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Water Cooler Talk: Takeaways From ‘It Ends With Us’ Suits

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This article is part of a [monthly column](#) that connects popular culture to hot-button labor and employment law issues. In this installment, we focus on the workplace anti-harassment lessons learned from the litigation involving the stars of “It Ends With Us.”

The drama of “It Ends With Us” has jumped from the book to the big screen to a real-life legal battle that offers a sharp reminder of how retaliation and digital misconduct can derail even the most powerful players in any type of workplace setting.

While the story in the book and film centered on domestic violence, the real-world fallout surrounding the film production teaches us two major workplace lessons. First, employers must take meaningful steps to prevent harassment from happening in the first place, and mitigate the risk of harassment and retaliation claims being filed against them. And second, social media must be treated as a serious risk area, never as an afterthought.

“It Ends With Us” Background

The 2024 movie, which was based on the best-selling novel by Colleen Hoover, follows the story of Lily Bloom, played by Blake Lively, and her relationship with her husband, Ryle Kincaid, played by Justin Baldoni, who also directed the movie. As the story progresses, Ryle becomes increasingly abusive to Lily, both psychologically and physically, hitting her in the face, pushing her down the stairs and ultimately even biting her.

In addition to its dark and dramatic content, the filming of the movie has created drama in the form of two lawsuits filed by the lead celebrities against each other after the movie was released. On Dec. 31, 2024, Lively filed a lawsuit against Baldoni, the studio and others for sexual harassment, retaliation, breach of contract, intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress, and false light invasion of privacy in the [U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York](#).

In *Lively v. Wayfarer Studios LLC*, she alleges that Baldoni engaged in numerous inappropriate sexual comments and conduct during the movie’s filming. Lively alleged further that, after the film was released, Baldoni retaliated against her for complaining about his on-set conduct by planting allegedly false posts on social media in an attempt to “bury” her, *i.e.*, destroy her reputation.

Two weeks later, Baldoni [brought a separate suit](#) against Lively, her husband Ryan Reynolds and others in the same court. Baldoni's suit, *Wayfarer Studios v. Lively*, alleges that Lively's claims of sexual harassment were false and that she cherry-picked text messages between him and others, culminating in a false story fed to *The New York Times* with the intent to harm his reputation.

The lawsuit alleges claims for civil extortion, defamation, false light invasion of privacy, breach of implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, intentional interference with contractual relations, and intentional and negligent interference with prospective economic advantage, and seeks \$400 million in compensatory damages.

While both cases remain pending, the complaints provide some important lessons for employers in all industries.

Reducing Harassment and Retaliation Claims

First, it is important to remember that any action, whether formal or informal, that could dissuade a reasonable person from speaking up about workplace misconduct can become part of a retaliation claim. That includes public comments, damage to reputation and even digital smear campaigns like Lively alleges in her complaint.

Employers should also remember that, even if employment has ended, post-employment retaliatory behavior still can expose them to serious legal liability. That is, an employee or former employee who engages in protected activity can raise a claim of retaliation if they are subjected to causally connected adverse actions, such as negative job references, or as here, the filing of a lawsuit against them.

Additionally, while Lively and Baldoni have differing views on the conduct that occurred in the workplace — conduct that Lively describes as harassment — all employers have an obligation to avoid creating a hostile work environment, including harassment on the basis of any protected characteristic (here, sex). Having strong harassment policies, comprehensive anti-harassment training, and a clear reporting mechanism for any violations, can go a long way toward helping employers to avoid such claims or mount a defense against them.

Here is what employers can do.

Make reporting safe and accessible.

While retaliation claims arise after someone speaks up, preventing them starts with a strong reporting infrastructure. A harassment or retaliation policy is only as strong as its reporting options.

If the alleged wrongdoer is the only listed contact for reporting harassment or discrimination to, the policy fails. Organizations must offer alternative, clearly communicated paths for reporting, even in small teams or companies with few layers of leadership.

Training from the top down matters.

It is important that all employees, including senior leadership, receive thorough and frequent harassment training. Senior leadership is not immune from claims.

On the contrary, the public-facing nature of their jobs make them even more susceptible. So executives should receive the same (or more) training on what constitutes harassment and retaliation and what does not. The higher the rank, the greater the scrutiny.

It is crucial to follow through.

Even after a complaint is resolved or employment ends, employers must continue to be cautious. Post-employment retaliation, such as negative statements or interference with future job opportunities, can still trigger liability.

The Dark Side of Digital Media

In an era of direct messages and Slack threads, misconduct can unfold far from the office floor. Targeted online messaging and public “astroturfing” (appearing like grassroots support while being privately coordinated) can all be used to intimidate, retaliate or silence complainants.

The Lively-Baldoni case brings this to life. Allegations of manipulated media campaigns, doctored communications and retaliatory leaks demonstrate how quickly social media can complicate a situation. Employers must ensure that the use of digital tools, internally and externally, is aligned with their anti-harassment and anti-retaliation policies.

There are a few best practices for managing digital risks.

Treat informal channels as formal.

Texts, messaging apps and social platforms should be considered extensions of the workplace. If it would not be acceptable in an email, it should not be allowed in a group chat. Train employees, and especially managers, to apply professional standards across all platforms.

Encourage use of company devices.

Limit business texting and encourage employees to use company-sanctioned communication tools where messages can be logged and retrieved if needed. Text messages on personal devices are hard to track and even harder to collect during litigation.

Audit your digital footprint and current policies.

It is important to know that targeted online narratives can backfire, especially if they appear retaliatory. A reputational response plan should focus on truth, transparency and professionalism, not takedowns.

Consider updating harassment policies as well. Make sure these policies explicitly address digital conduct, including cyberstalking, doxing and inappropriate content shared through workplace channels.

The Bottom Line

Preventing harassment and retaliation claims, and curbing digital misconduct, requires more than checking a box. It calls for thoughtful leadership, active policy enforcement and awareness that power, especially when amplified online, can be abused.

The real-life drama behind “It Ends With Us” serves as a cautionary tale of what can happen when workplace power dynamics, weak reporting structures and unchecked digital narratives collide. Whether you are on a film set or in a boardroom, the consequences of getting it wrong can be public and costly.

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