

The Furniture Industry's #MeToo Reckoning is Coming

Dear Stephen:

I was a pharmaceutical sales rep, until three years ago when I changed jobs. I liked sales, but I did not like what I was selling. I wanted to sell something more creative and tangible, and the office furniture industry seemed to fit the bill nicely. After doing my research on industries, I used Fortune magazine's "100 Best Places to Work" list, which comes out every year, to find a reputable company. I found a couple of companies from the furniture industry listed, and more than one were located near where I am from in Western Michigan. They seemed as cool as progressive Silicon Valley companies and made high design furniture that was often specified and used in those same tech offices. It seemed like I had found a match.

A few years in and the picture is not nearly as rosy as I'd hoped it would be. I've found myself

in an industry with as big of a sexual harassment issue as Hollywood. It might be even worse because it's often just so cold in western Michigan that no one can even thaw out long enough to file a complaint. It took almost no time for me to see that the #MeToo movement is starting to catch on at furniture manufacturers: Field sales reps all across the country are talking about it, folks at corporate in marketing, even HR workers and designers are abuzz. Our company owns several subsidiaries, and even a retail chain, and #MeToo is on fire at every level and across genders and sexual orientations. I've heard horror stories from both men and women, who have been here for years.

I am still a relative newbie, and luckily I've been spared the worst of this thus far, but I'm seriously thinking I need to get out of the industry before something



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press.

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

terrible happens. Why didn't I know about this before I joined this company? How do you find out about a company's reputation in this area? I did not see it on Glassdoor, and I definitely didn't see it in Fortune!!

UnFortunate

Dear UnFortunate,

Several questions and points are rolled into one here. First, the Fortune lists are marketing gimmicks. I know it's nice to think you can just trust these sorts of rankings, but any list like this is fairly arbitrary. If companies fill out all the forms in the right way, and they are a big enough name, they can all but guarantee they'll

The greatest number of workplace questions I have received in the past six months center on sexual harassment related issues.

be on those lists. Do not ever pick your job based on those rankings alone (or your doctor based on similar lists, for that matter). Glassdoor is a much better metric with much better information, but the best is to ask your friends and explore your LinkedIn connections. The Viscusi rule of thumb is to listen to people who have worked at these companies and their customers, not magazines or websites.

As far as the #MeToo movement and the furniture industry goes, I have stayed away from the subject so far because this is an advice column, and I am not a journalist, but I would love to see what stories a reporter from, say, The Grand Rapids Press might be able to dig up. I'd be just as interested to see reports from local papers in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Jasper, Indiana, for that matter. I expect that the closer we get to NeoCon 2018, the louder the rumblings will get, and they will eventually crescendo.

Yes, these companies have looked the other way for quite awhile.

Many have not. The greatest number of workplace questions I have received in the past six months center on sexual-harassment related issues. I do not publish them because either the senders have asked me not to share their stories and/or they involve salacious details naming individuals and publicly traded companies who have no chance to defend themselves. With that said, my advice to all these letter senders and anyone who might be unlucky enough to deal with this trauma is always the same: Call your company's HR hotline and report the incident in writing to both HR and your supervisors. We also have all kinds of features of our smartphones that let us record things. Evidence is more necessary than it should be, but a recording can be worth several thousands of words.

I'll add, finally, that as best as I can tell, you are exactly (and unfortunately) right on about the scope of the problem. I hear from men who were sexually harassed by other men, women

being harassed by women, and everything in between. I cannot help but think where there is smoke there is fire, and instead of everyone talking about how slow NeoCon 2018 will be this year, or complaining about how the Hall of Fame dinner is just getting too long and too expensive, the big story will be the contract furniture industry reckoning with its own Weinsteins and Spaceys and Lauers.

Everyone knows many lawsuits already have been settled. No one has made it public yet. I don't think that embargo will hold, and it's just as well. I am sure BIFMA will have this as a highlighted topic with a keynote speaker at its BIFMA 360 meeting coming up in Miami. No one is sleeping through this firestorm. You know CEOs in furniture will want to know how to protect their companies, employees, shareholders and themselves. And luckily for them, they have an association to help them stay ahead of the curve. More to come, believe me!

Stephen