

Why “OK Boomer” is not OK at Work

Labor & Employment Law Update

on December 5, 2019

By now, you most likely have heard the phrase “OK Boomer.” What began as a meme, quickly went viral. Soon enough, Boomer’s themselves have been seen using the phrase in jest. Elizabeth Warren recently used it as the subject line of an email fundraiser (next to a winking emoji). The phrase was the subject of an entire editorial on the most recent CBS Sunday Morning episode. For those of you entirely out of the loop on this one: Dictionary.com lists “OK Boomer” as a “slang phrase” used “to call out or dismiss out of touch or close-minded opinions associated with the Baby Boomer generation and older people more generally.”

The phrase was apparently developed to capture the idea of Millennials and Generation Z being fed up with getting lectured by an older generation; an older generation whom they perceive to be leaving behind a multitude of unsolvable problems. Some are embracing the idea as proof that the younger generation is poised to get more involved and that change is imminent. But the phrase can be seen as discriminatory and ageist.

Yes, trends are cool. Yes, memes are fun. But, the workplace is NOT the place to roll out new material. Ever. And, do you know what is definitely not fun or cool? Being the subject of a harassment complaint and workplace investigation. Or better yet, being named in an age discrimination lawsuit with your repeated use of the phrase, “OK Boomer” serving as proof that your company harbors discriminatory animus towards its older employees.

As noted on the EEOC’s website, “Although the law doesn’t prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that aren’t very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted).” In other words, using the phrase without anything else is not likely going to be deemed to constitute a “hostile work environment.” However, using the phrase casually and carelessly at work can certainly be enough to create the existence of a claim. And while the claim may be defensible by an employer, the term “defensible” often equates to “expensive” in terms of lawyer fees, lost time, decreased productivity, reduced morale, etc. Accordingly, the phrase cannot be viewed as harmless and instead should not be tolerated in the workplace.