

Subtle shades of discrimination

by Michael_Kinsman

A lesbian gets disillusioned because her company offers pet insurance - even for unusual pets such as pigs, rats and snakes - but doesn't offer same sex domestic partner benefits.

A female Asian attorney makes a typo and listens as her supervisor tells her, "There is an English problem here."

The manager of a Latina information technology worker tells his employee that she is "too ethnic looking to be taken seriously."

These things happen every day in our workplaces and they may seem insignificant on their face. But they are subtle forms of undeclared discrimination that don't wind up in federal lawsuits or company HR offices and cause an estimated 2 million people a year to find new jobs.

A recent survey done by the Level Playing Field Institute of San Francisco with Korn/Ferry International reports that this unclaimed discrimination may cost U.S. employers as much as \$64 billion per year in costs associated with turnover.

"The study highlights that unfairness in the form of everyday inappropriate behaviors is a very real, prevalent and damaging part of today's work environment," says Freeda Kapur Klein, chair of LPFI. "It is sadly ironic that so much money is spent on recruiting and so little attention is devoted to creating a fair and welcoming work environment."

The result is that companies often become a revolving door for people of color, women and gays.

This is not a report to be taken lightly. It's a \$64 billion problem. That's more than the aggregate revenues of Google, Amazon, Starbucks and Goldman Sachs.

The real problem is that these subtle discriminations are a way of life in our workplaces. The problem is in the personal behavior of individuals.

A worker shares a Polish joke to a group of co-workers, ignorant to the fact that not only is such a joke

inappropriate at work, but that one of his co-workers is of Polish heritage and takes it personally.

Three men in a hallway share a joke about a dumb blonde just as a woman colleague walks by and hears the punch line to the joke.

Those are obvious examples. But what about the group of men who go to lunch each day and never invite women along, or workers who turn up their noses when asked to work with certain other employees.

The frustration for business is that there is no anti-discrimination course they can provide employees to make these things go away. It's a cultural thing and even with sensitivity-training, changing any kind of entrenched culture is extremely difficult.

But that doesn't mean it's not worthy of attention. It is something every executive should contemplate and pay attention to.

For the sake of argument, let's say that the LPFI survey drastically overstates the impact of this problem. Let's say it is off by 50 percent.

That still means it is a \$32 billion problem so it still warrants attention.

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