

THE CUSTOMER ISN'T ALWAYS RIGHT

Our colleagues and managers are breaking the law if they bully or harass us for being gay. But what happens if we are bullied at work by a customer or client?

Paula had a difficult first year as a new teacher: "The kids clocked that I was a lesbian," she explains. "A bunch of year 10 boys kept calling me a dyke and were regularly abusive." Her head of year refused to challenge it, for fear of upsetting the parents.

It's not just kids who can be cruel, as Lizzie found out: "I used to work in a café where one of the regulars realised I

was gay and was horrible to me. She refused to be served by me and made some really nasty comments. My bosses told me to ignore it, as she spent a lot of money there."



Paula and Lizzie's bosses were both mistaken. As employers, they have a legal responsibility to prevent homophobic harassment against their staff. This includes

harassment from customers, pupils or clients.

If employees feel safe and valued, they are likely to be more loyal. "A prospective client said they didn't want to work with me because they'd heard I was openly gay and they felt uncomfortable about it," says Claire. "My company told them that if they couldn't treat the whole team with respect, we wouldn't be able to work with them. We lost that contract, but have won many more from clients who share our values. Frankly, I wouldn't want to work anywhere else."

If you are the victim of homophobic harassment at work, the first step is to speak to your employer. Contact your union representative to be sure of your legal rights.

Recruitment columnist Katherine Cowan is an independent diversity consultant. For more information go to: www.katherinecowan.net



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