management status of the perpetrator, and the education level of the evaluator. The research suggests that education level does have an impact on perception of harassment whereby the more educated the employees are, the less tolerant they become. The lower tolerance of educated women is also identified by Gutek (1993). Folgero and Fjeldstad (1995) discuss the concept of traditional work capacities of reproduction and production roles of women and men, and apply this as a partially causal effect of sexual harassment. The feminisation of particular jobs may lead to attitudes toward what is expected of service employees in terms of remarks that can be made or level of personal contact which is acceptable. Another cause of differing perceptions is the hierarchical status of the perpetrator in relation to the victim. It has been suggested that the perceived seriousness of the behaviour increases with the power of the person making the advances. The Head *et al.* (1995) research purports that whether a behaviour is perceived to be sexually harassing or not, will be a function of both the organisational hierarchical position of the perpetrator, and the gender of both parties. Their results indicate that when comparing identical behaviours, the actions of male superiors are most construed to be sexually harassing, while female peers' actions are least construed to be sexually harassing.

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Measuring the problem of sexual harassment

The true extent of sexual harassment is often disguised by the conspiracy of silence which shrouds the issue, with the victim often leaving the company to escape the harassment without providing the organisation with the true reason for leaving.

To provide a contemporary overview of sexual harassment in the Hospitality Industry the authors contacted 220 personnel directors. A list was compiled utilising the *Hospitality Yearbook 1997* directory of companies. A self-completion questionnaire and letter explaining the research was mailed to personnel directors. The response rate was 32 companies (14.5 per cent) with almost one third having less than 100 employees, one third 100-500 employees and one third over 500 employees.

Determining which behaviours actually constitute sexual harassment is perhaps the most complex and controversial aspect of the issue. Within groups, even for women, there does not appear to be agreement as to what constitutes sexual harassment. According to a survey in 1990 (Davidson and Earnshaw, 1990) of British management's attitudes to sexual harassment in the workplace, only 64.8 percent of respondents regarded sexual harassment as a serious management issue.

The findings from our survey are slightly different as they show that while almost 1 in 5 treat sexual harassment as a minor issue the majority (75 per cent) of the hospitality industry respondents treat such a situation as of critical importance.

It was reported that 90 per cent of the companies which responded provide staff training/induction courses relating to appropriate and inappropriate conduct in the workplace when dealing with customers. This training consists of written information (87 per cent), seminars (36 per cent), meetings (65 per cent), notice boards (45 per cent) and videotapes (23 per cent). Respondents were also asked their views as to the way in which their Company views sexual harassment of service staff by customers. Given the earlier importance reported for the seriousness of sexual harassment in the workplace it would not seem that companies are as positive about policies or the need to provide help for staff in dealing with problems.

There is some ambiguity as to what constitutes sexual harassment issues. The following provides evidence of what is considered serious. The seeming acceptability by a high number of companies of sexual teasing, jokes and remarks; or sexually suggestive looks and gestures, may mask a hostile work environment where perpetrators are seen as Don Juans rather than wrongdoers.

The interpretational element of sexual harassment means that actions that seem harmless or amusing to managers may be viewed as offensive and harassing to hospitality service staff.

Table I
Responses to the question: "To what extent is sexual harassment regarded as a serious management issue in your company?"

To what extent is sexual harassment a serious issue	Seriousness of harassment by customers of service staff (%)	Seriousness of harassment, as a management issue, within your company (%)
Very serious	46.9	50.0
Serious	28.1	25.0
Fairly serious	6.3	6.3
Minor	18.8	18.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: base 32 companies

Sexual harassment in hospitality and service organisations

The inherent characteristics of service organisations create a prime breeding ground for sexual harassment. By its nature, the service production process is inextricably linked to the close involvement of the customer, and behavioural norms are often set around satisfying a customer's expectations; preferably exceeding those expectations.

In addition to the intra-organisational strains resulting from the "normal" conflicts between different hierarchical levels and departments, the service organisation has to deal with three categories of workers: back-stage staff, front-line personnel, and participating customers. The constant interaction between these groups is therefore a constant source of stress and conflict.

The service workplace is largely populated by women, especially at the lower levels. Service employees tend to be young and have little formal education. Their position in the workplace is often weak: young women are less confident when dealing with people in authority, and feel less important than any other group of employees in the work place (Aaron and Dry, 1992; Hamilton and Veglahn, 1992; Laudadio, 1988). Due to the lack of legitimate, coercive, reward, or expert power, the service worker may have to rely on referent power; that is, to be socially attractive and friendly with the customer. One author knows of a young girl who was told on

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Table II
The management's views on harassment issues

Sexual harassment issues related to staff	Staff are capable of managing most incidents themselves with support from supervisors and line managers (%)	A formal anti-sexual harassment policy is essential for the well-being of staff and to ensure incidents are taken seriously (%)	The nature of the company's service style and customer profile means that it is rarely an issue (%)
Very accurate	36.7	36.7	46.9
Fairly accurate	63.3	50.0	40.6
Inaccurate	–	13.3	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: base 32 companies

Table III
Does your company operate specific policies?

Policy issues	Is an anti-sexual harassment policy in force? (%)	Is a copy of your policy given to all employees? (%)	Is a copy of your policy displayed at each of your premises? (%)	Does this policy sexual harassment by customers? (%)
Yes	71.9	42.9	50.0	57.1
No	28.1	57.1	50.0	42.9
Total	100.0	100.0[a]	100.0[a]	100.0[a]

Note: base 32 companies; [a] 28 companies

Table IV
What degree of sexual harassment would you consider the following?

Attitude to SH	Letters, telephone calls or materials of a sexual nature (%)	Sexually suggestive looks or gestures (%)	Deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering or pinching (%)	Pressure for dates (%)	Sexual teasing including jokes or remarks (%)
Very serious	75.0	18.8	71.9	15.6	9.7
Serious	18.8	46.9	28.1	31.3	38.7
Fairly serious	6.3	18.8	–	31.3	22.6
Minor	–	15.6	–	21.9	29.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: base 32 companies;

starting as a waitress to "wear her skirt as short as she would feel it comfortable".

Research by Eller (1990) clearly indicates that more men and women experience sexual harassment in the hotel industry than do individuals in society-at-large. Woods and Kavanagh (1994) also found that hospitality managers perceive sexual harassment to be pervasive within the industry. The hospitality industry may be particularly susceptible to incidents of sexual harassment due to the ambiguity of "hospitality service" , the unusual hours and conditions of work, the interaction of persons in the delivery of service, and the importance placed on appearance – which focuses attention on people as sexual beings. In many customer contact roles in the service sector, "sexiness" is a part of the role itself, the "job flirt" is encouraged as a part of the service style (Hall, 1993) and there may be a thin line between "selling the service" and "selling sexuality". We found from our hospitality survey of personnel directors that 80 per cent responded that the dress code was important with 39 per cent allowing very short skirts and 38 per cent not allowing trousers. Interestingly on being asked if safe "flirting" with customers was part of the job for your service staff 7 per cent agreed it was and 39 per cent

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were neutral. Outlets such as TGI Fridays utilise training schemes which encourage flirtation as a means of increasing the amount spent and repeat business. This is not an easy situation to manage. MacKinnon (1979), for example, defines the role of the waitress as requiring "constant vigilance, skillful obsequiousness, and an ability to project the implication that there (are) … sexual possibilities for the relationship while avoiding the explicit 'how about it' that would force a refusal into the open". While management may implicitly or explicitly encourage customer contact staff to use their personality (sexuality) to please the customer, the staff themselves may also actively exploit their assets for their own interests. The following quotation (Cook, 1996) from a London waitress demonstrates some of the contradictions of the role:

> Everyone I know wears shorter skirts … especially on Saturday nights – because you can guarantee better tips … I suppose you are slightly willing to compromise and I'm not as feminist about it as I know I should be. But unfortunately men tip and women don't.

An emphasis on the quality of customer service, which is normally regarded as a positive feature of an organisation, may leave staff feeling unsupported and vulnerable if they are expected to respond in a reasonable and friendly manner to customers who overstep the mark. Hochschild's (1983) classic study of cabin attendants showed the stress associated with having to keep smiling regardless of the way one is treated by customers. Sosteric (1996) reports a case study of staff in a nightclub whose morale and quality of service went down when they were no longer allowed, in the name of improving customer service, to support each other and use aggression and rudeness to deal with obnoxious behaviour or sexual harassment from customers.

Unlike office and manufacturing work places where an employee works virtually without interruption from outsiders, hotel employees usually have close social contact with co-workers, supervisors, customers and suppliers. Moreover, hotel employees work long, irregular hours and experience periods of intense activity balanced with slack periods. These long hours often involve night, evening and even holiday shifts. In an environment of heightened – almost forced – social interaction (particularly in smaller hotels with shared employee accommodation), a prime breeding ground exists for the existence of sexual harassment.

The full impact of sexual harassment

High turnover

Maintaining a stable workforce has become a critical success factor in sustaining a competitive advantage. Service organisations – particularly the hotel industry – presently face intense staff turnover, high labour costs, and a diminishing supply of workers. Of our sample, 58 per cent reported fairly high turnover rates and 23 per cent high rates. 19 per cent of companies reported staff had resigned due to harassment by customers and 23 per cent could not say one way or another if this was a reason. Continually having to be polite and friendly towards offensive customers, and lack of power to control one's own working environment, can lead to a feeling of "burnoutness" and alienation. The ultimate result of such feelings may be that the employee leaves the organisation. Alternatively, and as damaging to the organisation, the employee may withdraw psychologically and go through the motions of "being nice to the customers" with smiles eliding into sneers (Filby, 1992) .

Poor working relationships

Sexual harassment also presents economic, social and competitive issues for a company. A successful company requires the existence of good relations among its employees and the people with whom the company does business. Sexual harassment creates poor working relationships which can harm the company, the individuals directly involved, and indirectly, other employees within the company. Additional problems will exist within organisational relationships: companies which have "high rates of sexual harassment also have high rates of racial harassment, discrimination, and other forms of unfair treatment" (Sandroff, 1992). This finding indicates that companies which tolerate sexual harassment tend to have personnel problems in general.

The economic costs

The cost of sexual harassment to businesses is one that should not be overlooked. In 1988, *Working Women* magazine surveyed 160 of the "Fortune 500" manufacturing and service companies in the US, representing 3.3 million employees (Sandroff, 1992) and found an average company loss of $6.7 million a year in decreased productivity, increased absenteeism and higher employee turnover caused by sexual harassment. Despite these tangible financial or economic costs, the "real" or underlying costs to businesses and human suffering may be immeasurable.

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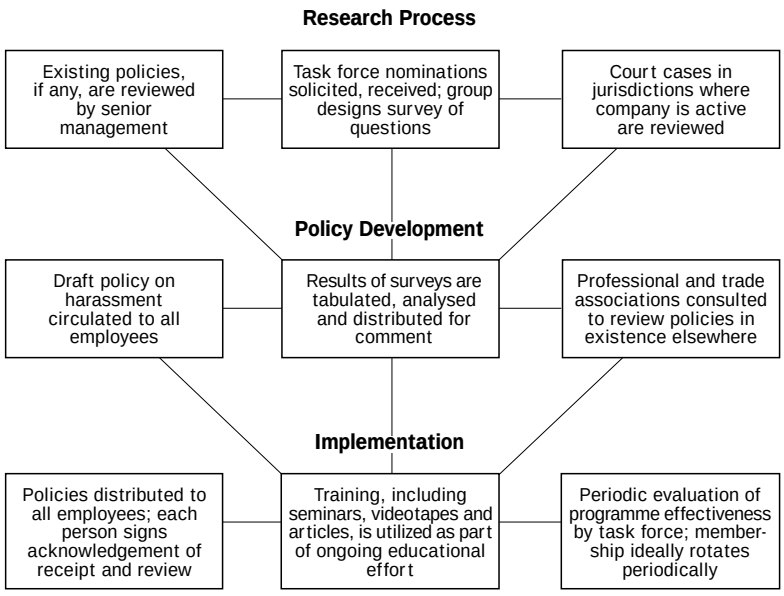
The psychosocial impacts on the victim

One of the most disturbing consequences of sexual harassment is the human impact, with devastating short- and long-term physical and psychological consequences. We found that 10 per cent of our hospitality industry sample had been involved in legal proceedings following an incidence of sexual harassment by a customer or member of staff. Many victims suffer "...detrimental physical and psychosocial effects ranging from sickness, anger, anxiety, tiredness, fear, sleep problems, weight loss, relationship problems, depression and loss of confidence, to nervous breakdown" (Earnshaw and Davidson, 1994). Not surprisingly, the victim's relationship with others (particularly other men – if the harasser was a man) can also be adversely affected (Gutek, 1985) as can a victims' general attitude towards work in terms of lowered motivation, decreased job satisfaction, lowered confidence to do the job and lowered organisational commitment.

A sexual harassment policy

Two-thirds of sexual harassment complaints in America's largest corporations were made against immediate supervisors and upper management. This finding raises a very serious concern, because it is the responsibility of management to implement programmes designed to reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment. This point stresses the need for a company policy that allows a variety of channels through which harassment claims can be filed, allowing one's immediate supervisor or manager to be by-passed (Barton and Eichelberger, 1994). A formalised procedure for creating a policy, that will assist hospitality managers in preparing a response to the problem of sexual harassment is shown Figure 1.

Figure 1
The creation of corporate policies on sexual harassment



Victims are unlikely to report incidents unless they are sure that their complaints will be dealt with seriously and sympathetically. Therefore, the most important aspect of a sexual harassment policy is the firm and continued commitment from senior management to encourage the creation of an open culture which has preventive measures. This requires clearly defined anti-sexual policies with well displayed information on ways of confidential reporting; to take all reports seriously and ensuring that immediate corrective action is taken against the perpetrator(s) of sexual harassment. Such an approach opens up the organisation to a monitoring of the extent of any problems related to sexual harassment. In addition this will enhance equal opportunities and guard against future legal claims. It will also provide a clear message to all hospitality employees about the company's ethical position with regard to staff, management and its customers.

While the type of formal policy described above is undoubtedly beneficial, it should be recognised that a formal policy alone may not solve all problems. Sexuality is an inevitable part of organisational life and in many service roles staff are encouraged to use their sexuality to please customers and sell the product although most employers would not openly admit this. Of course staff are often encouraged to "flirt" and not to genuinely "come on" but it is hardly surprising if the distinction between the role and the reality can become blurred and staff can often be left to feel that it is their responsibility alone to keep control of the situation as the following quote from a waitress working at a novelty restaurant in London which attracts groups of drunken "City boys" illustrates:

> All the girls here are very broadminded. It goes with the turf. Inevitably you are going to be groped at some stage but it is up to you to control the situation. One comment is usually enough to stop them doing it (Cook, 1996).

Rather than focusing merely on mechanisms for reporting and dealing with sexual harassment when it has happened, managers need to be aware of the way their strategies (the service styles they define, the type of clientele they attract) impact on their staff. It is unrealistic and repressive to suggest that one should never use sex to sell, but, if one does, the organisation has a responsibility to ensure that staff are supported and protected against unacceptable behaviour from customers.

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Conclusion

The maximisation of profit remains a pivotal objective for service business activity and as such organisations need to deal proactively with the issue of sexual harassment. This organisational view of treating sexual harassment as a matter of employee effectiveness places the locus on preventative management and protection of the most fundamental resource of the company – the personal resource. A service company requires a happy and well motivated workforce in order to be successful. By systematically removing the occurrence of sexual harassment, organisations can meet both the employee's need for protection, and the organisational need for productivity and effectiveness.

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