

WORKPLACE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Uncovering the best ways to
minimise tensions at work

Creating a harmonious work environment is vital to getting the most out of your employees.

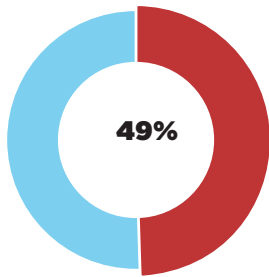
By avoiding workplace tension, ensuring lines of communication remain open and transparent, and quickly dealing with any issues that arise, the foundation will be laid for a more successful and productive team environment.

However, professional teams – like any other – can fall victim to conflict and confrontation, so it is essential that businesses act swiftly to quell problems before they escalate.

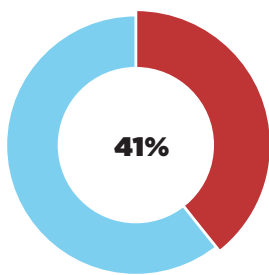
In this report, we will examine the biggest causes of workplace conflict in the UK, as well as the steps managers and HR teams can take to resolve issues that arise, to reduce the likelihood of conflict occurring.

We will analyse the common causes of office politics and explore which relationships are most likely to fall victim to conflict, before looking at how organisations can create the kind of environment that will reduce the chance of disputes developing.

Finally, we will investigate the role of Human Resources in overcoming workplace issues, whether staff feel confident raising issues with HR reps (particularly during disputes with senior management), and finally if HR departments are viewed generally as an effective means of initiating conflict resolution.



Less than half of businesses surveyed have a clear company policy on acceptable behaviour in the workplace.



Most workers think a face-to-face meeting with colleagues is the most effective means of resolving workplace conflict.

Less than half of businesses surveyed (49%) have a clear company policy on acceptable behaviour in the workplace.

35% of workers think HR departments should get actively involved in workplace conflicts.

The majority of UK workers (54%) would try to resolve workplace conflict themselves if it involved them directly.

38% of workers would feel most comfortable talking about workplace conflict with their line manager.

Most workers (41%) think a face-to-face meeting between colleagues is the most effective means of resolving workplace conflict.

Unfair workloads and excessive working hours are the most likely sources of professional conflict.

Workplace gossip and rumours are most likely to cause personal conflict at work.

Better communication between management and staff is key to reducing conflict at work, according to 38% of workers surveyed.

Fewer than half of employees (48%) think their company is effective in dealing with conflict at work.

35% of staff say senior management will get involved in resolving conflict, but only if they deem it necessary.

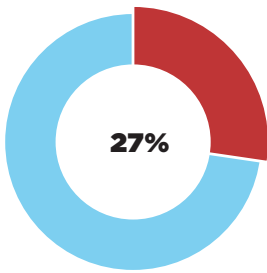
Common causes of workplace conflict in the UK

Feeling they are working more hours or taking on bigger workloads than colleagues are the most common causes of grievance amongst UK workers, and the issues that are most likely to cause conflict in the workplace.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of top issues cited to cause tension are those involving staff who feel they are being slighted in favour of other people, particularly when it comes to perceived preferential treatment and disparity over wages.

Failure to be progressed through a business has been known to cause issues for one in five workers, who say they have noticed a colleague's attitude change if they have been overlooked for a promotion.

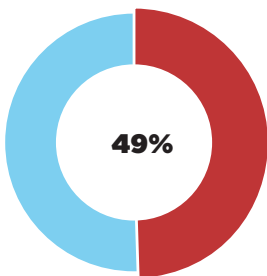
On a more positive note, generating a harmonious work environment goes a long way to keeping the workforce happy, with factors such as desk location, office music and the general atmosphere of the workplace all noted as significant factors in negating office tension.



Some workers say they have noticed resentment grow against friendship groups or clique.

The inevitable development of friendship groups and cliques are also major concerns for bosses looking to avoid disharmony.

Gossip and office rumours are the biggest sources of “personal” conflict in UK workplaces, while some workers (27%) say they have noticed resentment grow against friendship groups or cliques.



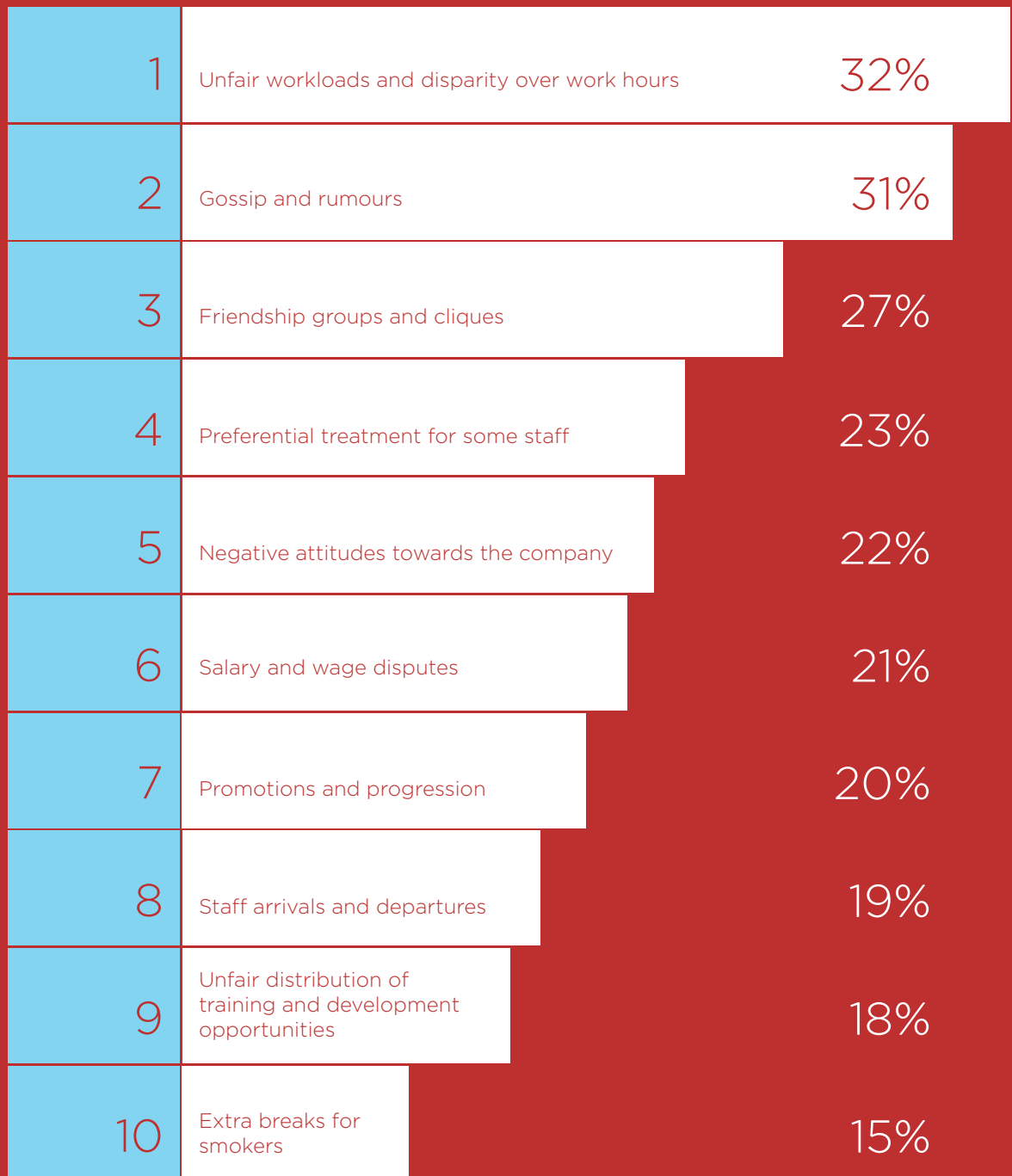
Fewer than half of workers feel their company is effective at dealing with personal conflict.

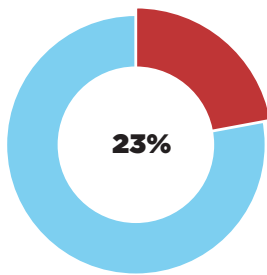
And, whilst a good office social scene and Christmas parties are generally considered good for morale, they are also known to cause problems among co-workers – especially when alcohol becomes a factor.

Worryingly, fewer than half (49%) of workers feel their company is effective at dealing with these problems in the workplace.

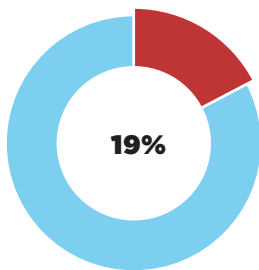
What is clear from these results is that a significant number of conflicts at work are started by colleagues feeling slighted in favour of other people. Opening up better channels of communication between staff and management to explain why certain events occur is an obvious way of dealing with this problem.

Top 10 causes of conflict in UK workplaces





23% of those surveyed
believe team building
activities would improve a
business' atmosphere.



Nearly one in five workers
say better employee
recognition is a key way of
reducing conflict.

What can employers do to reduce conflict in their companies?

Whilst it is difficult to suppress conflict at all times, there are steps employers can take to reduce it, or at least deal with it quickly when it arises.

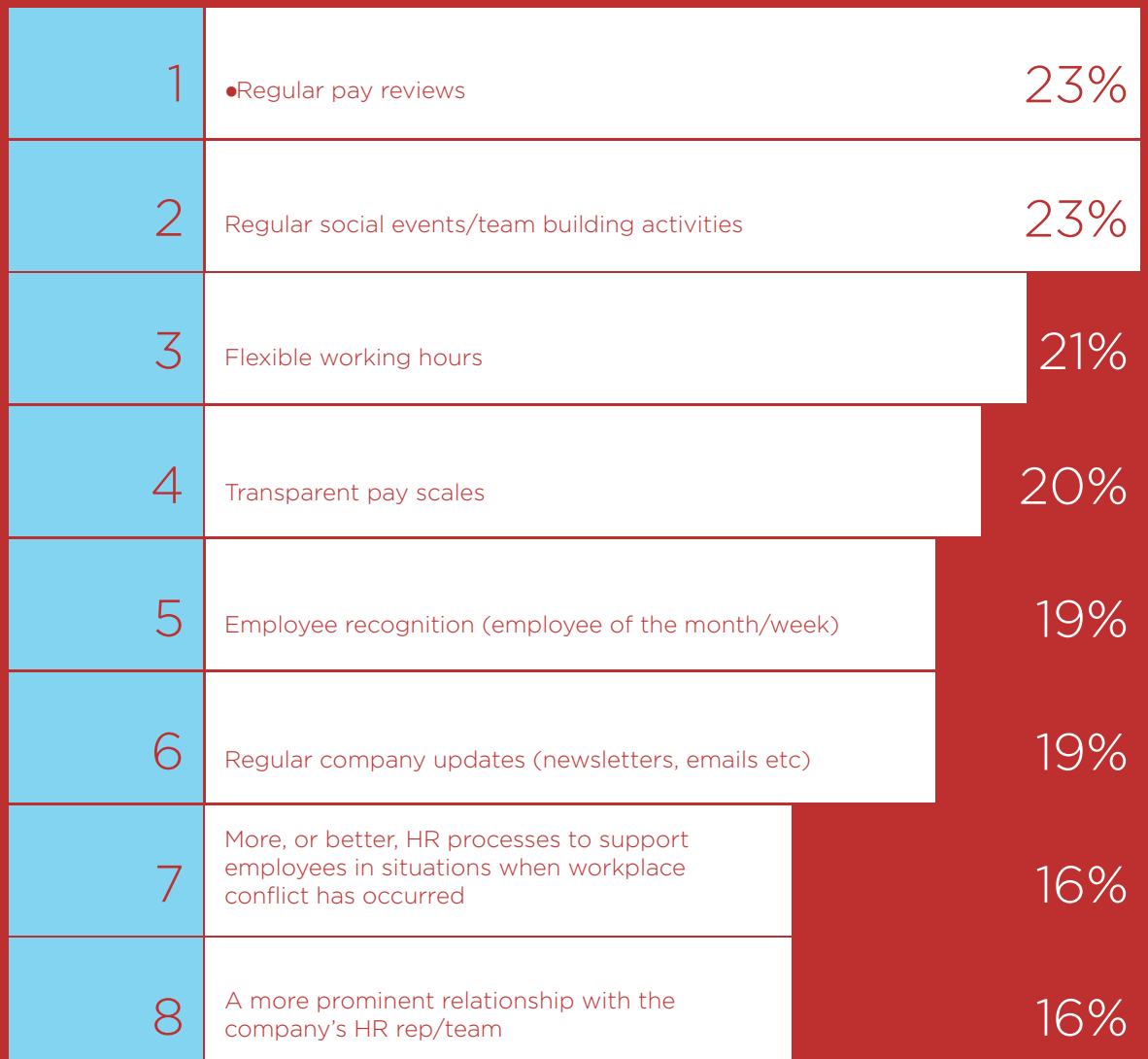
When it comes to what staff think will work best, more transparency across all levels of the business, particularly between management and the wider workforce, is identified as key, with uncertainty about what is happening within an organisation a specific cause of tension and concern.

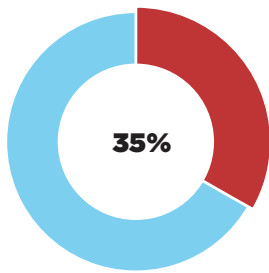
Holding regular team meetings to give management the opportunity to provide company updates is the answer to reducing conflict for 19% of people, while frequent social events and team building activities would improve a business' atmosphere, according to 23% of those surveyed.

For nearly one in five workers (19%), better employee recognition – such as employee of the month awards – are a key way of reducing conflict and creating a more positive work environment.

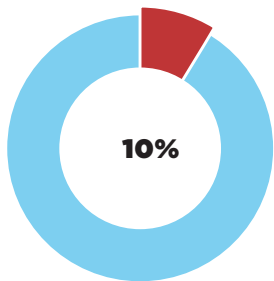
Improving access to conflict resolution would be beneficial, according to nearly one in five workers, whilst 23% say regular pay reviews would make staff more content. 21% also think flexible working hours would make their company a better place.

What would improve morale in UK businesses?





More than a third say they have experienced disputes between co-workers in the past.



One in 10 workers in the UK have experienced a dispute between the wider workforce and management.

Workplace feuds

Disputes between co-workers are the most likely causes of conflict in UK workplaces, with more than a third (35%) saying they have experienced this type of problem in the past.

And, whilst conflict between management and the workforce is a regular story within newspaper headlines, it is also a genuine problem for business owners to overcome, with more than a quarter of workers saying they have reported an issue to their line manager at some point in their careers.

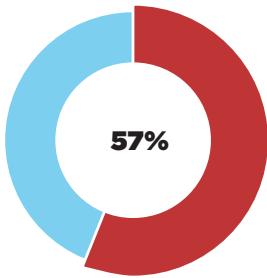
One in 10 workers in the UK have been employed in a company where they have experienced a dispute between the wider workforce and management which, although slightly less common, is still a cause for concern.

Many workers have also reported being employed by a company that has seen conflict develop between members of the senior management team, an issue which is potentially much more damaging to a business' long term survival. 12% of workers say they have experienced this type of conflict at work.

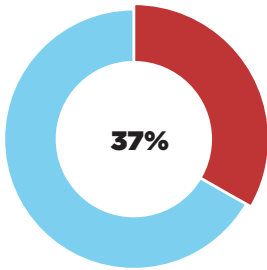
But it is not just conflicts between individuals that are causing issues for UK organisations, with disputes between departments being noted as a regular cause of internal problems for nearly a fifth of workers.

Most common source of workplace disputes

1	Conflict between colleagues	35%
2	Conflict between workers and their direct manager	27%
3	Conflict between departments/teams	17%
4	Conflict between management & the rest of the staff	13%
5	Conflict between members of management	12%



For the majority of UK workers, just witnessing a conflict at work is enough to leave them feeling less motivated.



Over a third struggle to maintain positive relationships with clients, suppliers or customers after an incident of workplace tension.

The impact of conflict

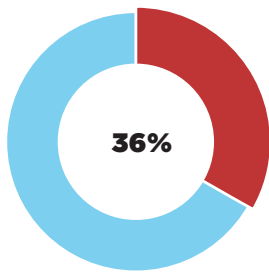
For the majority of UK workers (57%), just witnessing a conflict at work – even if they are not directly involved – is enough to leave them feeling less motivated, at least in the short and medium term.

This also has a knock-on effect on their output, with many (37%) saying they struggle to maintain positive relationships with clients, suppliers or customers in the aftermath of an incident of workplace tension.

As well as changing how they interact with people outside of work, conflict also alters how half of the UK's workforce engage with their co-workers – even those who had no role in the conflict.

Unsurprisingly, being exposed to workplace conflict has a negative effect on the general health and wellbeing of workforces across the UK too, with employees feeling more stressed as a result of these problems.

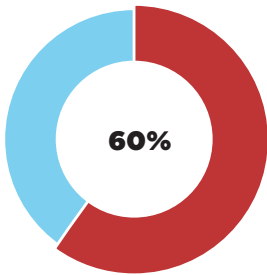
Some workers (27%) have even left their jobs as a direct result of workplace conflict in extreme circumstances, while almost the same proportion have considered quitting – even if a conflict didn't personally involve them or a close colleague.



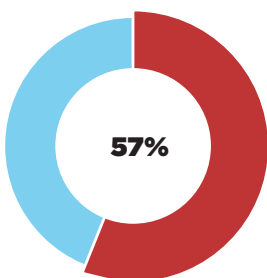
For over a third of people, the fear of being involved in a conflict at work is so great that they have intentionally avoided getting close with their co-workers.

For 36% of people, the simple fear of being involved in a conflict at work is so great that they have intentionally avoided getting close to their co-workers as a means of reducing potential problems.

These figures should be particularly worrying for business owners, as employees clearly don't need to be directly involved in conflict for it to affect their attitude to work. It is evident that a harmonious workplace plays a key factor in employees' retention, therefore it should remain in sharp focus for the management team and HR.



Nearly two thirds say conflict makes them more stressed at work.



57% feel less motivated to work after being involved in conflict.

The impact of workplace conflict

Conflict makes me more stressed at work – 60%

Workplace conflict has had a negative effect on my general happiness – 60%

I feel less motivated to work after being involved in conflict – 57%

Conflict negatively influences how I interact with co-workers – 51%

Workplace conflict has had a negative effect on my productivity at work – 53%

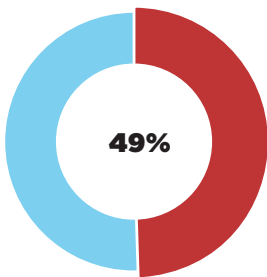
I would likely consider leaving a company if I was directly involved in conflict at work – 42%

Workplace conflict has had a negative effect on how I interact with customers, clients and suppliers – 37%

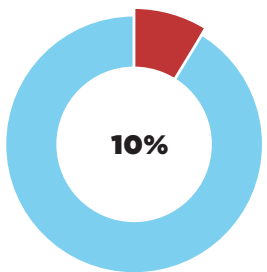
I generally avoid getting close to the people I work with in order to avoid conflict – 36%

I would consider leaving my job if a conflict involved a close friend or colleague – 33%

I have left my job in the past because of a conflict at work – 27%



Fewer than half of employees in the UK say they are working for a company that has an official policy of acceptable behaviour in the workplace.



Almost one in ten have reported that colleagues do take advantage of the lack of policies.

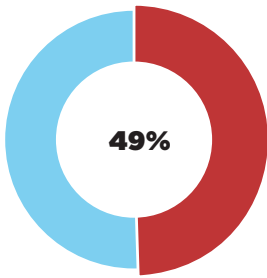
Defining what is acceptable in the workplace

Fewer than half of employees in the UK (49%) say they are working for a company that has an official policy of acceptable behaviour in the workplace.

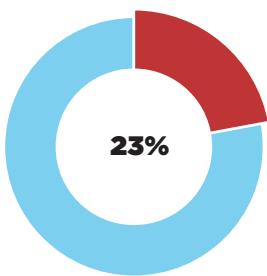
Whilst conflict is inevitable on occasions, setting clear rules around employee conduct can go a long way towards reducing or minimising instances of unrest. However, this is clearly not a widely-utilised practice.

And, whilst this does not necessarily lead to an outbreak of inappropriate behaviour in every case, a number of workers (almost 10%) have reported that colleagues do take advantage of the lack of policies by pushing the limits on what they can get away with before management steps in.

Even in workplaces where appropriate behaviour is not officially defined, it is common for staff to be given a “general idea” of what is acceptable, with nearly a quarter of workers reporting this to be the situation where they work, while one in five workers say their colleagues mostly know how they should act anyway.



Nearly half say the company they work for has no clear policy on what is acceptable.



23% say management have given them an idea of what is acceptable in the workplace.

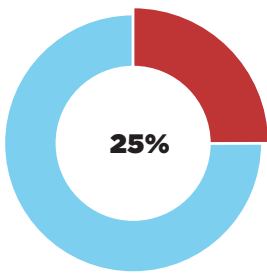
Are bosses doing enough to define acceptable behaviour?

The place where I work doesn't have a clear policy on what is acceptable – 49%

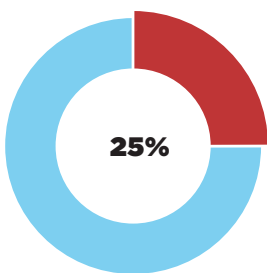
Management have given us an idea of what is acceptable in the workplace – 23%

Workplace behaviour has never been defined but most people know how to act – 21%

Our workplace has no defined acceptable behaviour and people take advantage of it – 7%



Seeking help from the company's HR department or rep is the solution for **a quarter** of people.



25% would leave the affected parties to rectify any problems on their own.

Dealing with problems when they arise

When problems do arise in the workplace, there is a split amongst workers on the best way to deal with them, and who should be involved.

Seeking help from the company's HR department or rep is the solution for 25% of people.

However, the same proportion of people say they would prefer to step in themselves to resolve any issues, whilst another 25% would leave the affected parties to rectify any problems on their own.

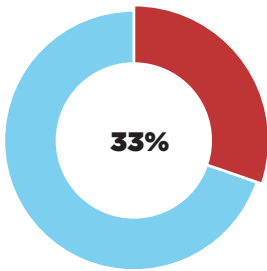
This reveals one of the key difficulties businesses face when it comes to resolving conflict, with workers having such differing opinions on how these issues should be dealt with.

Another cause for concern is how employees feel when dealing with conflict involving themselves and a direct superior, or a member of senior staff.

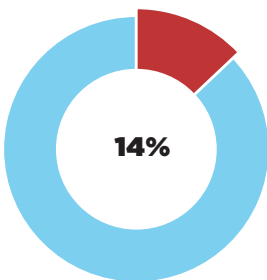
Whilst it could be potentially awkward, most workers (33%) say they would rather have a direct conversation with the manager themselves to try and resolve the problem.

This course of action is followed closely by the 32% who say they would prefer to raise any issues with another member of senior staff, followed by 16% who would discuss it with another colleague.

There are, however, a number of people (14%) who feel unable to raise concerns about a dispute with a senior member of staff. This suggests that there is a gulf in some workplaces when it comes to staff and management.



One third would be more comfortable raising issues with individuals directly.



14% feel unable to raise problems of conflict at work.

Are workers confident raising issues of conflict?

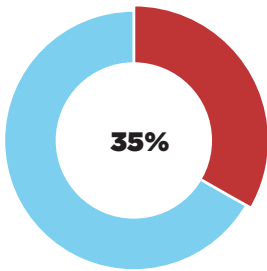
I would be more comfortable raising issues with individuals directly (even if it was a senior member of staff) – 33%

I would feel more comfortable raising issues at work but with another member of senior staff – 32%

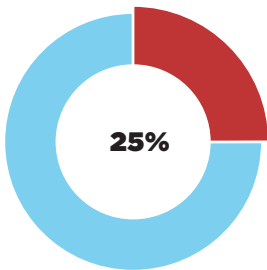
I would raise an issue but with another colleague rather than management – 16%

I feel unable to raise problems of conflict at work – 14%

I would raise a problem with the HR department – 12%



Over a third of workers believe that Human Resource departments should be involved in resolving workplace disputes.



A quarter feel that HR Business Partners should be brought in to resolve escalating conflicts.

Involving HR to resolve workplace disputes

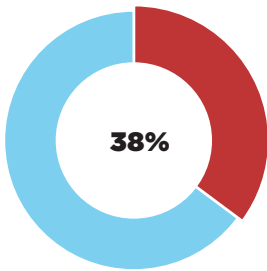
Over a third of workers in the UK (35%) believe that Human Resource departments should be actively involved in the process of resolving workplace disputes, because they are viewed as impartial and better able to facilitate a resolution.

Whilst agreeing that HR Business Partners should be involved when conflict arises in an office, 25% of workers feel they should only be brought in to resolve escalating conflicts, compared to the 22% who believe that the afflicted party's line manager should be able to deal with any issues.

Involving management at all is a step too far in the minds of 18% of workers, who think issues should be resolved by those directly concerned.

For workers who notice conflict developing, the majority say that they are more likely to step in and try to resolve it themselves (54%), compared to the 25% who would immediately refer it to management or HR.

Others (39%) would only take action when an issue begins to impact their own work.



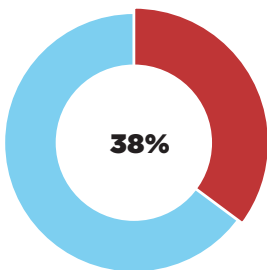
Over a third said they would step in if it involved a close friend or colleague.

Stepping in to resolve workplace conflict

I would step in if it involved a close friend or colleague – 38%

I would step in if I was specifically asked to – 26%

I would not try and resolve conflict myself because I don't like confrontation – 11%



Over a third said they would feel most comfortable raising issues with my line manager.

Who do workers feel most comfortable talking to about workplace conflict?

I would feel most comfortable raising issues with my line manager – 38%

I would most likely raise any problems with a close friend or colleague – 17%

I would raise any issues with another member of my team – 14%

I wouldn't bring an issue up at work but would talk to my family at home – 10%

I would raise any issue with my company's HR department – 10%

I would rather avoid talking about workplace conflict – 12%

Best channel to deal with workplace conflict

Face-to-face meetings between the afflicted parties – 41%

Face-to-face meeting with management – 24%

Conclusion

The majority of organisations in the UK are failing to effectively tackle workplace conflict and establish what kind of behaviour is acceptable.

Feeling overworked and underappreciated is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the biggest source of workplace conflict, followed by a lack of communication between management and the wider workforce.

A failure by management to regularly update workers on the position or direction of the business is said to be especially damaging to morale, with staff saying regular updates and team meetings would be the most effective way of dealing with these problems before they arise.

As well as causing disruption in the workplace, these conflicts are also damaging worker output, and can potentially ruin the reputation of a business in the longer term.

Maybe unsurprisingly, the majority of people say experiencing a conflict at work – even it does not involve them directly – leaves them feeling unmotivated and negatively impacts their relationship with colleagues, clients, suppliers and customers.

When it comes to dealing with disputes, there is a clear divide amongst members of staff as to the best way to resolve problems, with the same proportion of workers split between getting involved themselves, involving management or HR, or just leaving the aggrieved parties to settle the problem on their own.

Human Resources, whilst not the first port of call for many workers when it comes to conflict resolution, is also considered an essential part of the problem solving landscape.

Due to their impartial nature, HR professionals are identified as helpful resources in resolving conflict, and many workers do feel HR could take a more proactive role in settling disputes.

