

The ADVOCATE

Firm defines conduct unbecoming

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In addition to making house calls, one Stamford company invites companies to send their employees to them to get the required sexual harassment prevention training mandated by the state.

Since 2001, OperationsInc, a human resources consulting firm in Stamford, has held more than 20 open-enrollment-style harassment prevention sessions, geared to small businesses to send their managers and supervisors for their state-required training.

OperationsInc held another one of its sessions for representatives from seven companies yesterday at the Merritt 7 Corporate Park in Norwalk, and the firm's chief executive officer, David Lewis, said interest in his classes has increased in large part because of some current events that show sexual harassment lawsuits are still a relevant and costly issue for corporate America.

Last fall, a jury found the owners of the New York Knicks guilty of sexually harassing a former team executive, awarding the woman \$11.6 million.

About the same time, Supreme Court Chief Justice Clarence Thomas published a memoir which revisited his controversy with Anita Hill, a former colleague of Thomas' who accused him of sexual harassment.

"It's changed the curriculum," Lewis said about the two events. "It makes it a little more real when you start referring to specific stories."

The firm received more inquiries for private classes between October and November than it did for the previous two years, Lewis added.

OperationInc's sessions have been praised by participants for being a little more lively and active than some other training classes.

In these classes, Lewis explains the definition of sexual harassment under Title VII of state law. He reviews specific

physical, verbal and nonverbal cues associated with harassment. He also discusses the investigation and legal

processes that follow when a suit is filed.

Real-life scenarios are described and re-enacted.

"It's really been a positive experience and takes a realistic approach," said Heidi Kouble, human resources manager for Hoffman Engineering Corp., a Stamford company that has 68 employees. "Usually, somebody just sticks you in front of a video . . . but he uses active cases so you feel what's happening."

The open enrollment classes are also beneficial for a small company that does not have the resources to schedule private classes whenever they hire new supervisors, she added.

"The real-life examples he gives, really hit home," said Judith Russo, vice president of human resources for Connecticut Community Bank based in Fairfield.

Under state law, companies with 50 or more employees are required to provide training on sexual harassment prevention to their supervisors.

Other organizations that run training sessions say the public forum-style has its pluses and minuses.

"It can be effective in either cases, though sometimes it can be a bit more effective when its one company alone," said Mark Soycher, human resources counsel for the Connecticut Business and Industry Association. "But bringing people in from a lot of different businesses can be thought provoking."

Soycher was not surprised that the Knicks' case and the Thomas memoir were generating corporate interest.

"When you have high-profile defendants with big dollar payouts, it does show the importance of addressing the issue," Soycher said. "And it also frightens some companies."