



**CIPD Applied Research Conference 2017**  
The shifting landscape of work and working lives

# HR structures and the management of conflict: ghettoising employment relations?

Conference Paper

**Professor Richard Saundry, Dr Virginia Fisher and Dr Sue Kinsey**  
University of Plymouth

# HR structures and the management of conflict: ghettoising employment relations?

Professor Richard Saundry, Dr Virginia Fisher and Dr Sue Kinsey  
University of Plymouth

## Summary

Conflict management and employment relations lay at the heart of the foundation of the HR profession. In 1931, the Institute of Labour Management, a forerunner of the CIPD, was set up *'to assist in the management of recruitment, discipline, dismissal and industrial relations at plant level amongst unionised male workers'* (CIPD 2017). Although these issues still represent a major part of HR work, recent research questions the extent to which the management of conflict remains a central component of either HR or organisational strategy (Saundry et al 2016). This paper draws on Acas-funded research to explore the relationship between the approaches adopted by HR practitioners to workplace conflict and the organisational structures they inhabit. It argues that conflict management is increasingly seen as a transactional and peripheral activity. This not only threatens to inhibit informal and creative approaches to conflict resolution but also points to a progressive marginalisation of employment relations.

## Strategic HRM and the management of conflict

The regulation of the employment relationship was traditionally a core part of the HR function and invariably involved active intervention in individual employment disputes. Crucial to this was a perception of HR practitioners as honest brokers who could adopt a neutral role and ensure fairness and equity (Harris et al 2002). As Jones and Saundry (2012) have argued, this potentially helped them to win trust and promote conflict resolution. However, the advent of human resource management (HRM) in the 1980s signalled a new unitarist orientation for the function, more closely associated with business performance. Critics have suggested that, consequently, the role of the HR function as a mediator between workers and management slipped down, if not entirely off, the organisational agenda (Keenoy 1990, Legge 1989).

In recent years, the alignment between HR activity and organisational imperatives has become even clearer through the emergence of the 'strategic business partner' (Wright 2008, Pritchard 2010, Keegan and Francis 2010). Although the nature of business partnering is widely debated, it has been enthusiastically embraced by HR practitioners as a means of securing greater legitimacy and organisational influence (Kulik and Perry 2008). It is based on the central premise that HR should concern itself with 'value-adding' activities, 'embedding' itself in the business, working closely with line managers to execute strategy (Ulrich 1997). Administrative and transactional activities, which were

previously undertaken by HR practitioners, should instead be devolved to line managers, outsourced or located in shared-service centres.

It has been argued that the emphasis on strategic partnering makes it difficult for HR practitioners to sustain employee-centred approaches (Hope-Hailey et al 2005, Francis and Keegan 2006, Harris 2007). Accordingly, it would seem unlikely that conflict resolution would be seen as having 'added value'. However, the role of HR business partners (HRBPs) and what they consider to be strategic may vary because of local, contextual factors and demands. For example, Roche and Teague (2012) found evidence of employment relations issues including pay design, restructuring and even union negotiations being part of the remit of HRBPs. Moreover, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) argue that partnership is a broader concept that extends well beyond the idea of dedicated HRBPs and potentially incorporates championing and/or advocating the interests of employees.

Whether conflict management is seen as a strategic or transactional activity is an important question. Research has suggested that early and effective resolution of conflict is much more likely in workplaces in which HR practitioners work in close partnership with line managers and where the management of conflict is linked to wider organisational goals of employee engagement and productivity (Jones and Saundry 2012, Saundry et al 2016). However, although more HR practitioners still spend time dealing with discipline and grievance than with any other issue (van Wanrooy et al 2013), the evidence to date suggests that conflict management is not a priority for most UK organisations (Saundry and Wibberley 2014, Saundry et al 2016).

### The research – the ghettoisation of employment relations?

To examine this issue in greater detail, we conducted a total of 31 semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners, drawn from a wide range of different organisational contexts and representing varied levels of seniority. In doing so we explored: the importance placed by practitioners on conflict management; the place of conflict management and employment relations within the HR function; and the extent of employment relations' skills and knowledge.

#### 'Just day-to-day stuff'

The management of conflict was overwhelmingly seen by respondents in our sample as a transactional activity. It was striking that, time and again, respondents, even those intimately involved in dealing with complex conflict management issues, referred to this work as 'day-to-day':

*'...the HR advisers are dealing with all the day-to-day operational work and advising the managers on how to deal with any difficulties within their teams...'*

*'I'm more day-to-day, I do the payroll, the recruitment, disciplinary and grievances, the general welfare of the staff, support and guidance to heads of department...'*

One respondent explained that 'day-to-day operational work' comprised:

*'probation, performance management, grievances, if there's any grievances within the team, and also disciplinary, any disciplinary issues....'*

Another HR practitioner included bullying and harassment as an issue they would deal with 'as a matter of course' as part of their 'day-to-day work'. While descriptions of the detail of conflict management appeared to suggest that it was often multi-faceted and relational, respondents tended to focus on aspects related to policy development, procedural adherence and legal compliance:

*'...a bit like the HR police, cleaning up after people and telling people they can't do things or telling people they should be doing things.'*

There was little evidence that conflict management was either a formal part of organisational strategy or seen as a strategic issue for HR. To a certain degree this reflected the way that most practitioners conceptualised conflict in terms of disciplinary issues and employee grievances. It was rare for respondents to make any link between conflict and wider issues of performance and productivity. At best conflict management was seen as a by-product of broader projects relating to change management and restructuring, rather than being a priority in itself. For example, an HR practitioner in a medium-sized private organisation, when asked whether managing conflict was a strategic issue, replied:

*'I suppose it is and it isn't. It's sort of a transactional day job kind of role. It's going to be there, it's part of our role, but it's not being translated into a strategic aim. I'm more strategic about our projects and how we're trying to add to the value.'*

In contrast, in smaller organisations with more generalist HR functions, the management of conflict was a core concern. However, even here there was an ambition to be more 'strategic', which was associated with a move away from what one respondent described as 'tissues and issues'.

### **In the ghetto...**

The sense of conflict management as a low value-added activity was also reflected in its place within HR structures. Where organisations had attempted to develop more strategic models of HR, conflict management was the preserve of either HR advisers or employment relations specialists. They not only tended to be located centrally, rather than embedded into operational units, but these posts were also typically associated with lower status, pay and influence. Moreover, there was a clear separation between employment relations (perceived as operational and transactional) and the more strategic work of HRBPs, who typically refused to stray into employment relations' territory.

In one organisation, HRBPs and HR advisers had worked very closely together with both contributing to conflict management and resolution. However, it was felt that HRBPs were being 'dragged in' to operational issues and so the two were separated, with business partners relocated to sit within operational units:

*'...for the HR advisers, we do all the day-to-day operational work ... under the previous structure, it was thought that the HR business partners were picking up quite a lot of the operational work. ... Under the new structure we're going to try to move away from that, so they're solely just dealing with the strategic elements.'*

There were mixed views as to whether the distinction between employment relations specialists and HRBPs hindered or facilitated conflict resolution. Some respondents felt that this demarcation worked relatively well:

*'Senior managers know the HRBPs pretty well as they sit on their leadership team meetings. So if they've got a staff conflict issue they might just say to the HRBP, actually I've got this problem and the HRBP would say that the best person to speak to is me and I'll allocate it to one of my team and they'll get in touch to give advice. So the HRBPs don't get involved in advising on individual conflict issues. We respect each other's expertise; it's quite healthy and works well.'*

Others were less sure. They argued that business partners were in a position to adopt an overview of HR issues within a particular area, and therefore arguably best placed to identify and address the early signs of conflict. However, they did not see managing conflict as a priority and instead saw these issues as the domain of either the employment relations specialist or the line manager. At best, conflict management was a consequence of, but not part of, strategic considerations. It therefore spun out of, and was secondary to, the overarching role of the business partner. The following quote explains the process in terms of business partners acting in a commissioning role:

*'The HRBPs are the strategic commissioning individuals in HR ... they act in that strategic space commissioning these operational services. Then there's the business as usual, which we all just get along with in our specialist teams. So discipline cases, grievances, conflict, bullying and harassment and we'd deal with that as a matter of course as part of our day-to-day work.'*

There are two key issues encapsulated in this quote. First, employment relations specialists themselves see their work as business as usual and as a lower order of importance than the work of business partners. Second, employee relations' considerations emerge at a late, and in some cases, the last stage of HR strategic processes, making early resolution more difficult.

## An endangered species?

The way in which respondents perceived conflict management and employment relations raises important concerns about the future of these disciplines as core components of the HR skillset. They were not only associated with 'old school HR', but were seen as irrelevant to aspiring HR practitioners with ambitions to develop into strategic partners. In short, specialising in employment relations was not seen as a path to career success.

Paradoxically, a byproduct of the marginalisation of employment relations was a perceived shortage of high-level skills and expertise. One respondent explained that it was very difficult to recruit staff in these areas:

*'...actually getting somebody with really good, broad experience in dealing with these sorts of issues, they're rare people.... People who deal with trade unions today are very rare.'*

In addition, experienced HR practitioners, including HRBPs, were reluctant to take on, or move into, 'relations'. Instead, organisations tended to concentrate their employment relations expertise into dedicated teams. This specialisation prevented the development and dissemination of knowledge and also made it difficult for organisations to respond to conflict in an agile and creative manner. Any issues that fell into the category of employment relations were unlikely to be addressed and resolved at an early point. For example, one respondent working in a large organisation explained that a difficult grievance situation *'would go to a regional manager, or it would go to a site manager, or it would come to a business partner'*, but this would then be quickly passed on to centralised employment relations (ER) staff:

*'So the expertise was very much firmly within one location in [location], but consequently the rest of the HR community weren't developing that expertise. So the problem was the rest of the HR community rather than ER.... Not because, I think they were passing the buck because HR haven't got the technical expertise in ER ... my view was, was that increasingly ER was cleaning up HR's crap.'*

There was a particular problem finding HR practitioners with knowledge of trade unions and collective employment relations. Even in unionised organisations, where such expertise was seen as necessary, it still lay outside the mainstream concerns of strategic HR:

*'We do have one individual who, can't remember what the job title is, but he liaises with the unions...'*

## Conclusions and implications

While it has been suggested previously that the management of conflict is not on the strategic agenda of UK organisations, this research confirms that it is also increasingly ghettoised within the HR function. What is perhaps more alarming is that this also

appears to apply to employment relations in general. These issues, once the core concerns of the HR profession, do not form part of the strategic armoury of the contemporary HR practitioner. Furthermore, conflict management and employment relations are seen as counter-aspirational.

Of course it could be argued that what one of our respondents dubbed 'old school HR' has become redundant as the collective regulation of employment has been progressively eroded. However, we believe that the ghettoisation of employment relations has a number of far-reaching implications for HR practitioners and the organisations they work in. First, the relegation of conflict management to a second-order activity means that responses to conflict are inevitably reactive, late and focused on the management of risk. Second, the inability to manage conflict effectively threatens to have a negative impact on trust, engagement and well-being with damaging consequences for organisational productivity. Third, organisations will find it difficult to either understand or promote 'good work' if employment relations is viewed as transactional. Finally, there is a danger that organisations will lack necessary expertise if the changing political context triggers a return to more collective employment relations.

In short, we contend that employment relations knowledge and skills are being side-lined and eroded just at the time when it needs to be at the centre of the CIPD's mission to ensure 'better work and working lives'. To counter this, HR practitioners, particularly those entering the profession, need to be encouraged to rediscover the importance of the employment relationship. Management educators also have a key part to play in this by encouraging more critical approaches to the teaching of HRM and also by placing employment relations at the core of their provision. However, the CIPD itself must lead the way by challenging the denigration of employment relations as a transactional activity.

## References

- CIPD. (2017) *Our History*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: [www.cipd.co.uk/about/who-we-are/history](http://www.cipd.co.uk/about/who-we-are/history) [Accessed 30 March 2017].
- FRANCIS, H. and KEEGAN, A. (2006) The changing face of HRM: in search of balance. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 16, No 3. pp231–49.
- HARRIS, L. (2007) The changing nature of the human resource function in UK local government and its role as employee champion. *Employee Relations*. Vol 30, No 1. pp34–47.
- HARRIS, L., DOUGHTY, D. and KIRK, S. (2002) The devolution of HR responsibilities – perspectives from the UK's public sector. *Journal of European Industrial Training*. Vol 26, No 5. pp218–29.
- HOPE-HAILEY, V., TRUSS, C. and FARNDAL, E. (2005) The HR department's role in organizational performance. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 15, No 3. pp49–66.

- JONES, C. and SAUNDRY, R. (2012) The practice of discipline: evaluating the roles and relationship between managers and HR professionals. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 22, No 3. pp 252–66.
- KEEGAN, A. and FRANCIS, H. (2010) Practitioner talk: the changing textscape of HRM and emergence of HR business partnership. *International Journal of HRM*. Vol 21, No 6. pp873–98.
- KEENOY, T. (1990) Human resource management: rhetoric, reality and contradiction. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Vol 1, No 3. pp363–84.
- KULIK, C.T. and PERRY, E.L. (2008) When less is more: the effect of devolution on HR's strategic role and construed image. *Human Resource Management*. Vol 47, No 3. pp541–58.
- LEGGE, K. (1989) Human resource management: a critical analysis. In: STOREY, J. (ed.) *New perspectives in human resource management*. London: Routledge.
- PRITCHARD, K. (2010) Becoming an HR strategic partner: tales of transition. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 20, No 2. pp175–88.
- ROCHE, W. and TEAGUE, P. (2012) Business partners and working the pumps: human resource managers in the recession. *Human Relations*. Vol 65, No 10. pp1333–58.
- SAUNDRY, R., ADAM, D., ASHMAN, I., FORDE, C., WIBBERLEY, G. and WRIGHT, S. (2016) *Managing individual conflict in the contemporary British workplace*. London: Acas.
- SAUNDRY, R. and WIBBERLEY, G. (2014) *Workplace dispute resolution and the management of individual conflict: a thematic analysis of five case studies*. London: Acas.
- ULRICH, D. (1997) *Human resource champions: the next agenda for adding value and delivering results*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press
- ULRICH, D. and BROCKBANK, W. (2005) Role call. *People Management*. Vol 11, No 12. pp24–8.
- VAN WANROOY, B., BEWLEY, H., BRYSON, A., FORTH, J., FREETH, S., STOKES, L. and WOOD, S. (2013) *Employment relations in the shadow of recession: findings from the 2011 workplace employment relations study*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- WRIGHT, C. (2008) Reinventing human resource management: business partners, internal consultants and the limits to professionalization. *Human Relations*. Vol 61, No 8. pp1063–86.