

Addressing harassment in the tourism and hospitality sector

Inappropriate behaviour and harassment in the tourism and hospitality sector

Tourism and hospitality services include tasks that are performed, for example, in restaurants, hotels and leisure services.

Customer service, which includes creating experiences for customers, is demanding. Customers are easily disappointed if their expectations are not met. Work that includes serving alcohol increases the risk of having to put up with inappropriate behaviour, and statistically we know that for example waiters and hotel cleaners face more sexual harassment from customers.

Different forms of harassment in the workplace include:

- inappropriate behaviour
- sexual/gender harassment
- discriminatory harassment
- domestic violence and harassment
- digital harassment.

Digital harassment is inappropriate, threatening or offensive work-related communication through online work tools or digital channels.

For example:

- in email, chat and messaging apps
- in appointment booking and feedback channels
- in social media and review platforms

The harasser can be anyone, including a customer or other outsider. Digital harassment is not part of customer service work, and it is unacceptable.

Different forms of harassment in the workplace include:

- **inappropriate behaviour**
- **sexual/gender harassment**
- **discriminatory harassment**
- **domestic violence and harassment**
- **digital harassment**



Harassment and inappropriate behaviour

Harassment refers to systematic and continuous negative activity or behaviour. In some cases, a single act can already meet the definition of harassment. In the workplace, the employer or a representative of the employer can harass the employee. An employee may harass or treat another employee or supervisor in an inappropriate manner. Suppliers or other stakeholders of the employer that visit the workplace sporadically may behave inappropriately. Even customers can harass the employee.

Inappropriate behaviour can be all of the above, with the difference that it is not continuous and repeated by the same person. Nevertheless, it is harmful and unacceptable. Inappropriate behaviour is aggressive or intentionally insulting behaviour, shouting, cursing and any kind of abusive speech even if it is a one-off event. Insults from different sources often result in feelings of disgrace, shame or sadness.

Harassment is, for example, when these things occur repeatedly

- **threats, intimidation**
- **malicious and suggestive messages**
- **belittling and mocking language**
- **questioning one's reputation or status**
- **criticizing one's personal qualities**
- **sexual harassment**
- **continuous unjustified criticism of one's work and making it more difficult**
- **isolation from the working community**

Sexual harassment refers to verbal, non-verbal or physical unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, which intentionally or factually violates a person's mental or physical integrity, especially by creating a threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating or oppressive atmosphere.

Sexual harassment is punishable under the Criminal Code.

Sexual harassment can be, for example

- suggestive gestures and facial expressions
- provocative and vulgar language
- dirty jokes
- remarks about one's body, clothing or private life.

Harassment based on gender refers to unwanted behaviour related to a person's gender that is not sexual in nature and that intentionally or factually violates the person's mental or physical integrity and creates a threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating or oppressive atmosphere.

Harassment based on gender can be:

- degrading and negative speech about the other gender
- degrading the opposite gender
- gender-based workplace bullying
- negative remarks related to sexual orientation.

AN EXAMPLE of sexual harassment

Minna works as a waitress in a restaurant. Minna has a colleague called Matti, who is quick to comment on Minna's work clothes and appearance. He can, for example, score Minna's physical appearance each day. Sometimes Matti tells Minna that her work clothes are too boring and urges Minna to have a more open neckline and shorter skirts. Matti also repeatedly makes "funny" sexual innuendos disguised as something that is related to work, although he is the only one who finds them funny.

AN EXAMPLE of sexual harassment based on gender

The work community had decided to have a recreation day onboard a boat. Everyone else received the travel tickets in their e-mails, but Saija didn't. When she asked about it, she was told that she did not have a booking, because she was pregnant and could therefore not travel anyway.

Discriminatory harassment

Harassment is considered discriminatory if it occurs on grounds prohibited by the Act on Equality Between Men and Women and Non-Discrimination Act. An employee's characteristics such as age, language or sexual orientation cannot be accepted as grounds for unequal treatment, and if they are the reason for acting in a disruptive manner, it may raise a suspicion of discrimination.

Domestic Violence and harassment at the workplace

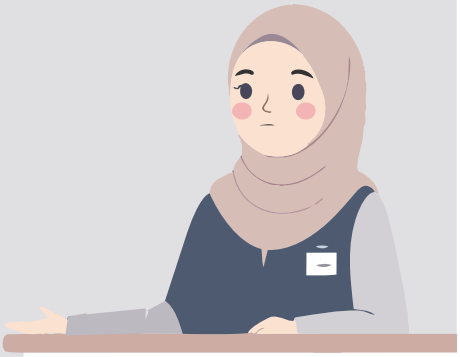
Sometimes an employee is harassed, threatened or abused by his or her present or former partner outside the workplace. The employer has no power to intervene and no responsibility for things that happen outside the workplace, but it is obvious that the situation experienced by the employee can, if prolonged, affect his or her ability to work and thereby the entire work community.

Workplaces need to plan procedures to support such a person. Counselling should be done discreetly. The most important thing is to provide information on where to get support and that the employer is understanding about the matter.

If it turns out that the threat experienced by the employee also endangers the rest of the work community, this should be taken into account in a separate risk assessment, and necessary measures should be planned based on it. This may include increasing security or updating alarm options.

AN EXAMPLE of discriminatory harassment

Jasmin works at the hotel reception. She wears a headdress that covers her hair and matches with her work attire. A customer who was about to check in at the hotel once looked at Jasmin and said that he could not be served by "a foreigner like that". He loudly demanded proper service or else he wouldn't agree to stay.



Preventing harassment and intervening in the workplace

If there is harassment or other improper behaviour aimed at an employee that harms or endangers his or her health, the employer is obliged to take necessary measures in order to eliminate the problem once he has received information about it. Going digital does not remove the employer's liability.

The employer must try to find out what has happened and, when it comes to the actions of the employer's subordinates, follow consistent actions and solutions related to the employees. It is also possible that the harassment is caused by a customer, in which case the employer does not always have the opportunity to intervene effectively. Even then, the situation should be clarified by discussing it in the work community and by providing training and guidance to employees to tackle such situations. Each employee's need for induction should be assessed with respect to his or her personal conditions. A younger, more inexperienced employee may need more coaching than a more experienced one.

Correspondingly, the employee must avoid all harassment and other inappropriate behaviour aimed at other employees as it may cause harm or endanger their safety or health. In accordance with his or her own experience, professional skills and the instructions received from the employer, the employee must take care of his or her own and other employees' safety and health with all necessary means. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the employee must also follow the rules and instructions given by the employer.

Instructions regarding harassment in the work community

It is necessary to have instructions in the workplace so that the employee who has experienced harassment knows how to bring it up. Discussing and going through the instructions in the work community also sends a signal to employees that the matter is taken seriously and encourages them to report situations as soon as possible.

It is easiest to intervene at the earliest stage so that unnecessary experiences of injustice that might escalate into something else and the resulting consequences affecting the employees' health can be prevented.

The Centre for Occupational Safety's instructions and manuals related to the subject

> TTK: Preventing and handling inappropriate treatment in the workplace

If you feel that your co-worker or superior has behaved in a disturbing manner (insulting, inappropriate behaviour etc.) towards you:

1. Immediately report your experience to the offender. Request that this should not happen again.

2. If the harassment continues, tell your supervisor or their supervisor. If it is a senior supervisor, make it clear that you find the behaviour inappropriate.

3. When a supervisor has been notified, the matter must be resolved (it is also good to state the time limit in the instructions). The employer/supervisor must use available means to find out what happened (discussion, interviewing witnesses etc.).

4. If the conclusion is that harassment (or other inappropriate behaviour) has taken place, the supervisor must ensure that it doesn't take place anymore. If the supervisor is the possible perpetrator, any misunderstandings must be cleared up and the behaviour changed so that it is not perceived as offensive.

   Even if the end conclusion is that actual harassment has not taken place, any behaviour that needlessly cause unpleasant experiences must be eliminated.



Harassment or inappropriate behaviour from customers

Harassment from customers can be intentional or unintentional. It is very typical for a customer to be grumpy or anxious about something that is not related to the actual service event, and this affects the customer's behaviour towards the customer service representative. Sometimes bad behaviour is triggered by dissatisfaction with the service. The food is not satisfactory, or the service doesn't meet the customer's expectations, and the customer is disappointed.

Customer service representatives are no strangers to situations where their personal characteristics are being commented on or criticized at. Commenting may be related to the person's appearance, language skills, or ethnicity. Harassment based on sexuality or gender can also occur. Especially comments with sexual undertones are often said in a humoristic way, although they are not funny.

Harassment can take place face-to-face, over the phone, or via electronic communication channels. Various types of harassment via digital platforms have become more common in recent years. Another growing problem is customers filming in the workplace, either openly or secretly, for example with smart glasses, and making comments and trying to contact through social media.

> The Centre for Occupational Safety's materials related to the subject (in Finnish)

> TTK: Tunnista ja hallitse somehäirinnän riskejä työssä

Harassment that takes place through digital connections, directly or via social media, must be responded to appropriately. When it is possible to respond to the contact, it must be made clear that if the situation continues, the matter will be reported to the police. Anonymous harassers should be blocked from personal and possible company accounts.

Instructions on how to handle a customer who behaves in an inappropriate manner

When it comes to customer contacts, employees should not be targeted with harassment or sexual harassment. "A customer is always right" is an often quoted but somewhat misleading phrase. A customer should of course be treated with dignity, but there are, however, situations in customer service work where the customer does not behave in a prudent manner. It is good to prepare everyone for these in advance by familiarizing employees with these situations.

A proven method is, for example, warning the customer that any bad behaviour may result in the customer not being served any-more. This too needs to be done extremely politely, but firmly.

Harassment through digital connections, either directly or through social media, must be addressed appropriately. When it is possible to respond to a message or a comment, it should be made clear that if the situation continues, the matter will be brought to the attention of the police. Anonymous harassers should be blocked from personal or company accounts.

Why is it important to tackle customer-related harassment at work?

It is very important that workers in customer services know that they have the right to prevent unreasonable behaviour towards them without having to face negative feedback from their manager. People typically have different perceptions of what is inappropriate behaviour based on their life experience and personality. Discussing these issues in the work community and sharing experiences and examples helps employees to set boundaries for appropriate behaviour.

How should customer-related harassment be addressed in advance?

The best thing is to have the work community gather together and discuss the matter. This could take place in conjunction of the weekly or monthly meetings, separate training sessions or during coffee room discussions. The essential thing is that everyone gets to participate in building a common vision.

Digital harassment should be included in the risk assessment and clear instructions should be drawn up: how to act and who to report. If necessary, the employee's anonymity will be protected.

Employees could, for example, give examples of situations that they have perceived as harassment or discuss the examples in this handbook and together think about the limits of normal vs. inappropriate customer behaviour.

For example

- the customer raises his voice
- the customer starts calling you names
- the customer smashes / throws things.



After that, employees could decide on a few sentences to start the “customer warning procedure”, i.e. asking the customer to change his or her behaviour. It is good to practice these in advance so that they come to mind easily when the situation calls for it. It is also good to practice saying these sentences in a calm and polite but convincing tone of voice.

In addition to this, we need practical instructions on how to act if a customer event is interrupted or has to be interrupted (the customer walks out) or becomes threatening.

> TTK: Threats of violence (in Finnish)

After the harassment – how to deal with it, is aftercare needed?

The workplace guidelines should instruct the employee to always report situations, including those that came close to the response limit, but did not reach it in the end. In this way a firm mutual understanding of what is unacceptable behaviour can be achieved.

The supervisor must ensure that the employee is not left troubled over the unpleasant incident. Sometimes it might be that the employee, who was fine with the incident at first, reports later on that the incident still worries them. Discussing the situation openly amongst colleagues often helps, but sometimes professional help is needed if the shock has been severe.

Repeating the instructions in the work community

Going through the instructions must be part of the normal job induction. In addition, it is necessary to repeat the process amongst colleagues often enough so that the agreed and practiced concepts are not forgotten.

For example

- **”I am sorry, but your behaviour is offensive. So in order to be able to serve you, I ask you to behave correctly.”**
- **”Since you continue to behave offensively, I now have to stop serving you and ask you to return when you have calmed down / can behave correctly.”**



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