

Evidence, empathy and emotions: decision-making styles of human resource professionals and their effectiveness in resolving complaints of sexual harassment

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Decision-making styles
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Abstract

Purpose – The decision-making styles of human resource professionals (HRPs) in resolving complaints of sexual harassment are extremely important as they form the backbone of effectiveness in the resolution of a complaint. The purpose of this paper is to explore these decision-making styles and gauge their effectiveness in resolving such complaints.

Design/methodology/approach – Employing a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 HRPs of 30 companies in Sri Lanka.

Findings – We found eight decision-making styles used by HRPs in resolving complaints of sexual harassment: (1) analytical, (2) behavioural, (3) directive, (4) conceptual, (5) avoidant, (6) dependent, (7) intuitive and judgemental, and (8) manipulative and persuasive. HRPs were found to generally adopt combinations of these styles, with one or two styles being dominant while one or two were used as back-up styles. In resolving complaints of sexual harassment, certain combinations of these styles were found to be more effective than others because they led to procedural, distributive and interactional justice.

Practical implications – The implications of these findings for self-reflection and in training for the HRPs are also discussed.

Originality/value – The findings of this study assist us in understanding how and why HRPs make different decisions when resolving seemingly similar complaints and the effectiveness of such decisions.

Keywords Sexual harassment, Complaints, Human resource professionals, Decision-making styles, Dominant style, Back-up style, Effectiveness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For decades, scholars, policymakers, organisational stakeholders and the public have sought to understand how to prevent and handle sexual harassment in the workplace. However, despite extensive research, discussion and debate about various strategies, policies and procedures relating to the prevention and settlement of such issues, many organisations still struggle with the persistent increase in incidents of sexual harassment.

Studies on how organisations address concerns of sexual harassment have mainly been focussed on preventive initiatives such as anti-sexual harassment policies, procedures and training (Buchanan *et al.*, 2014; Hunt *et al.*, 2010; Mainiero, 2020; Medeiros and Griffith, 2019) as well as the creation of a climate of zero-tolerance (Henekam and Bennett, 2017). Studies that specifically look at the handling/settlement of cases of sexual harassment are found to be quite rare. The few studies that do exist have provided advice and guidelines on how to resolve complaints of sexual harassment (e.g. Buchanan *et al.*, 2014; McDonald *et al.*, 2015) and on how to conduct effective investigations by collecting evidence and following due process (Chan and Kleiner, 2000).

However, very little academic inquiry has been conducted into the more specific aspects of the settlement of sexual harassment cases, such as how and why human resource professionals

