



Workplace Safety Is The Next Focus In The #EmpowermentEra

Insights

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Employee safety has always been important, but the recent public shaming of allegedly hazardous workplaces reveals that the public's disdain for companies that provide unsafe environments for their employees is increasing. No longer can you ignore the public cries to eliminate or minimize occupational hazards, as you risk becoming the latest public face of what has essentially become the "Empowerment Era" – a time when people from all walks of life not only feel emboldened to expose "bad players" but now have the digital means by which to amplify and give power to their voices.

As a recent example of this shifting landscape, Senator Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Ilhan Omar publicly demanded that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) make public the injury and illness data from a giant, multi-national retailer in December 2019. Their call was an apparent effort to publicly shame the company after employees had reported hazardous working conditions, and could be the spark that kicks the #Worksafe movement into high gear. These kinds of publicized efforts are no longer rare, but instead are simply the latest example of a trend that began at the start of the last decade.

The Birth Of The #EmpowermentEra

The 2010's saw rapid growth in the use of both mobile devices and social media. This new, immediate access to information led to drastic social and political changes around the world. Uprisings such as the Arab Spring were the direct result of individuals using social media to spread information quickly and to a broad audience.

With this newfound ability to share stories with a vast group of others, individuals began to feel empowered to express their achievements, failures, and gripes, realizing that their message might now be heard by a vast audience. Here in the U.S., this became particularly true in the workplace, where employees began to take advantage of their ability to share their struggles and complaints with their employers.

The Fight For \$15 Movement – The First Stage Of The #EmpowermentEra

The #EmpowermentEra in the workplace began around 2012, when workers utilized social media to support the Fight for \$15 movement: a collective crusade which sought to increase the minimum wage paid to workers in largely retail and other blue-collar positions. The movement specifically credits its success to Twitter, when in 2015 it used the social media platform to update its progress and garner "trending" status on the website in strategically selected U.S. cities.

This immediate and coordinated dissemination of information raised awareness of the issue. It ultimately led many state and local governments to change their minimum wage laws. Several cities across the country now have minimum wages at or about \$15 per hour, and by 2025 we will see at least six states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey), and the District of Columbia meet that same level. Moreover, it brought public shaming to employers that paid low wages and led many high-profile companies to adjust their pay practices accordingly.

The #MeToo Movement – The Second Stage of The #EmpowermentEra

Born in 2017, the #MeToo movement became the second stage of the #EmpowermentEra, reaching prominence due to an incredible groundswell of social media activity. The movement escalated after several Hollywood actresses publicly shared their stories of harassment from the same movie producer, Harvey Weinstein. In fact, the phrase #MeToo gained national prominence thanks to an October 15, 2017 tweet by actress Alyssa Milano, where she noted “If all the women who have ever been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, then we give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.”

The response to Milano’s call to action was overwhelming. Millions took to Twitter and other platforms to share their story of sexual harassment, an overwhelming number of which occurred in the workplace, many detailing how their supervisors or coworkers took advantage of them. This movement ultimately led to the removal of several high-profile executives, including Matt Lauer, former co-host of NBC’s popular morning television program, *The Today Show*.

As a result, many employers that were seen as tolerating the behavior suffered reputational damage. Further, employers began – and are still – feeling the impact of this expression of empowerment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recently reported that sexual harassment claims rose over 13% from 2017 to 2018, indicating a significant increase in the number of workers who are no longer afraid to speak out and exercise their rights against workplace harassment. _

The #WorkSafe Movement – The Next Stage of The #EmpowermentEra

Given the recent public shaming of a giant retailer by Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Ilhan, along with the increased public access that we all now have to companies’ safety data and OSHA inspection and citation history, the next stage of the #EmpowermentEra is poised to focus on safety in the workplace. Workplace safety hazards are easier than ever to both capture – with a simple photo or video of the dangerous condition – and to share broadly – with a tweet or share on social media – given that nearly every employee has access to a mobile device. Like the ridicule employers faced in the first two stages of the #EmpowermentEra, unwary employers will face scrutiny if they fail to provide safe workplaces, resulting in not only the loss of valued employees who demand a safe work environment, but the loss of business opportunities that accompany public ridicule.

Expect to see a significant increase in the number of posts, videos, and hashtags on social media concerning workplace safety over the next several years. In fact, posts with tags such as “#worksafe” are already getting significant traction on Twitter and LinkedIn, with the number of

#worksafe are already getting significant traction on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#), with the number of posts containing that moniker growing at an exponential rate. With this rise in public shaming, expect employee complaints to OSHA to increase as well, like the higher number of sexual harassment-related EEOC claims filed following the #MeToo movement.

How You Can Prepare For The #Worksafe Stage Of The #EmpowermentEra

Given the increase in public shaming towards poor workplace safety practices, what can you do to avoid such ridicule or respond to a negative social media post? The following are best practices on how to prevent and respond to such an occurrence:

1. **Develop a robust safety program.** The best way to prevent the public dissemination of a photo showing dangerous conditions at your workplace is to eliminate hazards from your facility. Take the time to review and update your safety programs and training policies to ensure they are providing the best protection possible to your employees. An effective tool to achieve this goal is to perform the personal protective equipment/hazard assessments required by OSHA for each job task at your facility. This exercise will allow you to both determine and address each hazard in your workplace, and in the meantime comply with a mandatory OSHA regulation.
2. **Engage your employees.** Employees who would rather publicly shame their employer on social media rather than bring such a hazard to a manager's attention are likely unhappy, disengaged, or have had concerns ignored on previous occasions. Create a work environment where employees both feel safe and understand they can raise safety concerns to management without fear of retribution, including rewarding employees who raise concerns, forming safety committees to encourage employee participation, and investigating every near miss at your facility to eliminate hazards and minimize accidents.
3. **Use a negative post as an opportunity for improvement.** If an employee posts a photo, video, or complaint concerning workplace safety on a social media outlet, use the incident as an opportunity to learn and improve your safety program. Instead of retaliating against the worker for voicing their concern, ask the employee to articulate their fears about worker safety. Address the complaint and make any changes necessary to create a safer environment. Don't ignore the post or simply attempt to retaliate against the employee. Employing a positive approach, along with utilizing the practices mentioned above, will hopefully decrease or eliminate the number of future issues.
4. **Preserve your safety public footprint.** Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Omar were seeking non-public injury and illness data about a giant company; although OSHA initially denied their request, there is other public information currently available about every company's safety record. OSHA's [establishment search page](#) not only allows the public to view any OSHA inspections your company has undergone since 1972, but also gives one access to all citations issued (and accepted), and penalties paid. Given access to this information, the public can and will continue to use it to shame employers who have accepted and paid several OSHA citations. To avoid this ridicule and other [consequences](#), properly contest all citations where you have a good faith defense and can't obtain the result you require through settlement.

Conclusion

The public will no longer tolerate companies that treat employees poorly in any aspect of employment, and government regulators will be sure to ramp up the pressure in areas called to their attention by a chorus of voices. We expect the #Worksafe movement to gain traction in the coming months and years, so it's time for you to make sure your organization thrives during this next phase of the #EmpowermentEra.

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