

ethikos Volume 32, Number 5. September 01, 2018 Employee Hotlines: Improving organizational wellbeing

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With all the recent media attention surrounding the #MeToo movement, it's more important than ever to ensure that employees have a safe space to discuss unethical behavior in the workplace. One of the most important lessons from this movement was the acknowledgement that it is often difficult for victims to speak up. If there's a culture of general acceptance of destructive behavior, even those who may be opposed to it will find it difficult to know where to turn.

Employee hotlines are a simple, inexpensive, and effective step employers can take, not only to help employees speak up in cases of harassment and discrimination, but also to combat illegal actions, such as fraud and the never-ending risk of embezzlement. In overlooking hotlines as a tool for keeping the lines of communication open, employers are missing one of the most effective tools for detecting problems, deterring problems, and defending against accusations. In the Forum on Corporate Governance and Financial Regulation, Harvard Law School stated, "It is more crucial than ever that companies have effective whistleblower hotlines as part of their corporate compliance programs..."^[1]

Hotlines are an extremely practical and inexpensive solution to what are often complex problems. They often are able to put an end to small problems before they become major ones, which can end up saving a company a significant amount of time and money. Because they act as deterrents, hotlines also mean that employees are less likely to behave in unethical ways: "Having an independent hotline available to employees can help alert the company to and reduce the possibility of inappropriate or illegal company actions"^[2]

In addition to stopping problems and deterring employees from creating them in the first place, hotlines also act as insurance if employees decide to take legal action, because hotlines are a verifiable, reasonable measure that employers have taken to ensure employees have access to protection against harassment. In a legal situation, if employers can prove that they have provided this option to employees, whether or not the employee makes use of it, can be a part of what helps determine whether or not the employer is at fault. The Society for Human Resource Management points out that "The hotline should be available 24 hours a day, and by being available year-round, it can increase the likelihood of early detection and response to discrimination or harassment claims, which can significantly limit liability."^[3]

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