

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

When Is It Wise to Go to HR?

At WSJ's 'Women in the Workplace' forum, panelists debate best ways for workers and employers to respond to harassment claims



From left, Michelle Ma, assistant editor at The Wall Street Journal, Minda Harts, chief executive of the Memo LLC, and writer Indu Reddy at the 'Women in the Workplace' forum in San Francisco on Tuesday. PHOTO: ANDREW DAVIS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Chip Cutter

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When asked whether they trusted their human-resources department, only about a quarter of the audience raised their hands at a panel at The Wall Street Journal's "Women in the Workplace" forum in San Francisco this week.

The unscientific poll hints at the difficult position in which many HR departments find themselves. HR workers often want to protect company interests while supporting employees and doing their part, with others, to guide an organization's culture.

Forum participants debated the role of HR at U.S. companies. Some panelists—made up of activists, attorneys and chief executives—questioned whether workers should go to HR to file harassment complaints. Others highlighted a disconnect between hiring and promotion practices and a divergence in how employees view such decisions compared with HR leaders.

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Do you trust that the HR department has your best interest at heart? What has been your experience with that department? Join the conversation below.

The discussion over HR comes as more companies focus on promoting an inclusive working environment. In 2012, 56% of companies said they were committed to gender diversity, according to data from McKinsey & Co. Today, the number stands at 87%.

Creating a respectful workplace means putting in place fair investigations after people report harassment and misconduct, as well as proper training and education for employees—functions typically handled by HR, said Ally Coll, an attorney who co-founded the Purple Campaign, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting workplace sexual harassment.

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Yet even after all the attention generated by the #MeToo movement, Ms. Coll said she can't unequivocally advise people to report their concerns to HR. She said raising issues of harassment can still result in adverse career consequences.

"What I would like to see is for people to feel comfortable reporting misconduct internally. But right now, I don't know if that's always fair advice," Ms. Coll said. "It really does still come at a career cost for a lot of people."

Writer Indu Reddy organized a walkout earlier this year to protest forced arbitration for employees at her former company, online-game maker Riot Games. She said raising issues to HR can be exceedingly difficult for the employees involved, in part, because workers must often go alone, unable to bring a friend or supporter along for legal reasons.

"It is traumatic," she said. "It's kind of shocking and scary and isolating."

When asked if she trusts HR, Ms. Reddy called it a loaded question, noting that workers need greater support beyond just reporting issues. She would like to see companies offer counseling, for example, and more ways for people to come together and discuss sensitive issues, whether

through events or roundtables, a point echoed by her co-panelist, Minda Harts, CEO of the Memo LLC, a career-development platform for women of color.

Ms. Reddy also said HR needs to focus on greater representation across gender and race. “I would like to see more faces in HR that look like me, that understand my struggles, that I feel safe going to,” she said. “I think that’s part of the process of solving this gap and creating a safer environment.”

Bernard Tyson, CEO of health-care giant Kaiser Permanente, said that in any given issue, it can be tough to sum up who is right—the HR people or the workers. “I think it depends on the side of the equation you’re on,” he said. “People experience different things in the work environment.”

HR leaders and employees also have divergent views on why people are promoted at work, according to findings in the fifth annual Women in the Workplace survey conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey.

In choosing managers inside an organization, HR leaders cited strong leadership skills and abilities to manage people as top priorities. Workers, meanwhile, were more likely to say that people got promoted to manager based on their skills in navigating corporate politics or on their likability.

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