

PRESENTED AT
ESSENTIAL EMPLOYMENT LAW

August 19, 2022
Austin, Texas

WORKPLACE INVESTIGATIONS

Connie Cornell

Connie Cornell



Austin, TX
ccornell@cornellsmith.com
512.328.1540

WORKPLACE INVESTIGATIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

When an employee complains about discrimination or harassment, investigation of that complaint allows the employer to identify potential solutions to the concerns raised by the employee, and may also insulate the employer from legal liability. There are defenses available to employers who appropriately investigate and respond to an employee's claim that the employee is being harassed because of the employee's race, religion, national origin, disability, age, sex, or genetic information.

In cases that involve hostile work environment claims based on harassment by non-supervisors, the employee must prove that the employer knew or should have known of the harassment, but failed to take prompt and appropriate remedial action.¹ In cases where a supervisor's conduct is involved, and where the employee's complaint is of a hostile work environment as opposed to *quid pro quo* harassment,² the burden shifts to the employer to prove the *Ellerth/Faragher* affirmative defense, the first prong of which is that the employer acted reasonably to prevent and promptly correct the harassing behavior, which usually requires the employer prove that once it knew or should have known of the harassment, it investigated and took prompt and appropriate remedial action. Under the recent amendments to the Texas Labor Code Sections 21.141 and 21.142, it appears that in certain sexual harassment cases, the plaintiff will bear the burden of proving that once the employer knew or should have known of the wrongful conduct, it failed to take immediate and appropriate corrective action. This article explores some of the more practical aspects of how to investigate and respond to complaints of workplace harassment.

II. INVESTIGATING HARASSMENT COMPLAINTS

There is no rulebook for conducting harassment investigations. In determining the best steps in any given investigation, there are several variables that should be considered. If there is any guiding principle, it would be to use common sense. If a jury is listening to testimony about

¹ That "the employer knew, or should have known, of the harassment and failed to take prompt remedial action" is the fifth of five elements of a plaintiff's *prima facie* hostile work environment claim when the claim concerns alleged harassment by a non-supervisor. *See, e.g., Wright v. UPS*, 842 F. App'x 869, 874 (5th Cir. 2021).

² If the employee alleges that the harassment resulted in a tangible employment action, then it is a *quid pro quo* case and there may be no affirmative defense available to the employer if the employee can show a nexus between the sexual advances and the employment action. In those instances, the employer is vicariously liable. *See, e.g., Casiano v. AT&T Corp.*, 213 F.3d 278, 283-84 (5th Cir. 2000). On the other hand, if there is no tangible employment action, then the suit is a hostile work environment case, and the employer may be subjected to vicarious liability for severe or pervasive sexual harassment **unless** it can prove the *Ellerth/Faragher* affirmative defense, which is: (1) the employer exercised reasonable care to prevent and correct promptly any sexual harassment, and (2) the employee unreasonably failed to take advantage of any preventative or corrective opportunities provided by the employer or to otherwise avoid harm. *Id.* at 284.

the steps taken or not taken during an investigation, it will be easier for an employer to defend a practical approach than it will be to defend its rigid adherence to a procedure that clearly did not fit the situation. Employers can take comfort in the fact that the Texas Supreme Court has explicitly held that an employer cannot be sued for a negligent investigation by the employee accused of harassment or misconduct. *Tex. Farm Bureau Mut. Ins. Cos. v. Sears*, 84 S.W.3d 604 (Tex. 2002) (holding that an employer does not owe an at-will employee a duty of care when it investigates an allegation of misconduct against the employee). Nevertheless, a poor investigation may result in the employer reaching an inaccurate conclusion, and a sloppy investigation can negatively influence a jury in a harassment case, where the reasonableness of the employer's response is an issue for the jury to decide. Although there is not a perfect formula that can be applied to every situation that requires an investigation, the following outline of how to approach a typical harassment investigation may be useful to highlight the common challenges and difficult choices that arise during many investigations.

While not all harassment complaints are made by females against males, or even against someone of the opposite sex, for simplicity's sake, this article is written in the context of a hypothetical female complainant (the "Complainant") complaining of sexual harassment by a male (the "Accused"). In the actual investigation, the terms "Complainant" and "Accused" should probably be avoided. Instead, the investigator may refer to them as the "concerned employee" and the "employee who is the subject of the concern."

III. EMERGENCIES AND EMOTIONALLY VOLATILE SITUATIONS

Occasionally, a situation arises that is so severe that it requires emergency action. For example, if there has been a physical assault or threat of physical harm, the employer may consider extraordinary measures, such as police involvement. The employer should not send a Complainant back into a work situation where she fears for her personal safety.

If the Complainant wishes to resign, the company should evaluate the pros and cons of discouraging the resignation. Once the Complainant has left the company's employment, even if she resigns, she may claim that the harassment caused her "constructive discharge." Such a claim would require that she prove that a reasonable person under the same or similar circumstances would have felt compelled to resign. It may be wise for the company to encourage the Complainant to give the company an opportunity to address the situation before making such a decision. If the company succeeds in convincing the Complainant not to resign, the company has sidestepped any constructive discharge claim. Even if the company is unsuccessful in its attempts to prevent the resignation, it may still avoid liability on a constructive discharge claim if the company's efforts persuade a jury that the Complainant was unreasonable in choosing to resign without giving the company a chance to solve her problem. If a Complainant insists on resigning, the company should prepare a memo to the Complainant stating the company's regret that she has chosen to resign, and urging her to reconsider her decision and to allow the company an opportunity to investigate and address her concern (See Attachment A).

In other cases, in limited circumstances, with advice of counsel, it may be better for the employer not to intercede and to simply accept the employee's resignation, for example, if the employee's resignation may be desirable for reasons completely unrelated to any harassment

Find the full text of this and thousands of other resources from leading experts in dozens of legal practice areas in the [UT Law CLE eLibrary \(utcle.org/elibrary\)](https://utcle.org/elibrary)

Title search: Workplace Investigations

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
2022 Essential Employment Law: A Practical Course in the Basics session
"Investigating Sensitive Employment Complaints"