Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2019), **12**, 20–24
doi:10.1017/iop.2019.1

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

If we build it, will they come? Lack of incentives as barriers to implementing effective sexual harassment training

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Medeiros and Griffith (2019) correctly assert, "… sexual harassment *and* sexual assault are issues in organizations of all kinds and need to be addressed" (p. 3). Organizations should strive to create a welcoming and safe environment for all employees, and designing trainings that promote effective transfer is part of that effort. Yet, only 10% of adults polled in February and March of 2018 reported any increase in sexual harassment training or resources since the #MeToo movement began (Gurcheik, 2018). This demonstrates that the visible social movement has not necessarily translated into increased effort by organizations to address the problem—but why not?

In this commentary, we argue that organizations may not be motivated to increase the effectiveness of their sexual assault and sexual harassment interventions. Medeiros and Griffith (2019) articulate a comprehensive framework detailing what is known about effective training design, evaluation, and post-training environmental factors. However, the effectiveness of any training is fundamentally based on the premise that organizations are inclined to implement these best practices and improve their trainings. We are not sure that this is the case.

Lack of incentives at the organizational level

Organizations are not sufficiently motivated to implement effective sexual harassment training programs. The paramount reason organizations implement these trainings is to "check a legal box," which creates cynicism among trainees (Kath & Magley, 2014). "Check the box" trainings, those typically conducted by organizations, signal that the organization is not fully committed to changing its climate. Rather, the organization's goal is to protect itself. Medeiros and Griffith (2019) mention the term *climate* multiple times in this focal article; however, they fail to explain how their framework will change organizational culture and why organizations would choose to implement it in the first place.

According to Marcia McCormick, a law professor at St. Louis University, "The biggest reason that companies do workplace harassment training is because it gives them a special legal defense when it comes to being sued" (Adams, 2017). Laws prohibiting sexual harassment have been in place for years, yet instances of sexual harassment are still widespread, and the majority of instances are unreported (Hersch, 2018; Reger & Pollack, 2017). Reports to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) are even more rare than reports to organizations—only

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around 18% of overall harassment incidents make their way to the EEOC (Hersch, 2018). At first glance, one might interpret lower reporting rates as indicating that there are simply fewer cases in general. However, low reporting rates may reflect institutional barriers and attitudes, and the conflation of reporting rates with true incidence rates can lead to ignorance on the part of companies when it comes to these issues.

It seems that many companies evoke a "not us" rather than "us too" mentality; they may turn a blind eye to harassing behaviors and fail to take steps to address them, thus failing to effectively encourage reporting among victims. This is exemplified in recent high-profile cases, such as the widespread issues at the former Weinstein Company (Reger & Pollack, 2017), which were ignored or minimized for decades. This "not us" mentality allows perpetrators to continue their harassment unchecked. It also signals to victims that their organization will not act to prevent future instances of harassment, nor adequately punish people who engage in these behaviors (Reger & Pollack, 2017). Furthermore, victims may fear retaliation if the organization does not have sufficient policies in place to protect them (Johnson, Kirk, & Keplinger, 2016). Without these protective measures, victims of harassment are less likely to speak up, and as a result, organizations feel safe from accusations. If organizations believe that increased reporting will negatively affect their bottom line, they will not be motivated to shift from "check the box" trainings and implement the best practices put forth by Medeiros and Griffith (2019). Thus, although Medeiros and Griffith provide a comprehensible and empirically sound framework for more effective training, they do not address why companies would or should change their existing interventions. If companies are not incentivized to change the *systems* that allow sexual harassment to persist, they will not administer more effective trainings until they are convinced that it is in their best interest.

Lack of incentives at the individual level

Even if there is organizational support for sexual harassment training initiatives, there might not be adequate incentives in place for the individual workers responsible for the implementation of the policies and training.

Employees in leadership positions

Research on diversity training effectiveness has demonstrated that leader support matters for promoting transfer of training (Kalinoski et al., 2013; Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Leaders occupy positions of power and influence within their organizations; therefore, if leaders do not communicate support for antiharassment policies, they have disproportionate influence in undermining the messages put forth by the training (Craig, 2018).

Leaders may not have an accurate sense of the prevalence of sexual harassment within their organizations, particularly in larger organizations where most complaints are handled by the HR department. Male leaders in particular may struggle to understand the importance and prevalence of sexual harassment and may not believe that addressing it should be a priority, because sexual harassment is predominately perpetrated by men, with women as the most common victims (Wan, 2017). The dominance of men in leadership positions and overall masculine culture can create an atmosphere where women feel that reporting sexual harassment will cause them to be excluded (Johnson et al., 2016).

Leaders need to acknowledge that an issue exists in order to address it, and admitting that harassment occurs within their organizations may be in direct conflict with their self-interests. Executive leaders are often held accountable by their boards, and in the case of public companies, they are also accountable to shareholders (Heskett, 2017). Leaders are not concerned solely with managing the reputation of the company; they are also constantly managing their own reputation and image as leaders. Admitting to any shortcomings in organizational efforts to combat harassment, or admitting to a company culture that allows harassment to persist, could be construed as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

personal shortcoming of the leader. Leaders may not be aware of the prevalence of harassment—and, even if they are, they may lack incentives to address it publicly.

Employees in the HR department

Organization-level factors impact the likelihood that training best practices will be implemented, but the specific department left to execute the organization's decisions is, in most cases, the human resources (HR) department (Koenig, 2018). Employees in HR roles are just that—employees, and they can be expected to behave in ways that take into account their own job security and incentives, such as compensation, strategically allocating their resources accordingly. Even if a given HR professional is intrinsically motivated to improve the sexual harassment climate in the organization, he/she is juggling multiple goals and will use a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors to guide decisions about the allocation of time and energy (Carver & Scheier, 2002).

The ways that organizations incentivize their HR professionals could impact their motivation to protect the harassed within organizations. If performance assessments focus on the ways in which HR initiatives have led to cost savings for the organization, it could have unintended effects. For example, a valuable employee who brings in revenue for the company might be less likely to be terminated if he is found to be a perpetrator of harassment (Peirce, Smolinski, & Rosen, 1998). If the HR department terminates the harasser, it may fear taking the blame for expensive wrongful termination lawsuits (Gerdeman, 2018). Better sexual harassment trainings would lead to a higher percentage of employees who are the victims of harassment feeling comfortable coming forward, which would lead to an increase in claims that are required by law to be investigated. Time spent on these claims may cut into time that HR professionals are able to spend on other tasks, which may lead them be incentivized to keep the rate of reports down.

Medeiros and Griffith (2019) discuss the difficult task of assessing training effectiveness, and this difficulty spills over into the performance evaluations of those employees who are in charge of the trainings. If we are not even sure how to determine whether a training is effective, how are HR professionals being evaluated on the effectiveness of their trainings? Or, is this even a part of their evaluation structure at all? If they are not being rewarded in their evaluation structure for increasing the effectiveness of trainings, how much time and energy can they reasonably be expected to devote to improving them? Unlike workplace fatalities and severe injuries, reports of sexual harassment and discrimination are not required to be reported to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and are not subject to a system of fines. This may be a part of why they are prioritized less than they would be if there was a similarly public and explicitly costly consequence for organizations with poor harassment climates, as there are for organizations with poor safety climates (Hersch, 2018). In order for organizations to improve their sexual harassment trainings and climates, they must critically evaluate the incentive structures in place for the employees responsible for executing them, not only the content of the trainings and policies.

Directions for future research: Incentivizing organizations and employees to improve harassment training

What are the proper incentives to improve the effectiveness of sexual harassment training? Organizations are typically incentivized by the notion that these harassment trainings impact their bottom line; however, this "business case" for harassment training remains insufficient in creating the systemic changes so desperately needed in the case of harassment training and policy (Jones, King, Nelson, Geller, & Bowes-Sperry, 2013). The literature on diversity training is more robust than the literature on sexual harassment training. Therefore, it might behoove researchers to extrapolate findings from this area to investigate underlying issues common to training that aims to build an inclusive climate in the workplace.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In order for diversity training to positively impact the organization's bottom line, it needs to actually change behavior. Research has shown that diversity training is most effective at changing behavior when organizations have a positive climate (Nishii, 2013). Therefore, an inclusive climate is required for organizations to leverage the benefits of diversity training. We might make a similar argument for harassment training in organizations; however, little research has been done to investigate this.

Industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists specifically look at the interplay between individuals and organizational decisions, which is why our field is positioned to think about this issue from both lenses. The framework put forth by Medeiros and Griffith (2019) clearly outlines what organizations should do; however, there is more research to be done on how to translate this *should do* to what organizations *will do*. Put simply, it falls upon us as I-O psychologists to understand how to motivate organizations to implement more effective trainings.

Moreover, I-O psychologists need to do more than make the "business case" for harassment training to these organizations. Prior studies have demonstrated that aligning business and social arguments appears more effective for inciting lasting change around these issues as opposed to solely presenting the business case (Jones et al., 2013). Therefore, both the "business case" and the "moral case" for instituting effective harassment policies must be articulated to organizations. However, we know that simply telling people to do something does not always change their behavior; if it did, many I-O psychologists would be out of a job. Further research is necessary in order to discover not only what best practices are but how to make those best practices commonplace.

Conclusion

Medeiros and Griffith (2019) outline the various considerations that organizations should take into account when designing, implementing, and assessing sexual harassment trainings. We believe that unless organizational interests, the attitudes of leadership, and incentive structures of HR professionals are addressed, the best practices outlined by Medeiros and Griffith may not be implemented. This is a difficult task for an organization to undertake, but there is a compelling business, as well as moral, case for its immediate prioritization.

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Cite this article: Bilotta I., Davenport M.K., Wu F.Y., and Beier M.E. (2019). If we build it, will they come? Lack of incentives as barriers to implementing effective sexual harassment training. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **12**, 20–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.1