

DISCRIMINATION: practices must protect employees

Firms face prosecution over client harassment of staff

Law firms will soon face prosecution under the Sex Discrimination Act if they fail to protect their staff from sexual harassment by clients, employment lawyers have warned.

The European Equal Treatment Directive, which comes into force this week, obliges employers to protect employees from being sexually harassed by third parties, including clients. The employer must take action if an employee complains of harassment three or more times. Failure to act could lead to prosecution.

Samantha Mangwana, employment solicitor at national firm Russell Jones & Walker, said: 'Client entertainment is part of the lawyer's role, essential to attract new clients and maintain relationships. But alcohol-fuelled loss of inhibition can lead to a client making inappropriate sexual advances. The new directive protects the employee by obliging the law firm's management team to act decisively.'

Ronnie Fox, principal at Fox in London, said the new rules formalised the employer's duty to ensure dignity and respect in the workplace. He added: 'Sexual

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Harassment: new directive

harassment can take many forms and is no respecter of gender. One male solicitor was harassed by a woman client so ardently that she climbed up some scaffolding to get to his bedroom window.'

Roseanne Russell, formerly at the Equal Opportunities Commission and now an employment solicitor at London and Reading firm Doyle Clayton, stressed that even a firm's biggest-spending client could not harass with impunity. 'The senior partner has to act, ensuring the employee is never alone with the offender, for instance, or changing client entertainment so that there is no alcohol.'

Jonathan Rayner