

**For Immediate Release**

24<sup>th</sup> February 2010

## **Back Off on Bullying or Else ...**

Workplace bullying is in the spotlight following this week's allegations against Prime Minister Gordon Brown and employment law experts are encouraging companies to check how they're performing, pointing to research which suggests the problem is on the increase.

According to public sector union Unison, reports of bullying have doubled in the past decade and their survey of 7,000 workers found that more than one in three had been bullied in the past six months.

"Figures show that 20% of management time is spent in dealing with conflict and 50% of staff who take long term sickness are struggling with bullying issues<sup>1</sup> so it's important that companies take a serious look at how much time their managers spend dealing with conflict, and how much litigation has to be handled by their lawyers." said Richard Stephens, partner in the employment department with Vanderpump & Sykes Solicitors.

"If there's a problem, they need to take action and deal with negative behaviour. As well as avoiding the cost of employment tribunals, a good working environment pays dividends all round."

Defending a tribunal claim costs employers an average of £20,000 and that figure is rising. Last year there were 189,000 tribunal applications - up one third from 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying at work is when someone tries to intimidate another worker, often in front of colleagues, and is often done by someone in a more senior position. It is similar to harassment, where someone's behaviour is offensive in making sexual comments, or abusing someone's race, religion or sexual orientation.

As well as the more obvious examples of bullying at work like being humiliated in front of colleagues, or physical or verbal abuse, it can include blocking promotion, malicious rumours, or copying memos that are critical of someone to others who do not need to know.

Added Richard: "The legal position with respect to bullying is more complex than discrimination, as there isn't a separate piece of legislation to deal with it, but there is protection for employees.

"For example, they can claim breach of contract on the basis that their employer has failed to provide reasonable support to ensure they can fulfil their job without harassment or disruption. Or there may be circumstances for claiming constructive unfair dismissal or by claiming personal injury protection, as employers have a legal duty to take reasonable care to avoid their workers suffering illness or injury."

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**About Vanderpump & Sykes:** Established since 1899, Vanderpump & Sykes is a well respected North London partnership offering a wide range of legal services to business and private clients.

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