

## Eric P. Bloom: Making racial, sexual or other jokes in bad taste with your staff



**By Eric P. Bloom**

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Hey, did you hear the joke about the you-know-who that did the you-know-what?

How about this one: Did you hear the one about the guy who told a racial joke in the office and lost his job? How about the one about the guy who told a sexually oriented joke in the office and was sued for sexual harassment?

Off-color jokes have a way of offending people. It may be because:

- A co-worker is a member of the group being picked on.
- You are making needless fun of a group or type of person the co-worker loves.
- There are simply many people that hate jokes that hurt people.

My advice to you is to keep dirty jokes, racial jokes and all other inappropriate jokes and comments out of the office. Not only is it in bad taste, but it may also be illegal.

Twice in my career I have seen people get into real trouble telling jokes they thought were funny in front of fellow employees. Both cases ended with similar results.

- Some thought the jokes were funny and were glad he told them.
- Some liked the jokes but thought it was inappropriate to tell them in the office.
- Some disliked the jokes because they were of bad taste.
- Some were silently offended by the joke.
- One or two were not silent in their contempt for the jokes and the person who told them.

In one case, the joke teller lost his job. In the other case, he received a written warning from human resources.

You should also avoid sending dirty jokes from your work email account or via your personal email account from company equipment. In both of these cases, your company has the right, and in some cases the legal requirement, to monitor your emails.

Not only can emails be easily forwarded without your knowledge, but they also permanently document the fact that you sent the joke through the office. For the record, emails can be used as an exhibit in lawsuits. Lastly, just because you delete an email from your work email account, it doesn't mean that it's actually gone. Many companies save all sent and received emails for up to seven years. This is done for business purposes, usually for regulatory or business reasons, but this business process can also be used to retrieve your emails for disciplinary investigations.

I spent most of my professional career as a manager working within an information technology (IT) area. During this time I often had responsibility over the email systems. Upon occasion, for other business reasons, my staff and I were asked to review emails. Upon doing so, we always seemed to come across people who sent personal emails via their work email. Most of them were totally innocent, such as telling their spouse they were working late. Some however, were complaining to their friends about their job, regarding sexual relations with other than their spouse, job hunting with other companies, and related to today's topic, racial and sexual oriented jokes. These findings were mostly kept private, unless they were illegal or against company policy. At minimum, these emails would be personally and/or professionally embarrassing. At worst, they could cost you your job or other dramatic personal loss.

The primary advice and takeaways from today's column is to know that:

- Off-color jokes have a way of offending people.
- Off-color jokes must be kept out of the workplace, including email.
- Just because you delete an email from your work email account, it doesn't mean that it's actually gone.

For additional information on today's topic, I suggest the book "Making Diversity Work: 7 Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace" by Sondra Thiederman.

Until next time, manage well, manage smart and continue to grow.

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