



An initiative of the European Union

I don't discriminate...

Do I?



Recognising discrimination

For Diversity



Against Discrimination



New laws prohibit discrimination, harassment and victimisation of employees on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief. All organisations need to look at how they can prevent discrimination taking place across any of these different grounds. Victims now have rights and can take cases against organisations.

But employees and staff working for organisations also have responsibilities not to discriminate. They need to ensure that they comply both with the detail and spirit of the law. It is possible that individuals acting in a discriminatory way could also be subject to legal action by a victim.

- **Do you understand what discrimination is?**
- **Have you checked your own behaviour and attitudes?**
- **Do you know how to deal with discrimination, as a "third party"?**
- **What are your responsibilities?**

Recognising discrimination and harassment

The workplace brings together lots of people who may have nothing in common other than their job, and this generally causes few problems. Most employees usually seem able to get along together and put aside any personal and cultural differences. However, sometimes employees do not, or will not, get on as colleagues at work, and this spills over into incidents of unacceptable behaviour such as discriminatory treatment or harassment. Sometimes such behaviour is not even intentional, or it is argued that it is not offensive as the recipient of the behaviour is seen to be "over-sensitive". Sometimes a company may have rules or systems that may also lead to discrimination. Discrimination can be overt but sometimes it can be hidden and more subtle.

You can see it when one group of people are given a particular job or access to things like training, decent terms and conditions of employment, workplace facilities and promotion. For example:

- > Women are only allocated certain jobs, whilst men take others.
- > Particular ethnic groups are only given certain tasks and not others.

- > People with disabilities are automatically rejected without considering how adjustments could easily be arranged to meet their particular needs.
- > Anyone that doesn't seem to "fit" (for example, because of their religion or sexual orientation) is denied their rights or even a job in the first place.
- > Certain rules or ways of doing things serve to exclude particular groups of people.
- > Stereotyping particular groups and creating an expectation of low performance, which, though unspoken, can permeate an organisation, creating an atmosphere that can negatively affect someone's work abilities.

Often these things happen in a very public way with the support of managers and other employees. Sometimes they are more hidden because people know they shouldn't discriminate but do it anyway! For example, sometimes they may use "codes" or euphemisms to hide discrimination against employees or customers.

You might also witness harassment and victimisation, such as:

- > Spreading false rumours that serve to discredit another employee.
- > Using derogatory or offensive remarks about work colleagues.
- > Making sexual innuendos about a colleague in his or her presence.
- > Making jokes about particular groups of people. For example, religious groups; gays and lesbians or an ethnic group. Everyone is meant to join in the "joke" including you if you are one of the groups being joked about - not to do so will lead to you being isolated and seen to be "not part of the team".
- > Engaging in physical abuse – slapping, hitting etc. – or threatening violence.

- > Dismissing the feelings of people who are the subject of jokes or abuse.
- > Making life difficult for someone who complains about the way they are being treated or who supports the victim by, for example, not speaking to them or even dismissing them.

The impact of such behaviour, apart from possibly leading to legal action, can sour working relations and possibly lead to the departure of valued employees, or to the loss of business. The victims can suffer personal stress and economic hardship.

What can you do?

When observing discrimination or harassment in action, there may be a temptation to avoid dealing with the situation because you may feel uncomfortable in confronting such issues, or because you believe that, if left alone, the problem will go away, or perhaps you don't even feel it is important. But it is. The reality is that once discrimination or harassment becomes embedded in the workforce, the adverse effects on the organisation and the harmony of the work environment, are likely to continue, and perhaps become even more damaging if not dealt with swiftly.





> Give your support to the victims and help them deal with the problem:

- Help them seek legal or other advice.
- Help them to confront the perpetrators.
- Help them raise the issue with the employer.
- Provide emotional support – discrimination is stressful for the victim.

> Ask for training to develop your own skills about:

- How to recognise discrimination.
- What the law says.
- What is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
- How to deal with examples of discrimination and harassment.

> Put pressure on the management of your organisation to:

- Establish non-discrimination policies and practices.
- Provide a model of good leadership.
- Deal with discrimination when it occurs.
- Establish a transparent complaints process.

If you are a manager, you have a duty to take action, even where the recipient does not complain. If you are a colleague of the victim or another employee you should also challenge discriminatory behaviour: You do not have to accept it!

You can develop your own understanding of discrimination issues and how to take action when others may be discriminating. Some important steps are:

> Think about your own behaviour and attitudes:

- Do you join in discriminatory behaviour, even if you find it distasteful?
- Do you help create a climate of respect by your own efforts?
- Do you tell others why you disapprove of discrimination or harassment?
- Are you willing to learn about other cultures and perspectives?

This is one of a series of fact sheets aimed at providing basic information on European Union Anti-Discrimination Policies, and giving practical advice on how organisations and individuals can avoid and combat discrimination. To find out more about the EU-wide campaign "For Diversity. Against Discrimination." and information about the situation in your Member State, visit our website: www.stop-discrimination.info

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