



10 August 2023

[Blog article](#) by **Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

The fundamental importance of promoting mutual respect at work

In How can employers create and sustain a workplace where it is the norm for everyone to treat each other with mutual respect?

And how far can employees be their 'authentic selves' in the workplace?

The best way of achieving a good and harmonious workplace is for employers to take seriously their responsibility to secure and maintain welcoming and inclusive working environments. That is, working environments where everyone is treated by everyone else, including co-workers and customers, with dignity, respect, and where everyone is confident that they will not be subjected to discriminatory, offensive, humiliating, or intimidating behaviour while they are at work. It is more than merely tolerating co-workers.

Creating a harmonious workplace

But this is not new to employers in Northern Ireland. Many have, over the years, dealt successfully with very difficult and sensitive workplace issues, quite often from the perspective of the historical conflict between the two main religious/political communities here, and often by following guidance issued by the Equality Commission.

It is essential that employers continue to build on their expertise and what has been achieved. They should use the underlying fair employment and equal opportunities principles to secure and maintain harmonious and productive workplaces, where time and money is spent on better things than the consequences of discrimination and harassment.

Accommodating for aspects of employees' lives

This does not mean that a working environment must be a "neutral" space, which in any case, is likely to be an impossible standard to aim for. Employees cannot or should not be expected to leave every personal issue at the factory gate or office

door.

Indeed, for many years employers have been expected to take account of and to accommodate aspects of their employees' lives that might impact on their work, such as pregnancy and maternity, bereavement, their caring responsibilities for children or other relatives, their physical health or disabilities. As may be expected, the range of issues that should be considered by employers evolves and now extends to issues that may in the past have been avoided, such as mental ill health, gender or the menopause.

Setting workplace boundaries

On the other hand, being open and welcoming to everyone cannot mean that "*everything goes*" or that "*everything is allowed*". For example, what might be acceptable social chat in a pub on a Saturday might not be acceptable behaviour in a workplace.

Furthermore, just consider what may happen if employees are encouraged to express their deeply and sincerely held religious or philosophical beliefs or political opinions in the factory or office. Given the variety of these, how might other employees react? Will they passively tolerate them, vociferously oppose them, or feel offended or threatened by them or by the person who expresses them, or feel unwelcomed and a sense of isolation?

To that extent, common sense dictates that it would not be desirable to encourage employees to necessarily bring their "*whole self to work*", particularly in terms of their potential behaviours and the potential impact that may have on others. Instead, it would be prudent to set boundaries outlining the standards of behaviour that are expected of each member of staff in the course of their employment.

The risks of not setting workplace boundaries

The risks of not setting such boundaries are that employees may be exposed to unlawful discrimination or harassment with employers having to answer complaints in an employment tribunal that they have breached the equality laws. In addition, employees may become disengaged from their work which may be evidenced by underperformance, increased absence, and increased negativity in the workplace.

Taking practicable steps to secure and maintain such a good and harmonious working environment will show everyone, including those who may not historically have been "visible" in a particular workplace, that they are and will be welcomed and respected for who they are. This is particularly the case for people from minority groups, for example, people of different sexual orientation, gender or minority ethnic backgrounds.

Equality Commission guidance for creating a harmonious workplace

Efforts begin, but do not end, by setting a foundation of good [workplace policies](#), primarily corporate [equal opportunities](#) and [anti-harassment policies](#), together with a [Joint Declaration of Protection](#) (pdf) signed by management and trade union representatives. These will reflect the standards that employers and employees are expected to conform to by equality law and its associated good practice standards.

We have information and [training](#) for employers and service providers to help introduce and maintain inclusive workplaces.

You can also call our advice line on 028 90 500 600 to speak with an adviser or email enquiries@equalityni.org

We have a good deal to thank Northern Ireland's employers for in relation to the contribution made to our economy and our society. It is essential that employers continue to build on their expertise and continue to provide working environments that are good and harmonious for all of their workers.

- [Read more on the equality law framework](#) which has helped employers create better, more inclusive workplaces.