EMC Corp. has long prided itself on its hard-driving sales force. Marketing chief Frank Hauck says he hires salespeople with "the passion to knock down walls" who will fit into "a culture of doing whatever it takes." In training sessions, new sales reps walk across beds of hot coals and break boards with karate-like chops.

The sales team regards itself as an elite force that has turned the maker of data-storage systems into a market leader.

But some former EMC saleswomen say the company's sales culture has a less attractive side: a macho, frat-boy atmosphere that can be intimidating and, at times, discriminatory to women. In interviews, 17 former saleswomen and men who left between 2000 and this year described what they said were locker-room antics, company-paid visits to strip clubs, demeaning sexual remarks or retaliation against women who complained about the atmosphere. Three of the women said male managers unfairly took away accounts they had developed and gave them to men.

Many of their allegations, including the strip-club visits and the taking away of accounts, are also contained in at least six sexual-discrimination lawsuits filed since 2003 by women who once worked in EMC sales offices. The suits claim the women received unequal pay.

A sex-discrimination suit filed in 2004 by two former saleswomen in the Chicago office seeks class-action status. A hearing is scheduled for Sept. 17 in federal district court in Chicago on whether the purported class -- all saleswomen between 2001 and 2004 -- should be certified.

EMC officials deny that the company, which is based in Hopkinton, Mass., has ever condoned sexual harassment or discrimination. If pay was unequal among men and women, EMC said in court filings in the Chicago case, it was because of "the quantity or quality of their work, a bona fide seniority or merit-based pay system" or other factors. EMC says it has transformed its sales culture in recent years and beefed up management training on workplace issues.

Discrimination against women has proved intractable in some male-dominated industries such as construction, and in recent years, financial-services firms have been hit with a string of embarrassing lawsuits alleging discriminatory treatment of women. "Hostile environments for women tend to occur where they're dramatically in the minority," says Gillian Thomas, a lawyer for Legal Momentum, a New York-based women's legal rights
association.

Today, 13.5% of EMC's sales force is female, the company says, compared with 40% at International Business Machines Corp. and 29% at CA Inc., a big software vendor, those companies say. According to the 2000 U.S. census, about 25% of high-tech employees nationally were women.

"Tech sales is predominantly a male environment," says Kelly Harman, managing director of Zephyr Strategy, a Manassas, Va., sales-consulting firm, and former chairwoman of the sales group of Women in Technology, a professional association. "It used to be a very testosterone-laden environment, like playing for a football team. You've had a bunch of white guys running around selling technology. They'll say, 'We won't change just to make you comfortable.' " Ms. Harman says she sees more technology companies working to have "a more balanced sales force."

EMC, which notched sales of $11.2 billion last year, sells data-storage devices and software to big corporations. Founded in 1979 by two electrical engineers, it branched from selling office furniture to making printed circuit boards and eventually storage products. By the 1990s, its aggressive sales force had persuaded many corporate customers to use the company's hardware instead of more expensive devices from competitors such as IBM and Hewlett-Packard Co.

Its sales force, recruited heavily from the ranks of former college athletes, developed a reputation for never taking no for an answer. Salesmen called their best customers daily, gave them small gifts and sent them expensive bottles of wine when they dined out with their wives. Sales reps were expected to spend evenings dining with clients and weekends golfing with them.

The company still prides itself on its fighting spirit. At a national sales meeting in Las Vegas in 2002, Chief Executive Officer Joseph M. Tucci bounced out for a keynote address wearing boxing gloves. Nevertheless, EMC says its sales culture is hospitable to women.

Women sales reps hold key accounts such as DaimlerChrysler AG, Computer Sciences Corp. and Citigroup Inc. EMC spokesman Mark Fredrickson describes the company as a great place for women, and arranged for six top saleswomen to meet with a reporter for this newspaper. "The sales force is one of the best in the world. It's the most aggressive. I'm comfortable in that competitive world," said Emily Stampiglia, a seven-year veteran who previously worked at Microsoft Corp. She recently was promoted from the McLean, Va., sales office to a strategic marketing job. All six women said they had no knowledge of any sexual discrimination at EMC, and hadn't previously been aware of any allegations or suits by former saleswomen.

Former saleswoman Susan Bullwinkle, who worked in the Denver office for seven years and was contacted independently, says she was aware of salesmen visiting strip clubs, but never experienced any discrimination or harassment. "If you're looking to make a ton of money and be enabled," she says, "it's a great place to be."

The law firm representing the plaintiffs in the Chicago lawsuit, Stowell & Friedman, says it has collected 30 sworn affidavits from other former saleswomen that support their clients' allegations of a hostile and discriminatory work environment. Plaintiffs lawyers estimate that fewer than 500 women worked as EMC sales reps between 2001 and 2004. The lawyers say EMC saleswomen have filed 12 sex-discrimination cases with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission since 2001. Much of the court record in the Chicago case, including the affidavits, is sealed.
Tami Remien and Debra Fletcher, former EMC saleswomen who filed the Chicago suit, allege that discrimination eventually cost them their jobs. Ms. Remien said in the lawsuit that her boss, Richard Otten, and other salesmen in the Chicago office made her the target of "profanity-laced and gender-based tirades" when she worked at the company between 2001 and 2003. The lawsuit said Mr. Otten told her she wasn't qualified to fill a vacant position on the big Motorola Inc. account because she wouldn't "smoke, drink, swear, hunt, fish and tolerate strip clubs."

EMC declined to make Mr. Otten available for an interview, and he didn't return phone calls requesting comment. Mr. Fredrickson, the company spokesman, says the Chicago case is "completely without merit." He says the "salacious details" are "largely in dispute," and they "have little to do with the core legal issues" -- whether women were systematically underpaid. EMC is contesting the effort to make the Chicago suit a class action, saying the individual women's situations differ and each case should be handled separately.

EMC says it has long had a written antiharassment policy. It prohibits conduct that, "if unwelcome," could constitute harassment, including "sexual epithets, jokes...gossip regarding one's sex life" and downloading suggestive material from the Internet.

Much of the behavior that former employees -- some of whom were identified through plaintiffs' lawyers -- said contributed to a hostile work environment dates back several years. Twelve former saleswomen who worked for EMC between 1997 and 2006 said sales offices often were places where men freely made disparaging remarks about women. Four former saleswomen said that between 2000 and 2003, EMC national sales meetings and meetings with customers were sometimes followed by trips to strip clubs. A saleswoman who used to work in the Denver office says that at the annual sales kick-off meeting in Atlanta in 2001, managers, from vice presidents on down, took groups to such clubs.

In a 2003 discrimination lawsuit filed in California Superior Court in San Francisco, Lisa Nelson, who worked for EMC from 1994 to 2002 and rose to become the strategic account manager handling customer service on the Oracle Corp. account, said that when she worked in the Chicago office, a stripper was hired to come to the hotel where a company meeting was being held to celebrate the promotion of two managers. Ms. Nelson left the room and waited in the hallway, her lawsuit said.

While waiting there, she heard male salesmen who left the room saying that her "boss licked whipped-cream off the strippers' breasts," her complaint said. EMC's Mr. Fredrickson says that at the time of the lawsuit, the company wasn't able to "substantiate the incident," which allegedly took place sometime in the late 1990s.

Ms. Nelson's lawsuit was dismissed by the state court because her EMC employment contract required it go to arbitration. Both EMC and Ms. Nelson's lawyer declined to discuss how the arbitration was resolved.

Federal and state courts have referred at least five cases to arbitration, citing EMC's employment agreements, where they were resolved confidentially.

Mr. Hauck says that when he took over the sales force in 2001, he tried to make it clear that EMC wouldn't tolerate a hostile environment for women -- consistent, he says, with previous policy. Shortly after he took over, he says, a controller showed him an expense account from a salesman who wanted to be reimbursed for taking a client to a strip club. Mr. Hauck says he told the controller to refuse to pay the bill and to tell the sales force EMC wouldn't reimburse that type of client entertainment. He says he was
reiterating an existing corporate policy.

To instill appropriate behavior, at every event where he speaks, Mr. Hauck says, "I remind people they're ambassadors of EMC." Asked about visits to strip clubs with clients and raunchy jokes, he responds: "I would venture to say if it happens, it's not something that happens with any degree of regularity."

Mr. Hauck, now an executive vice president in charge of marketing, contends that EMC's corporate culture today is dramatically different from the way it was when he took over sales. He replaced many employees, he says, recruiting salespeople who can not only sell hardware but help customers solve problems. EMC has expanded training for managers on treating women and minorities fairly, he says, part of an effort to institute formal training in numerous aspects of the business.

After the technology bubble burst in 2000 and 2001, EMC endured a period of plunging revenue and layoffs. Then growth resumed, spurred recently by acquisitions of software companies. EMC's stock is up 73% in the past 12 months, giving it a market value of about $41 billion.

Its top salespeople are well paid. In 2004, the 370 people in the top third of its sales force earned about $330,000 a year, on average, according to documents in the Chicago case. Several of the best-paid ones are women, the company spokesman says.

Some former employees say the changes haven't eliminated behavior that some women find offensive. At a 2006 annual sales meeting at the Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, three scantily clothed showgirls came out on stage, turned around and bent over to show the initials EMC painted on their rear ends, says a former employee who worked in the marketing department until June and isn't involved in litigation.

Mr. Fredrickson says the event was arranged by an executive of a newly acquired company, who was "sanctioned" over the incident. He declined to elaborate. Mr. Fredrickson says the initials EMC were on the showgirls' thighs, not their derrières.

In the Chicago litigation, both sides agree that women never have comprised more than a fraction of the sales force. As EMC slashed overall employment in the wake of the technology bubble, the proportion of women dropped from 11.9% of 1,211 sales reps in 2000 to 8.3% of 875 reps in 2004.

The Chicago plaintiffs claim that female employees lost out in pay and promotion. The 2001 median earnings for 12 women with two to three years of service were $266,063, about 13% less than the $305,417 median for 108 comparably experienced men, according to Jerry Goldman, a math professor at DePaul University who is a paid expert for the plaintiffs. Another plaintiffs' expert, University of Pennsylvania sociology professor Janice Fanning Madden, says that only seven of the 225 salespeople promoted between 1998 and 2004 were women, less than one-third the number that a gender-neutral selection would have yielded.

EMC has disputed that analysis. Its expert witness, Joan Haworth of ERS Group of Jacksonville, Fla., says that average earnings for men and women are not "statistically significantly different in any year and are not always adverse to women," and that after 2002, men and women were promoted at the same rate. According to EMC's Mr. Fredrickson, between 2001 and 2004, annual pay for saleswomen averaged $276,320 a year, 5.1% more than the $262,866 average for salesmen.
Both plaintiffs, Ms. Remien and Ms. Fletcher, were responsible for parts of EMC's Motorola account, and both worked for Mr. Otten, a district sales manager in Chicago. Ms. Fletcher, 52 years old, says she was promoted to an unofficial position as global account manager soon after she was hired in 1999, but she continued to be compensated as a salesperson. She alleges that when she completed a $6 million sale to Motorola in May 2001, Mr. Otten told her that as a manager she wouldn't get credit, and "she should assign the credit to a male salesperson because 'he has a family to feed.'"

The lawsuit says Mr. Otten removed Ms. Fletcher from the Motorola account in March 2002 because of what she said was an unjustified request for her removal by a Motorola representative. He reassigned more of her accounts to male salespeople, the suit says, causing her income to decline. The lawsuit says that amounted to "constructive discharge" -- a legal term meaning that she was effectively fired because her work conditions had become intolerable. Mr. Hauck says he removed her, along with a male sales rep, because Motorola asked for a different representative. A Motorola spokeswoman says: "Our buyers, like all Motorolans, are held to stringent business standards." She adds that she doesn't have enough information to comment about dealings with EMC in 2002.

Ms. Remien, 49, who joined EMC in 2001, said in an interview she complained to EMC's human-resources department in September 2003 after Mr. Otten referred to her as a "b-." Ms. Remien said that Mr. Otten took away all of her accounts, prompting her to resign at the end of the year.

EMC denies that the women lost accounts unfairly and says sales representatives are moved off accounts "for a variety of reasons," including adjustments in sales quotas, salespeople's expertise and customer requests for new reps.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

Former EMC Corp. employee Lisa Nelson settled her lawsuit against the company following court-ordered mediation. This article incorrectly says the case was resolved in arbitration under her employment contract.