4 Strategies To Counter Antisemitism In The Workplace

By **Johanna Zelman and Rachel Ullrich** (July 17, 2023)

Antisemitism is a pervasive societal problem dating back to ancient times. Antisemitism, at its core, is the hatred of Jewish people for no other reason except that they are Jewish. It constitutes both religious and racial discrimination, and includes stereotypical tropes, scapegoating, anti-Zionism, using symbols associated with antisemitism such as swastikas and Holocaust denial.

Johanna Zelman

The Anti-Defamation League's "Antisemitic Attitudes in America" report this January found that nearly 85% of American adults believe at least one antisemitic stereotype. The ADL's 2022 "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents" also recorded the highest number of incidents of antisemitic harassment, vandalism and assault since it began tracking in 1979. This represents a 36% increase in such events compared to 2021 and a 500% increase over the past 10 years.

Rachel Ullrich

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and many state and local laws prohibit religious and racial discrimination in the workplace. Yet a November 2022 survey of U.S. hiring managers and recruiters by ResumeBuilder.com showed that antisemitism is present in 33% of workplaces and that it is considered acceptable in 29% of them. 23% of managers believe fewer Jewish people should work in their industries, 26% are less likely to hire a Jewish applicant and 17% were told by leadership not to hire Jewish people.

This is unacceptable and illegal, and employers must take action now. But what can employers do?

On May 25, the Biden administration released its "U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism." It outlines four pillars of action:

> Pillar 1. Increase awareness and understanding of antisemitism, including its threats to America, and broaden appreciation of Jewish American heritage.

> Pillar 2. Improve safety and security for Jewish communities.

> Pillar 3. Reverse the normalization of antisemitism and counter antisemitic discrimination.

> Pillar 4. Build cross-community solidarity and collective action to counter hate.

In line with these pillars, here are the pillars that we suggest for combating antisemitism in the workplace.

1. Educate the workforce.

Pillar 1 calls for increasing awareness through education, which employers can easily do. Provide information to employees, especially human resources and front-line managers and supervisors, about the Sabbath and why Jewish employees may need to leave early on

Fridays to be home before sundown to observe it.

During Jewish holidays, send out workplacewide communications about the meaning of the holiday and its traditions.

Share descriptions or recipes of traditional Jewish food, or invite Jewish employees to cook and bring food to the workplace to share with coworkers. Explain dietary traditions, such as keeping kosher and the meaning behind it.

Educate employees about the dangers of believing antisemitic tropes and stereotypes and how they are harmful to them as employees and to the company as a whole.

2. Review and revise your policies and procedures and enforce them accordingly.

To improve the safety and security of your Jewish employees, update your nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies and procedures to specifically prohibit antisemitism. Broadly prohibiting religious or racial discrimination is not enough. Specifically call out antisemitic tropes and symbols as examples.

Set up a process for reporting incidents of antisemitism and clearly state that there is zero tolerance for antisemitism in the workplace.

Require employees to complete training on the meaning of antisemitism, why antisemitic tropes and stereotypes are untrue and hurtful, and where they originated. Most people do not know that many antisemitic stereotypes are the result of restrictions placed on where Jewish people could live and work in the past.

Have your IT department monitor for online antisemitism. Your acceptable use policy for company systems should clearly prohibit using the company's computer system for discriminatory and harassing purposes, including antisemitism.

Set out clear consequences for violating the acceptable use policy, and monitor the company's online systems for violations. For example, an employer who becomes aware of an email containing antisemitic language should immediately take action against the employees who created, forwarded or otherwise shared it. It does not matter that a Jewish person may not have seen it.

If employees violate these policies, discipline those involved appropriately, regardless of rank. Speak with Jewish employees affected by the policy violation to make sure they understand that they are safe and that there is no tolerance for antisemitism in the workplace.

If the incident was public, speak with all Jewish employees to let them know the issue has been dealt with. Listen to any concerns they may have as a result of the incident, and take action to ensure those concerns are addressed. Make sure Jewish employees have information about the employee assistance programs available to them, and let them know that the company supports them.

3. Take a stand when necessary.

When an antisemitic incident occurs within the wider community, speak out to all employees against antisemitism and condemn the hateful acts.

Taking a stand and speaking out demonstrates to employees that antisemitism is not normal or acceptable. Remember, company culture begins at the top, so these messages should be heard from the highest level.

Taking a stand, however, means more than just lip service. If a company is publicly condemning antisemitism in the community while passively allowing it to occur in the workplace, it accomplishes nothing.

4. Embrace allyship.

Finally, embrace allyship. You should not rely on your Jewish employees to be the only ones fighting antisemitism. Antisemitism is not a Jewish problem; it is a societal problem. Many non-Jewish employees want to help but do not know how.

Non-Jewish employees should become allies by partnering with Jewish employees. Non-Jewish employees should also be empowered to speak up when they hear or see antisemitism in the workplace.

Create an employee resource group for Jewish employees, and encourage non-Jewish employees to attend or join the group's discussions on how antisemitism affects the workplace.

Create a working group or task force of both Jewish and non-Jewish employees who can work together on advising the company regarding issues affecting the Jewish community and how, as an employer, the company can best support its Jewish employees.

Conclusion

As acts of antisemitism continue to rise, the risk of this type of hate affecting your workplace also rises. By engaging Jewish employees on the issue of antisemitism, most employers will likely learn this issue is already present in the workplace.

By incorporating these workplace pillars, not only to address antisemitism but with all types of illegal discrimination and harassment, employers enhance their diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

Employers can no longer remain silent.

Johanna G. Zelman is the office managing partner for the Hartford, Connecticut, office of FordHarrison LLP.

Rachel Ziolkowski Ullrich is a partner at the firm.