



Fall Semester 2020

Course: MGT404

Case Study 2: Top 20 Blonde Jokes

Instructions:

1. Read the case below, and answer the questions at the end of the case.
2. Your answers must be based on the facts and other supporting evidence as indicated in the case, your notes and the relevant chapter(s) in the book.
3. Your report (summary and answers) should take at a maximum, 2 A4 size pages.
4. This is a group assignment. Each group should consist of 2 to 4 members. Please state on the cover page, the names and numbers of all students in the group.
5. The assignment is due on Wednesday, December 9, 2020. Please send your assignment to my email address: yiannos.rossides@ac.ac.cy
6. Late assignments, if accepted, will be penalized, i.e. the maximum attainable grade will be 80%.

Case: Top 20 Blonde Jokes

Bill Davis was really torn about the complaint that had just landed on his desk from a female employee in the accounting department. As HR director for Midland Pharmaceuticals, it was his job to address any complaints about employee behavior. Over the years, the company had invested a lot of money in training employees on the biggest employee behavior issues-sexual harassment and discrimination-probably, Bill suspected, because of the real danger of lawsuits that could cost the company tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars to settle. *However*, this complaint had Bill stumped.

Midland was a midsize regional company of about 180 employees. Its rural location provided a good quality of life for its employees-no commuting headaches, good schools, and salaries that were competitive with its more metropolitan competitors. Turnover was not an issue-in fact, the last employee newsletter had featured eight members of the same family working for Midland, and the next edition would feature one family with three generations working for the company. This was a good company to work for, and Bill enjoyed his job as HR director.

Jane Williams was a new employee in accounting. She had *moved* here as part of her husband's relocation to the area with another company about three months ago. Bill's conversation with her manager had revealed that she was a model employee-punctual, reliable, and very productive. Then Steve Collins in the warehouse had decided to brighten everyone's Friday by forwarding an e-mail that one of his buddies had sent to him. The title of the e-mail was "Top 20 Blonde Jokes." Collins had used the corporate e-mail directory to send the e-mail to everyone with a simple "Happy Friday" message, so Bill had opened it and, he confessed to himself, laughed at a couple of the jokes. He had then *moved* on to the quarterly report he was working on and thought nothing more of it.

Jane, who was blonde ("a natural blonde," as she had pointed out in her e-mail), did not find the e-mail funny at all - in fact, she took such offense to it that she filed a formal grievance against Collins, claiming that the e-mail created "a hostile working environment" for her (one of the key phrases the lawyers had emphasized in the harassment training). Bill had also been told that Jane was trying to get some of the other women in the department on her side by complaining that since the blonde jokes were always about females, they were discriminatory to women.

Bill had interviewed Jane personally when she was hired, and she didn't strike him as the type of employee who would try to hold the company for ransom *over* such a thing, so he suspected that the "hostile work environment" comment was meant more as an indication of her emotional response to the e-mail than a serious threat of legal action. However, her complaint was a formal one, and he needed to act on it. Unfortunately, Midland's policies on e-mail communication had always been fairly informal. It had never been raised as an issue before now. People were always sending jokes and silly stories, and Midland had relied upon the common sense of its employees not to send anything offensive or derogatory.

The IT folks took all the necessary precautions for network and data security, but as a family-owned company, the thought of monitoring employee e-mails had never been considered. Now, Bill feared, the issue would *have* to be addressed.

QUESTIONS

1. Was *Steve* Collins wrong to send the e-mail? Why?
2. Is Jane Williams overreacting in filing her formal complaint? Explain why or why not.
3. What impact do you think any change in the employee privacy policies would have at Midland?
4. What are Bill Davis's options here?