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Championing better work and working lives

REPORT | *January 2020*

Managing conflict in the modern workplace

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Report

Managing conflict in the modern workplace

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1 Introduction

Most of us spend a large portion of our waking hours at work, and so the quality of the working environment has a significant impact on our well-being. Relationships in the workplace affect the culture as well as the overall quality of work. This is why 'collective and social relationships' forms a key domain in the CIPD's well-being model and why 'Relationships at work' is one of the seven dimensions of the CIPD's Job Quality Index for good work.[1, 2]

A supportive working environment and positive relationships can greatly enhance our experience of work; conflict can seriously undermine it. Negative conflict at work also seriously undermines people's performance and productivity. It is stressful and time-consuming for all concerned, and takes focus away from delivering on objectives and organisational priorities.

Workplace conflict can occur across a wide spectrum of behaviour, from a low-level difference of opinion to serious incidents of bullying or harassment. Movements like #MeToo have shone a sharp spotlight on the stubborn incidence of sexual harassment in the workplace, despite decades of equalities legislation.

Against this backdrop of hopefully heightened awareness about unfair treatment at work, this report examines the state of working relationships in UK organisations. It draws on the views and experiences of both employers and employees, gathered from surveys and employee focus groups, to give us a rounded picture of the employment relationship. The report's findings provide insight into pressing workplace issues such as the quality of working relationships, the incidence of conflict, how confident people are to speak up about bullying and harassment, and how effectively organisations and managers handle complaints.

Not all conflict is necessarily negative, but even a minor disagreement between people can fester and escalate if it's not addressed and resolved at the earliest opportunity. Our research shows that conflict is very much a part of organisational life, and a *common occurrence* at work according to a significant proportion of both employees (26%) and employers (20%). Our survey of employees found that just over a third (35%) had experienced some form of interpersonal conflict, either an isolated dispute or ongoing difficult relationship, over the past year. Employees are almost twice as likely to have experienced bullying than harassment (not sexual harassment) at work over the past three years (15% versus 8%). Just 4% report experience of sexual harassment.

Our findings draw attention to the serious problem of bullying and harassment in UK workplaces and the devastating impact unfair treatment can have on individuals and organisations. They reveal a continued reliance on formal processes and procedures to deal with conflict and evidence of a serious perception–reality gap. Employers' and people managers' confidence to deal with conflict is not matched by the experience of employees who have been on the receiving end of it. We find a good level of confidence shown by employers *and* employees around people's ability to speak up at work but a less-than-satisfactory resolution rate: under half of employees (44%) experiencing conflict report that the conflict or difficult relationship has so far been fully or largely resolved. And the individual's people manager is just as likely to have made the situation worse as helped to resolve the conflict.

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It can take a lot of courage for someone to speak up about inappropriate behaviour at work, but there are very mixed and disappointing results on the ability of organisations to deal compassionately and effectively with complaints. Many people felt their organisation didn't act swiftly or fairly to resolve the complaint, or that they were even being blamed for the situation.

This report highlights key challenges for people professionals in how they guide organisations in handling conflict at work. It's encouraging that employees show a willingness to speak up if they feel they are being unfairly treated at work, but if the organisation's response falls far short of what's needed, people's confidence could be short-lived. Much more focus is needed by organisations to create genuinely inclusive cultures that recognise and nip conflict in the bud, respond quickly and sensitively to complaints, and ensure people managers are part of the solution and not the problem.

For more information on fostering an inclusive workplace, see our research on building inclusive workplaces.

Box 1: What is conflict?

We all have different experiences, backgrounds and perspectives which mean that we often see the world in different ways. This means we can all react differently to situations at work, which can also affect the relationships we have. This diversity of experience and thought is a good thing, but on occasion it can also lead to misunderstanding and conflict between individuals which need effective resolution strategies.

It's hard to pin down a precise definition of conflict, and one person's perception of a difficult situation can differ from someone else's. Some conflict can even be positive, such as a healthy amount of competition to reach goals or when a problem-solving approach is used to discuss differing opinions on a work project to reach a creative solution. A work group may have a conflict in deciding what strategy to pursue, or how to allocate responsibilities, for example. These conflicts can have a fruitful outcome if managed correctly.

There can be a fine line between this kind of conflict and where conflict becomes negative, such as behaviour that is unfair and unethical, and causes distress and disruption to the individual, group and even the wider organisation. Negative conflict between individuals at work can occur across a wide spectrum of behaviour, ranging from a one-off disagreement, or 'personality clash' or ongoing difficult relationship, to more serious manifestations of unfair treatment such as bullying and harassment.

Unhealthy conflict that has a negative impact on people can come in overt forms, such as verbal abuse or a shouting match. But it can also come in less tangible and visible forms, such as underlying and destructive tensions or resentment between people or isolating someone from a social event. It's this latter type of conflict that in some ways can be more challenging for organisations to identify and tackle. This is why organisations need to understand the myriad ways in which conflict can occur between individuals and be alert to any undercurrents in the working culture. The key to successful conflict management is understanding the real reasons for it, which in turn should ensure the organisation has an appropriate response to resolving it.

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2 What do the findings mean for people professionals?

People professionals should be at the forefront of fostering inclusive working cultures that do not tolerate any type of inappropriate behaviour, but to do so they need to know what steps to take. Therefore, we focus on four key insights that we believe HR needs to act on:

- Build inclusive cultures based on prevention.
- Put the ER back into HR.
- Let's shift from process to resolution.
- Ensure better support for managers in the front line.

Build inclusive cultures based on prevention

Overall, our research finds that both employers and employees are positive about the culture in their workplace. The overwhelming majority of employees report good working relationships with their colleagues and managers. But scratch the surface and there are signs of potential undercurrents in terms of how truly inclusive the working environment is for some people.

Our findings show organisations need to take stronger action to prevent stereotypical attitudes and unfair treatment if they are to build workplaces that foster acceptance and respect. A quarter (24%) of employees think challenging issues such as bullying and harassment are swept under the carpet in their organisation, while one in five (20%) agree that *'people in my team sometimes reject others for being different'*. An inclusive workplace is built on an acceptance – and celebration – of every individual, regardless of background, identity or circumstances. Attitudes and behaviours do not have to come in the form of overt prejudice for someone to feel excluded, and so the level of disagreement with this statement is a reminder that organisations need to be alert to any hint of a working environment that doesn't embrace diversity and tolerance. Employers, as well as individuals, will suffer if they don't treat complaints seriously and the culture doesn't encourage openness and a willingness to challenge inappropriate behaviour. Positive relationships at work should be underpinned by an open and collaborative management style, good teamworking, healthy interactions with peers and managers, and an ethos of dignity and respect.

When dealing with unfair treatment at work, prevention is better than cure. Employers should strive to develop cultures where harassment is known to be unacceptable. Policies dealing with equality and diversity, and bullying and harassment, are important but will only have impact if they are visible and brought to life across the organisation. Employers should promote the importance of respect between employees at every level of the organisation and ensure that people's behaviour reflects the right values. Senior leaders need to take a visible lead on the issue and set the tone for fostering a working environment where people feel empowered to speak up. They should be exemplary role models and consistently champion appropriate behaviour so that people managers and employees know exactly what's expected of them.

People managers should be trained in managing people effectively, including how to address conflict in their teams and deal with any concerns or complaints. All employees should know how to raise a complaint and to whom, and organisations should deal promptly, seriously and discreetly with any issues that are raised. Organisations may want to consider using more proactive and innovative reporting channels such as anonymous and/or confidential methods like telephone helplines run by third parties to provide support for employees wishing to report bullying or harassment.

People professionals have a crucial role to play in helping to build workplace cultures that are inclusive, and foster openness and transparency. The profession has a responsibility to ensure that any poor practices and behaviours that have led in the past to grievances and complaints do not continue.

Put the ER back into HR

Ongoing trends in employee relations (ER), including the fall in trade union and employee representation and lack of people manager capability in dealing with challenging people issues, have had a significant impact on the ability of employees to access effective conflict resolution processes, according to Acas.[3] Another key factor is the changing nature of the HR function itself. Its centralisation as the function takes on a more 'strategic' focus means there's a risk managers may be isolated as they assume day-to-day responsibility for managing conflict. At the same time, less value is often attached to the role of employee relations as an HR discipline, with conflict management typically viewed as operational and transactional in nature.[4]

Over the past decade CIPD research has highlighted the shifting role of HR and ER professionals, and the accompanying decline in conflict management as a core strategic focus.[5] Against this backdrop employee relations is increasingly viewed as a skillset rather than an aspirational career choice for the ambitious HR professional. This perception needs to change if the people profession is going to be able to rise to the challenges highlighted in this research. Too often, bullying and harassment issues aren't recognised early enough or resolved effectively.

It's evident that many employers don't even acknowledge the existence of conflict, according to research commissioned by Acas.[6] Alternatively, it's viewed through the narrow compliance lens of formal complaints and procedures rather than as an inherent and dynamic element of the employment relationship.

Organisations need a much wider, and more realistic, understanding of conflict to recognise it and respond effectively. Conflict is a fact of life in the modern workplace; against a backdrop of tumultuous political and economic change and highly pressurised work environments, there has never been a greater need for the expertise offered by ER specialists. People professionals have a vital part to play in ensuring that conflict is understood in all its nuanced complexity, and that organisations give it the strategic attention it deserves. We need to not only reassert the status of the ER specialism but broaden its reach so that the management of the employment relationship, and conflict, is seen as an integral part of every people professional's role.

Let's shift from process to resolution

One consequence of not viewing conflict from a strategic standpoint is that it tends to be dealt with in a reactive, ad hoc way. The focus is on handling individual disputes as they occur rather than on developing an organisational approach that develops early and collaborative ways to resolve conflict. Our findings show that employers are not making the most of the potential of early dispute resolution approaches like mediation to help settle disputes.

Further, over the years there's been significant expansion in the individual statutory rights framework in the UK. This has prompted many organisations to adopt an increasingly compliance-focused approach to handling conflict: it can feel much safer for employers, including HR, to avoid falling foul of the law by following policy and process to the letter. Too often, this means that formal procedures become the default option instead of coming into play only when there is no hope of resolution through a more positive approach. Our findings call out the need for more effective and collaborative ways to resolve conflict.

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Almost a third (31%) of the employees in our survey who had experienced conflict said the person they reported it to didn't take the conflict seriously, and almost half (48%) felt the other party's interests took precedence.

Our findings show how harmful the impact of conflict can be on individuals. Formal processes are often adversarial and drawn out, and can add further stress for people, as well as being challenging and costly for the organisation. Formal procedures like grievance have their place, but once they are initiated, positions typically become entrenched and the employment relationship is broken for good.

The CIPD's new Profession Map sets the context for the people profession to move away from an approach that is risk-averse, with over-reliance on policies and procedures, to one that is much more people-focused and promotes ethical practice.[7] One of our three key values for the profession is that it should be 'principles-led': this means *'seeing beyond the rules to do what's right and using principles to inform our decision-making'*. This has direct relevance for how people professionals develop effective approaches to resolve conflict. It means understanding that situations and decisions involving people are not always clear-cut; there are lots of shades of grey, and a strict adherence to procedure is unlikely to produce the best outcome.

The people profession often has a challenging role to play, balancing the needs of the organisation and employees, particularly in situations of conflict. There are often multiple interests in play where there is a difference, or a dispute. A people professional's role will vary in its level of influence in an organisation, but being principles-led means having the confidence to challenge if a situation is not being handled in the right way. We can't lose sight of the fact that we are there to help people have a voice at work, and people's well-being has to be centre stage to achieve our purpose of creating better work and working lives.

Another key value for the profession is to be 'evidence-based' and draw on *'strong evidence from diverse sources to inform our professional judgement'*. Again, this value should inform people professionals' approach to managing conflict and encourage a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics in organisations and between people. When formal procedures are instigated, the issue causing the conflict can become lost. When conflict occurs, it's often not the immediate issue that is even the true source of the dispute. Helping people to address conflict at an early, informal stage should encourage a deeper understanding of the underlying sources of conflict. This is far more likely to foster dialogue and the kind of problem-solving approach to produce a mutually acceptable outcome for the parties involved in the conflict.

If an allegation of harassment is serious, and/or the person on the receiving end of the unfair treatment wants to pursue a formal complaint, it may be most appropriate to go straight to a formal grievance and/or disciplinary process. But even harassment can take place across a very wide spectrum of behaviour and be unintentional, and there could be circumstances where a voluntary, informal approach to resolution can be helpful. Formal policies and procedures still have their place, but they need to know their place. Even the most detailed, thorough policy on its own will not necessarily deal with the real problem underlying the conflict, even less so if the policy sits on the shelf. We need to be guided by policy and process and not bound by them.

Ensure better support for managers in the front line

Over the past decade or more the trend has been to devolve responsibility for people management activities to people managers. Managing people is a big job and typically comes with a number of important responsibilities, such as implementing people

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policies, managing performance and absence and, of course, managing conflict. Carrying out any of these activities on top of an operational role can be challenging. If a manager hasn't been trained to be knowledgeable and competent, and doesn't receive ongoing support and guidance, the task could be very daunting.

Our findings show that managers tend to be least confident about the 'people' aspects of their role, such as managing conflict and having difficult conversations, compared with the more technical aspects like meeting deadlines and managing projects. This is far from surprising given the low level of investment in their training: only two-fifths (40%) of people managers say their organisation has provided them with training in people management skills to support them in their management role. Despite this, people managers report a surprisingly high level of confidence in their ability to deal with different aspects of conflict: the overwhelming majority say they would nip conflict between team members in the bud and that they understand what kind of behaviour constitutes bullying. Employers also exhibit a high regard for the capability of their managers to identify and handle conflict.

This level of confidence is not matched by the views of many employees taking part in our research: for example, when asked how effective their people manager was in dealing with the conflict they experienced, a third (32%) who had experienced conflict said their people manager had made the situation worse. This isn't surprising given that the person most likely to be the source of the conflict is the individual's people manager or supervisor.

If more organisations were aware of the potential benefits of training managers, perhaps more would be keen to invest in this area. Respondents to our employer survey are significantly more likely to report a number of tangible outcomes in their ability to handle conflict where they have invested in people management skills training. For example, four in five (79%) agree that *'if there is conflict within a team, a line manager would help to resolve this quickly'* compared with three in five (61%) organisations where managers haven't been trained, while four in five (82%) agree that *'line managers help their team to build healthy relationships'* compared with 56% of organisations where managers hadn't been trained.

Our findings show how people managers are at the forefront of identifying and managing conflict, as well as often being a cause of it. They need to have the confidence and capability to be proactive and deal with conflict at the earliest possible stage: this means challenging behaviours that cross the line into being inappropriate and being sensitive to situations where banter becomes bickering or bullying, as well as picking up on any underlying tensions in their team. The tendency for organisations, and the people profession, to be compliance-focused and rely on the perceived safety of formal procedures to resolve conflict is even truer of people managers, particularly where they lack the ongoing guidance and support of HR. It's vital that employers, and people professionals, invest in the skills and competence of managers so that they are not afraid of tackling conflict head on and encouraging informal, positive routes to resolution.

Conflict management guidance for people managers
People managers play a critical role in addressing conflict at its early stages. Learn how to deal with conflict head on by reading our new, practical guidance for people managers.

Explore the guide

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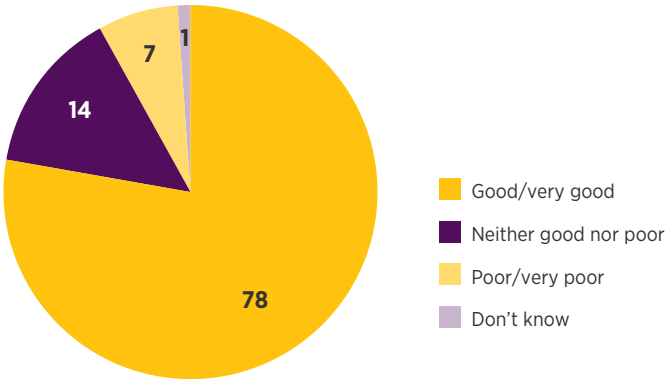
3 What's the climate like in UK workplaces?

Key findings

- Employers are positive about the climate in their workplace, with more than three-quarters describing it as 'good' or 'very good'. Employees are also positive, with the overwhelming majority reporting good working relationships with both colleagues inside and outside their team.
- Dig a little deeper and there is cause for concern about the inclusivity of some working environments. For example, fewer employees (63%) agree that *'no one in my team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts'* and one in five (20%) say that *'people in my team sometimes reject others for being different'*.
- Employees with a manager are generally positive about their relationship with their people manager or supervisor, with four in five (80%) describing it as good. Most people trust their manager or supervisor to take their concerns seriously. However, the most common view is that people management treats some team members more favourably than others (43% of employees versus 36% who disagree).
- There's room for improvement in how top managers lead the way in fostering a culture based on dignity and respect: just half (49%) agree that *'good behaviour is role-modelled by senior leaders in my organisation'* (26% disagree).

Employers are generally positive about the climate in their organisation, with more than three-quarters (78%) rating the working environment and culture as 'good' or 'very good' (see Figure 1). How does this compare with what employees think? At first glance we find there's a similar perception, with an even bigger majority reporting good working relationships with colleagues (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: How would you rate the working environment and culture at your organisation? (% of employers)



Base: all (n=1,016), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019.
Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

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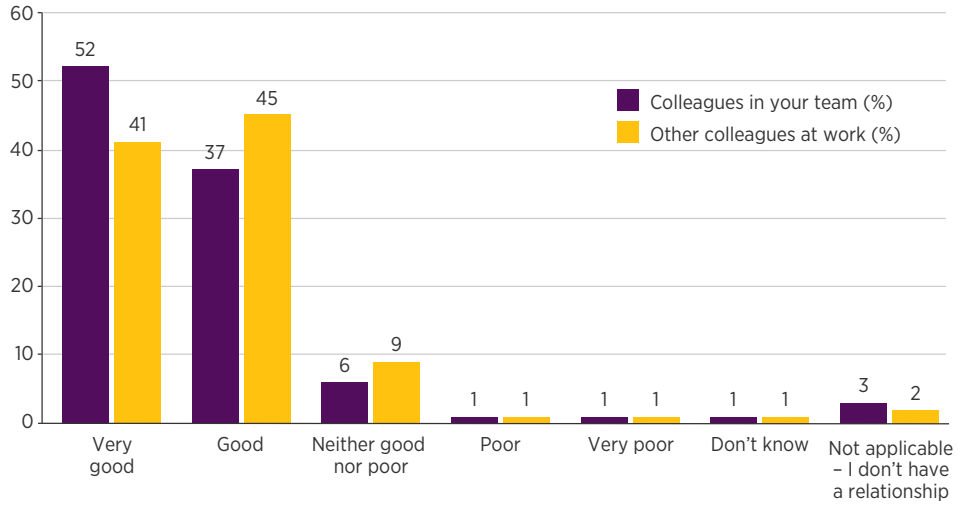
Figure 2: How would you describe your relationship(s) at work with...



Base: all employees (n=2,211)
Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

When we probe a bit deeper into the quality of relationships between peers, the findings are still generally positive: almost three in four (73%) employees agree that *'my colleagues treat other colleagues with dignity and respect'* (9% disagree). However, there are some concerning findings in the case of some working relationships. For example, a lower percentage of people (63%) agree that *'no one in my team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts'* (16% disagree) and one in five (20%) agree that *'people in my team sometimes reject others for being different'* (60% disagree).

Senior leaders have a defining influence on the culture of an organisation, and how they behave will set the tone for how everyone else interacts. Our findings from our employee survey show there is some room for improvement in how top managers lead the way: just half (49%) agree that *'good behaviour is role-modelled by senior leaders in my organisation'* (26% disagree). Similarly, over half (57%) agree that *'senior people in my organisation talk about the importance of respect and inclusion'* (19% disagree).

Employees were asked to describe in one sentence how they would describe the culture in their organisation in relation to managing conflict, including dealing with bullying and harassment:

'We have fostered an open culture where any problems are addressed and not allowed to escalate.'

'We have a very open and inclusive culture, where colleagues are good friends and speak freely, discussing things and resolving issues in a diplomatic and open manner.'

'The boss can be a bully but hasn't tried to bully me so far.'

'The culture is very fluid with listening to people's thoughts on the conflict to them moving on to formal procedure, which are well documented.'

'Problems can be brushed under the carpet in some areas. It depends on who you have as a manager.'

'Open, honest and supportive.'

'Good. Clear policies and processes.'

'The company encourages co-operation and open discussion to resolve conflicts between colleagues, and does not accept bullying or harassment.'

'We have a culture of openness to bring our problems to management.'

'Where possible most managers ignore it and bury their head in the sand.'

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We asked participants in our two online focus groups what a 'good' workplace culture looks like. The views can be summed up as a culture *'where employees are able to discuss concerns without fear, and where there are clear protocols regarding workplace behaviour'*. The first word cloud below illustrates what participants in the focus group comprising managers thought a 'good' workplace culture looks like, with the size of word denoting its frequency of use.

We also asked our focus group participants to describe a 'bad' workplace culture. For participants in the second focus group of employees who have experienced conflict, the word 'fear' comes to mind. At the forefront of this word cloud is lack of leadership, a firm reminder of the key role the top team should play in creating a culture based on dignity and respect (see the second word cloud below).

Word cloud showing what a 'good' workplace culture looks like, according to managers:

Wordcloud showing what a 'bad' workplace culture looks like, according to employees who had experienced conflict:

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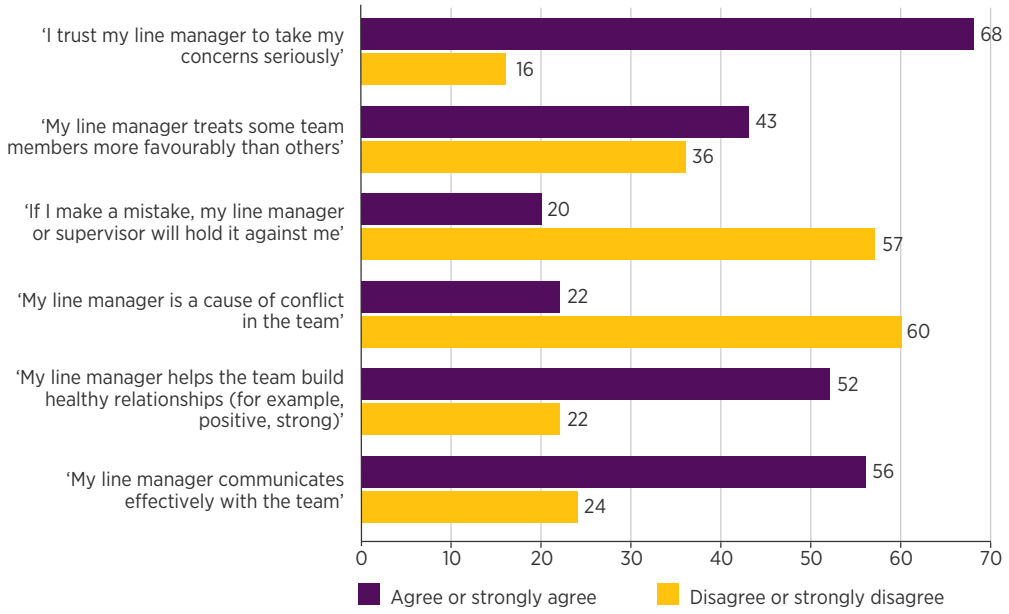
People managers: good, but not perfect?

Employers seem confident about the ability of their managers to create a good working environment: almost three-quarters (73%) agree that people managers help their team to build healthy relationships (just 7% disagree).

Individuals are also generally positive about their relationship with their people manager or supervisor, with four in five (80%) employees with a manager describing it as good and just 7% as poor. Managers are even more positive about their relationships with the people they manage: more than nine in ten (92%) rate them as good and just 2% as poor.

Most people trust their manager or supervisor to take their concerns seriously. But dig a bit deeper and some cracks emerge in people's perceptions of people management: around one in five employees say their manager would hold a mistake against them and that their manager is a cause of conflict in the team. There's a common view that people management treats some team members more favourably than others (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: What do people think of their line manager? (% of employees)



Base: all employees with a line manager (n=2,041)

4 The extent and nature of workplace conflict

Key findings

- Conflict at work is a *common occurrence* according to a quarter (26%) of employees, while one in five employers (20%) say the same.
- Our survey of *employees* shows that just over a third (35%) have experienced some form of interpersonal conflict at work over the last year, either an isolated dispute or incident of conflict or an ongoing difficult relationship.
- Unsurprisingly, people are most likely to clash with the people they spend most time with at work, with conflict most common with someone's people manager or a team member.

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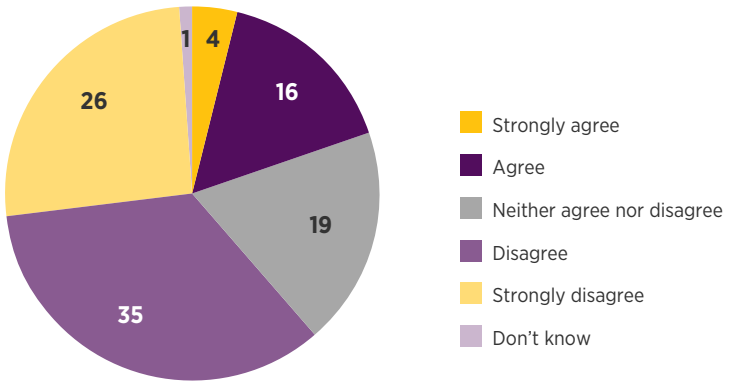
- The single most common cause of conflict is *differences in personality styles or working*, a catch-all description that can cover a multitude of different attitudes, tensions and dynamics between individuals in the workplace.
- By far the most common behaviour associated with conflict at work is lack of respect, reported by two-thirds (66%) of employees experiencing their most serious conflict.
- Our findings show how devastating the negative effects of conflict can be on people. Stress, a drop in motivation or commitment, anxiety and a loss of self-confidence are the most common effects on people, but some individuals say the impact is felt for years, and their confidence will never be the same again.

How widespread is workplace conflict?

Conflict at work is a common occurrence according to a quarter (26%) of employees, the same proportion who thought so when we asked employees the same question in a survey on workplace conflict five years ago.[8]

We also asked employers how widespread conflict is in their workplace, and a similar perception emerges, with one in five agreeing it's a common occurrence (Figure 4).

Figure 4: 'Conflict in my workplace is a common occurrence' (UK employers) (%)



Base: all (n=1,016), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019.
Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Conflict at work can of course manifest itself in formal discipline or grievance cases. Of the 161 respondents who said their organisation had handled disciplinary cases over the past 12 months, the average number of cases dealt with per employer was 12 and the median was three. Fewer (138 employers) said they had handled grievance cases in the same period; on average these organisations dealt with six each and the median was two. A larger number (587 employers) had dealt with an employment tribunal claim over the past 12 months, but, as expected, the average number of cases per employer was much lower (one).

Dealing with conflict can be time-consuming. According to our employer survey, employers spend an average of six days of management time dealing with each individual disciplinary case and five days dealing with a grievance case.

Our survey of employees shows that just over a third (35%) have experienced some form of interpersonal conflict at work over the last year, a similar proportion (38%) to 2015 when we carried out the last survey.[9] This either takes the form of *an isolated dispute or incident*

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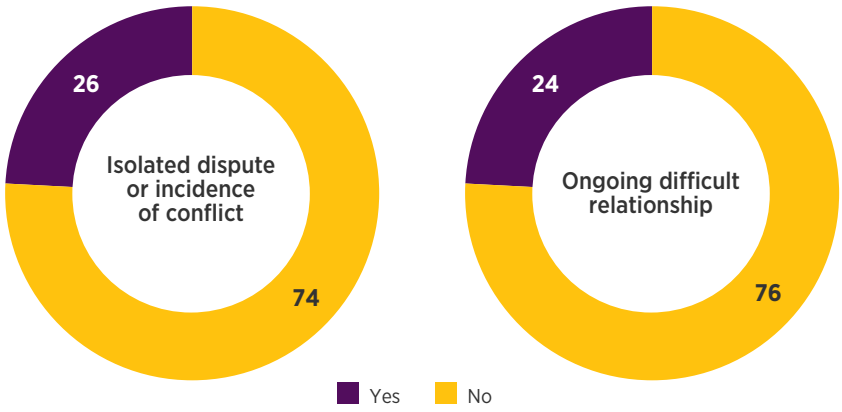
of conflict or an *ongoing difficult relationship*, with around a quarter reporting each type of conflict (see Figure 5). Of course, perceptions of what conflict is will vary from person to person, and so it's a subjective concept. A situation that one individual perceives as conflict may not be deemed serious enough to be labelled in this way by someone else. And because conflict covers such a wide spectrum of behaviour and situations, it's quite likely that some people will recall only their most recent or serious experience, potentially resulting in a slight under-reporting of conflict.

Our findings show an interesting gender gap between people's perception of how widespread conflict is in their workplace versus direct experience of it. There's no significant difference in the proportion of men and women reporting direct experience of interpersonal conflict in the form of an isolated incident or ongoing difficult relationship, which was also the case in our 2015 survey.[10] However, female employees are significantly more likely to agree that *'conflict in my work is a common occurrence'* compared with male employees (31% versus 23%).

Figure 5: UK employees reporting workplace conflict in last 12 months (%)



Base: all employees (n=2,211)

Conflict is significantly more common in the public sector (37% of employees agree it's a *common occurrence*) compared with the private (24%) and voluntary (23%) sectors, according to our current research. The incidence of conflict also increases with size of organisation: it's considered a common occurrence at work by one in five (20%) of those working in small and medium-sized enterprises (2–249 employees) compared with 31% of those in large organisations (250-plus). Public sector organisations tend to be large, and so these findings are consistent.

Who are we most likely to clash with?

We asked those people who had experienced conflict (either an isolated incident or ongoing difficult relationship) in the past year with whom they had encountered the most serious problem. By 'serious' we mean having the greatest consequences for those affected or the organisation. Not surprisingly, it's those with whom we work most closely who are most likely to be the source of conflict, with conflict most common with someone's people manager or a colleague in their team (see Figure 6). The only difference in terms of gender is that women are more likely to report that the conflict was with a colleague in their team (23% versus 16% for men).

Employees who don't manage anyone themselves are significantly more likely to report that the most serious conflict occurred with their people manager compared with those with people management responsibilities (27% versus 17%).

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People managers are typically at the forefront of dealing with conflict, as well as sometimes playing a leading role in it. The latter point is borne out in our survey of employees, with more than one in five (22%) respondents agreeing that their people manager is a cause of conflict in their team.

When asked how often they face situations where they need to manage conflict, either between themselves and a team member or between team members, less than one in five (15%) managers in our employee survey said once a week or more, while three in ten (30%) said once a month or more.

Figure 6: With which ONE person from the list below have you experienced the most serious problem? (%)

Base: all employees who have had a conflict (n=775)

What issues trigger conflict?

Understanding why conflict arises between individuals is not straightforward because relationships and human behaviour are usually complex and nuanced. For this reason it can be hard to attribute the conflict to one specific issue, and often there will be more than one issue at play. There can also be underlying tensions between people that coalesce into one particular issue or incident, but in reality run much deeper and are not articulated or dealt with as part of the conflict.

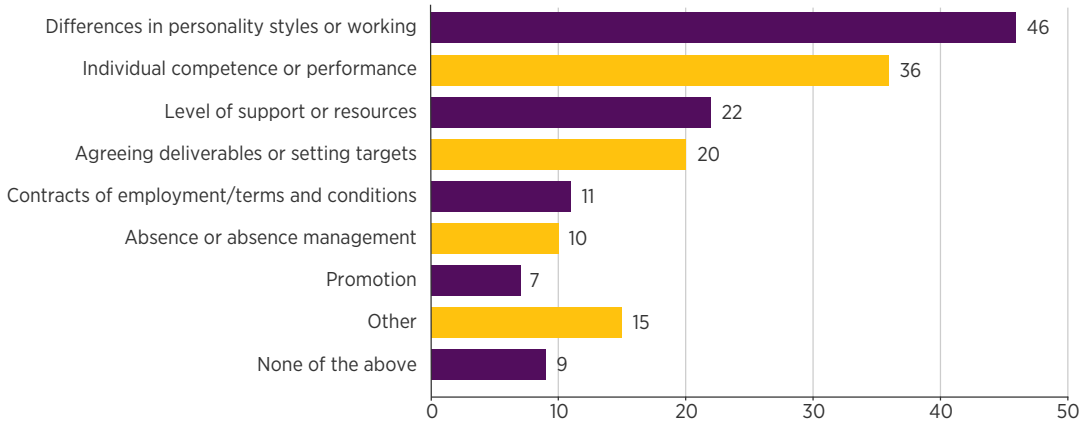
This perspective is reflected to some extent in our survey findings, which show the single most common cause of conflict is *'differences in personality styles or working'*, a catch-all description that can cover a multitude of different attitudes, tensions and dynamics between individuals in the workplace (see Figure 7). Attributing the cause of conflict as a personality clash can feel too simplistic, but sometimes an individual themselves can find it hard to pin down precisely why they are experiencing negative feelings towards another, so it's necessary to have this broad category. There can be less capacity to understand and embrace other people's differences in opinion or working style, for example, or historic differences between individuals that haven't been addressed and have festered over time.

But it's necessary to have an issues-based view of conflict because, typically, that's how conflict will manifest itself and be framed in the workplace.

The next most common cause or contributor of conflict is *'individual competence or performance'*. The role of performance management in generating and shaping workplace conflict can be a complex and controversial area to navigate – not least for the individuals concerned if there's conflict around performance issues. Acas research shows that, for some practitioners, conflict was seen as an inevitable consequence of managers 'doing their job' rather than shying away from difficult issues, particularly in organisations where performance had not been addressed or managed in a systematic way before.[11] The result was that staff either found it difficult to meet the new expectations on them and/or felt that this was unfair. Consequently, *'disputes were triggered by attempts by managers to address performance issues and consequent accusations of bullying or harassment'*.

Our 2020 findings chime closely with those of 2015 when we carried out a similar survey, showing that the main issues prompting conflict have not significantly changed.[12]

Figure 7: What issues did the most serious incident of conflict focus on? (%)



Base: all employees who knew their most serious conflict (n=701)

What kind of behaviour arises from conflict?

By far the most common behaviour associated with conflict at work is lack of respect, reported by two-thirds of employees experiencing their most serious conflict (see Figure 8). This finding underlines the importance of healthy and respectful relationships, and how commonly their absence can trigger conflict between people. Female employees are significantly more likely to report a lack of respect compared with their male counterparts (72% versus 61%).

Just over a third of people experiencing conflict report *'bullying, intimidation or harassment'* and we explore this kind of inappropriate behaviour in more depth in sections 5 and 6 below. Women are more likely than men to report bullying, intimidation or harassment (40% versus 31%).

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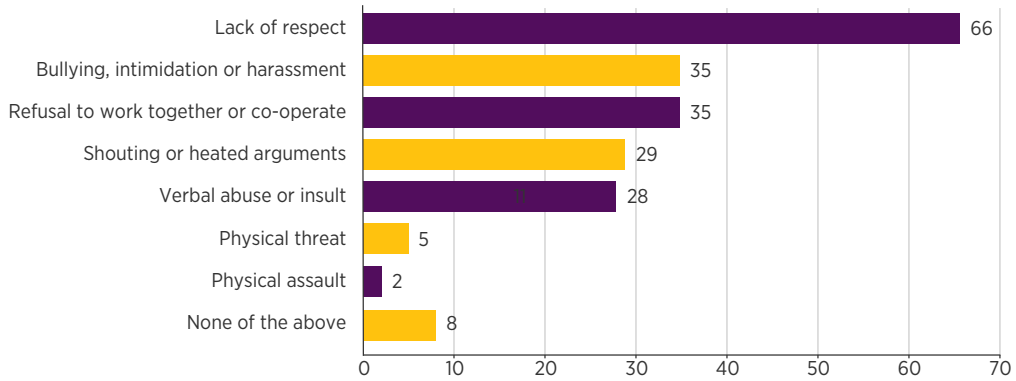
Figure 8: Perceived behaviour in workplace conflict (%)



Base: all employees who knew their most serious conflict (n=701)

The impact of conflict

Our findings show that the negative effects of conflict on people at work can be many and varied, and less than a quarter of employees report no impact on them. Some of the most common consequences are psychological or behavioural, with stress, a drop in motivation or commitment and anxiety the top three (see Figure 9). The majority of all negative impacts are significantly more likely to be experienced by non-managers compared with managers (for example, 54% versus 43% for stress, 46% versus 34% in the case of a drop in motivation or commitment, and 44% versus 30% for anxiety).

In one of the focus groups we carried out with employees to discuss their experience of conflict, participants spoke of the physical and mental impacts, including stress causing sickness absence, not being able to sleep and even having heart palpitations and suicidal thoughts. Long-term impacts included low confidence and anxiety. We learned that the impact can last years, with some believing that their confidence will never be the same again; this was especially the case when reflecting on their experiences, seeing their old work colleagues or workplace, or when applying for/starting a new job.

Example responses from those who have experienced conflict in the workplace:

'I had to have anti-depressants and counselling. I still can't go to the town where I worked because of panic attacks.'
(focus group participant who had experienced conflict)

'I took a job that probably pays less than I am capable of because of anxiety.'
(focus group participant who had experienced conflict)

Women are more likely to report three of the four top impacts of conflict (stress, anxiety and a loss of self-confidence), suggesting they are less likely to feel they work in a psychologically safe environment (psychological safety describes the level of trust and support, and presence – or not – of a blame culture at work). Formal consequences arising from the conflict, such as disciplinary action, dismissal and a legal dispute are rare for all employees, although more likely to be experienced by men in the case of disciplinary action or a legal dispute.

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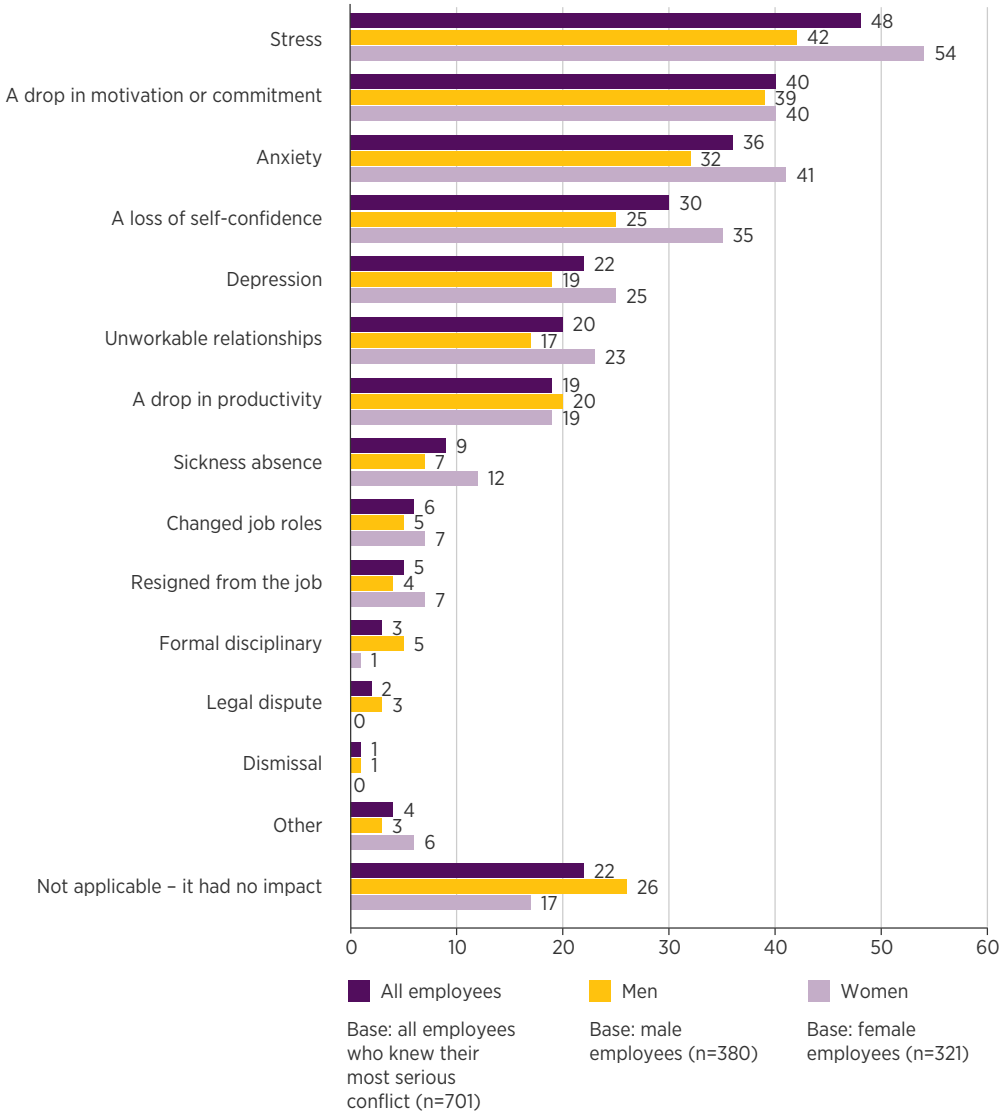
Figure 9: The impacts of conflict (%)



5 Bullying and harassment at work: who, what, where?

Key findings

- Employees are almost twice as likely to have experienced bullying than harassment (not sexual harassment) at work over the past three years (15% versus 8%). Just 4% report experience of sexual harassment.
- Employees working in the public sector are significantly more likely to say they have experienced bullying (21% compared with 14% in the private sector and 10% in the voluntary sector).
- Our findings show how bullying and harassment can occur across a wide spectrum of behaviour, ranging from extreme forms of intimidation, such as physical violence, to more subtle forms such as an inappropriate joke or ignoring someone.

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- Employees are most likely to say that their people manager or a team member was responsible for the bullying or harassment, and it's most likely to have happened in the workplace.
- Cyber-bullying is more common than inappropriate behaviour at a work social event. Bullying or harassing behaviour can be carried out just as easily via digital channels as more traditional, face-to-face forms, and one in ten report that it happened via email or social media and/or by phone or text message.

Bullying and harassment remain significant workplace issues despite increasing awareness of the problem in the media and society more generally. Bullying and harassment are terms that are often used interchangeably in everyday language, and the behaviour that can arise from both can be similar. Legally, however, harassment has a specific definition under equalities law, unlike bullying, which is not a legal term. Although there isn't one specific law against bullying, that doesn't mean employers don't have a legal duty to prevent it and there are still some legal protections from workplace bullying (see Box 2).

Box 2: What is bullying and harassment?

Under the Equality Act 2010, **harassment** is unlawful and is defined as *'unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual'*. The protected characteristics relevant to harassment are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. There is also protection for people from harassment on the basis of their membership of a trade union and, in Northern Ireland, against harassment on the basis of political belief. Pregnancy and maternity are not protected directly under the Equality Act harassment provisions; however, such harassment will amount to harassment related to sex.

There are two types of harassment related to sex; both of these involve unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual.

Sexual harassment involves unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. This must have an actual sexual content or connotation, for example making sexual remarks or jokes or making promotion decisions on the basis of sexual advances being accepted or rejected.

Sex-based harassment is a separate form of harassment involving unwanted conduct that is related to an individual's sex or the sex of another person. This is not sexual in nature but is behaviour which is linked to sex; for example, in a female-dominated workplace, constantly telling derogatory jokes about male stupidity which a particular male employee finds offensive.

The law protects individuals from harassment while applying for a job, in employment and in some circumstances after the working relationship has ended (for example, in connection with the provision of a verbal or written reference).

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There is no legal definition of **bullying**, but Acas says it can include: *'offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient'*.[13] The legal position with respect to workplace bullying is more complex than for harassment because there's no single piece of legislation that deals with it. Bullying can be covered by a wide range of different legal protections, including claims for breach of an express or implied term of the employment contract, for example breach of the implied term to take care of employees' safety.

Employers also have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees, which includes protection from bullying at work. There's also the common law obligation for an employer to take care of workers' safety. The Employment Rights Act 1996 provides for claims of unfair dismissal if employees feel forced to leave because of an employer's failure to deal with any complaint, including failure to protect them from bullying.

In extreme cases there is a right to make a claim under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 through the civil courts, although this is rare. This applies to situations where there is a course of conduct such as a sustained campaign, and more than a one-off incident. Bullying may also be a criminal offence necessitating police involvement.

Figure 10a: In the last three years, have you personally experienced or observed bullying at work? (%)

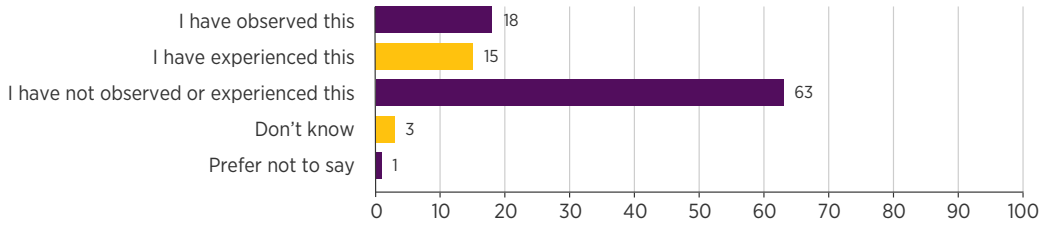


Figure 10b: In the last three years, have you personally experienced or observed harassment (NOT sexual harassment) at work? (%)

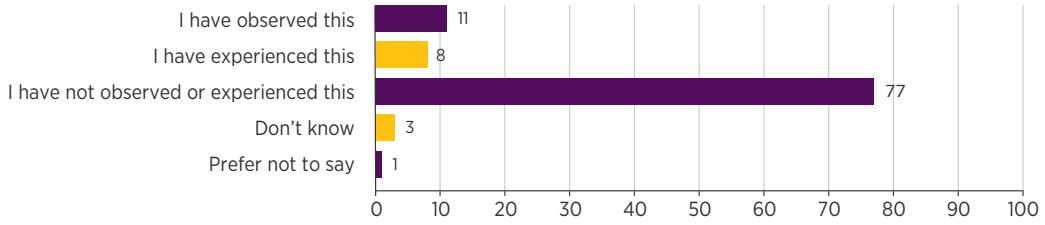
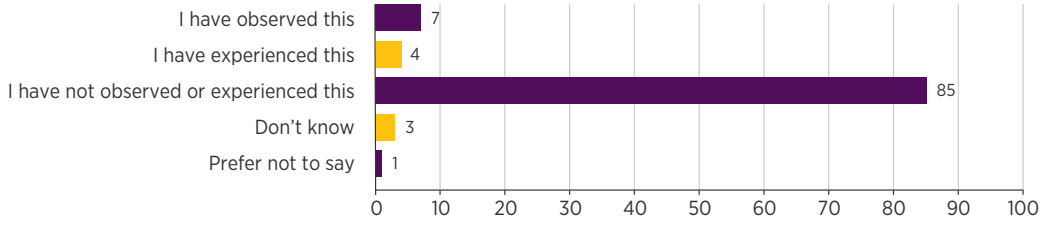


Figure 10c: In the last three years, have you personally experienced or observed sexual harassment at work? (%)



Base: all employees (n=2,211)

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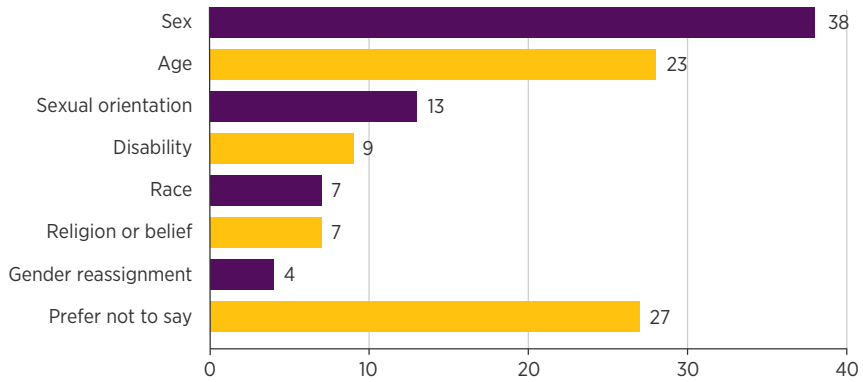
Employees are almost twice as likely to have *experienced* bullying than harassment (not sexual harassment) at work over the past three years (15% versus 8%). An even lower percentage (4%) have experienced sexual harassment. A higher percentage of people have *observed* all three types of inappropriate behaviour (see Figure 10).

Women are significantly more likely than men to report they have experienced bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace (17% versus 13% and 7% versus 2%, respectively). Employees with shorter job tenure are more likely to report experience of bullying: almost a fifth (18%) of those who have been with their employer for up to five years report it, compared with one in eight of those with between five and ten years' service (13%) or more than ten years' service (12%).

Of those employees who had experienced any type of harassment over the past three years, the most common protected characteristic this related to was sex, followed by age (see Figure 11). It's important to remember that men can also experience harassment based on sex, although it's considerably more common for women to report it. Female employees are more than twice as likely to say they have experienced harassment based on sex (52% of those who had experienced harassment compared with 20% of men). Male employees are significantly more likely to report harassment on grounds of disability (14% versus 5% of women reporting) and religion or belief (14% versus 2% reporting).

Employees working in the public sector are significantly more likely to say they have experienced bullying (21% compared with 14% in the private sector and 10% in the voluntary sector). The same is true of harassment (not sexual harassment), with 12% of public sector employees reporting this type of unfair treatment (compared with 7% in the private sector and 5% in the voluntary sector). We highlighted a similar trend in 2015 when we surveyed employees about conflict at work, but pointed out that the sectoral difference may in part be a product of how conflict is framed in organisations. This observation holds true today. As we flagged five years ago, the public sector has a stronger tradition of trade unionism and employee rights, and so employees may well identify with the phrase 'bullying and harassment' more readily than their counterparts in the private or third sectors would do. Thus, *'while the difference appears stark, we may to some extent be comparing apples and pears'*, and it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about bullying being a particular problem in public sector organisational culture.[14]

Figure 11: Which personal characteristic(s) did the harassment relate to? (%)



Base: all employees experiencing any type of harassment (n=231)

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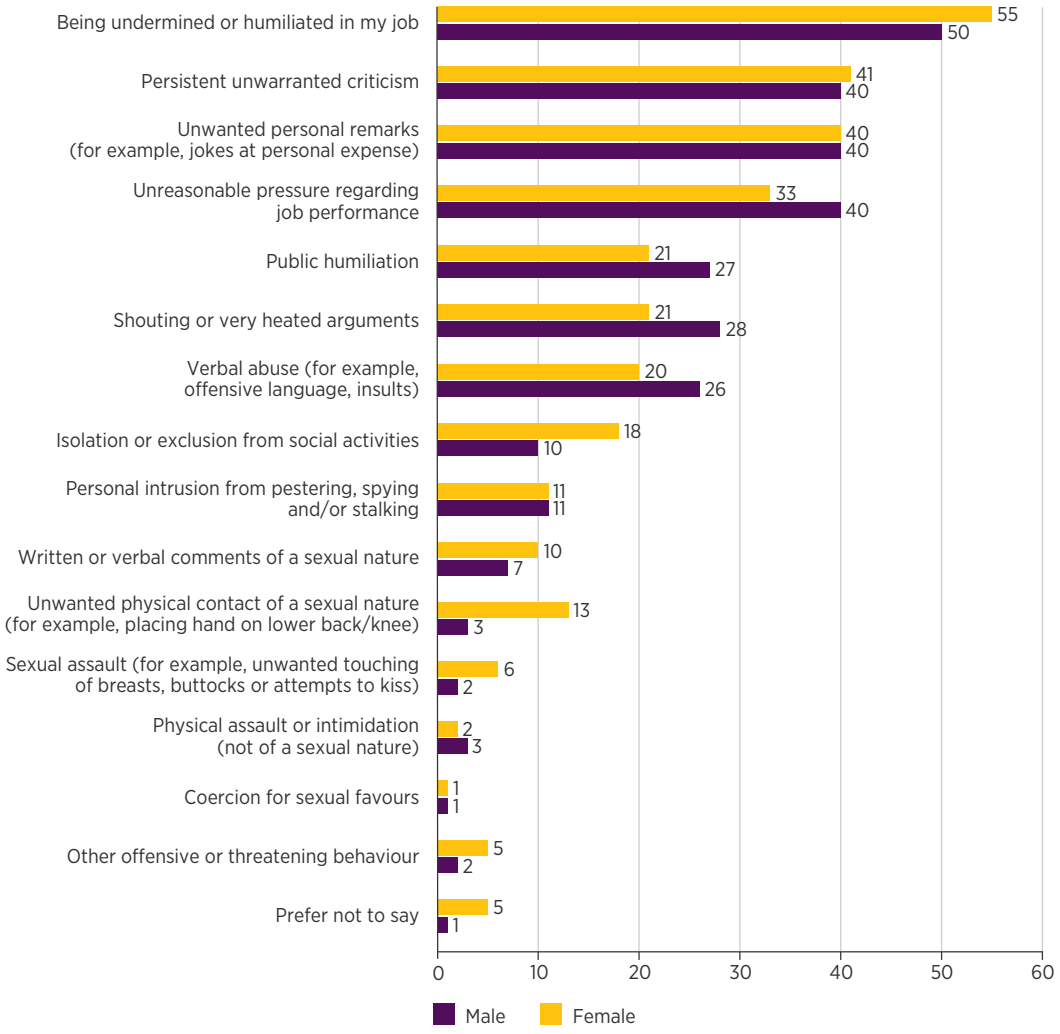
A wide spectrum of behaviour

Bullying or harassment may involve single or repeated incidents across a wide spectrum of behaviour, ranging from extreme forms of intimidation, such as physical violence, to more subtle forms such as an inappropriate joke or ignoring someone. This is evident in our employee survey results, with both men and women who have experienced unfair treatment reporting all types of behaviour to varying degrees across the spectrum (see Figure 12).

The most common behaviour associated with bullying or harassment reported by male and female employees is being undermined or humiliated in their job. Women are significantly more likely than men to say they have experienced *isolation or exclusion from social activities* and *unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature*, but there are no other significant differences in the type of bullying or harassing behaviours reported by female versus male employees.

Figure 12: What form did the bullying or harassment take? (%)



Base: all employees experiencing bullying or harassment (n=416; male=191, female=225)

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Few would disagree that the more extreme forms of unfair treatment shown in Figure 12, such as physical assault or intimidation, constitute bullying (or harassment, if a protected characteristic is involved, for example). But other types of behaviour can be more open to interpretation, and there can be shades of grey across the less overt end of the spectrum. Someone's perception about whether they are being unfairly treated is also important (see Box 2 in terms of equalities law). For example, actions or words that one person perceives as bullying could be dismissed or seen as firm management by another.

Who was responsible and where did it happen?

We've already reported that people tend to have the best working relationships with colleagues and people management (section 3). We've also reported that it's those with whom we work most closely who are most likely to be the source of conflict, with conflict also most common with a people manager or team member (section 4). Not surprisingly, therefore, this trend is reflected in our findings when we asked employees who was responsible for their most recent experience of bullying or harassment in the past three years (see Figure 13).

There are no significant differences in the alleged perpetrator according to male or female employees, nor does it make a difference if someone has people management responsibilities or not. 'Upwards bullying or harassment', when someone in a more junior position is responsible, is relatively rare. Unfair treatment perpetrated by someone outside the organisation, such as a customer or client, is also unusual.

Figure 13: Thinking of your most recent experience of bullying or harassment, who carried out this behaviour? (%)

Base: all employees experiencing bullying or harassment (n=416)

In terms of location, not surprisingly people are much more likely to say they were bullied or harassed in their workplace, although one in ten report that it happened via email or social media and/or by phone or text message (see Figure 14). Women are twice as likely to say that it happened via phone or text message (12% versus 6% for men).

Given the increasingly advanced technological world in which we work, employers should be especially aware of 'cyber-bullying'. The huge rise in social media and other online platforms has changed the way we communicate inside and outside work. Bullying or harassing behaviour can be carried out just as easily via digital/electronic channels as more traditional, face-to-face forms. Employees need to understand that detrimental texts

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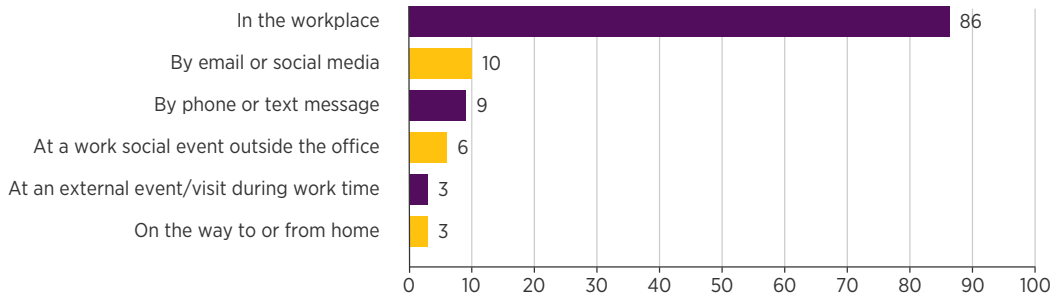
sent via mobiles or images of work colleagues posted on external websites following work events, for example, are just as inappropriate and harmful. The fact that digital platforms and channels are available 24/7 adds another disturbing dimension, as the inappropriate behaviour need not be confined to normal working hours.

Another manifestation of bullying associated with social media is *not* being included in digital discussions. In one of the focus groups we carried out with employees to discuss conflict, a number of participants reported feeling isolated in the workplace due to being excluded from social media such as WhatsApp groups, and feeling that colleagues are 'talking behind my back' on social media during and outside of work hours.

Figure 14: Where did your most recent experience of workplace bullying or harassment happen? (%)



Base: all employees experiencing bullying or harassment in the past three years (n=416)

6 Sexual harassment: pushed under the carpet?

Key findings

- Just 4% of employees say they have been sexually harassed over the past three years, but almost a quarter (24%) of employees think that challenging issues like bullying and harassment are swept under the carpet in their organisation.
- Our research explores whether the increased focus on sexual harassment, for example through high-profile scandals reported in the media and the #MeToo movement, has changed workplace attitudes and practices. Encouragingly, there has been positive change in the past two years in employees' confidence about tackling sexual harassment: a third (33%) feel more confident to challenge it and almost the same proportion (29%) feel more confident to raise a complaint about it.
- Senior and middle managers have a defining influence on the working culture and set the tone for expectations around dignity and respect. Therefore, it's encouraging that a significant proportion of employers also report positive behavioural change among senior leaders, managers and employees over the past two years. The most common organisational change is that employees are more confident about challenging other forms of inappropriate behaviour than they were before.

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There has been a strong spotlight on the incidence of sexual harassment in society and at work over the past couple of years, helped by the rise of large-scale public awareness campaigns like the Me Too (or #MeToo) movement and Time's Up. In 2016 a disturbing report by the TUC found that more than half of women overall, and nearly two-thirds of women aged 18–24, had experienced sexual harassment at work.[15]

Our employee survey finds the incidence of sexual harassment in workplaces is lower (4% of employees overall have experienced it in the past three years, with 7% of women reporting it versus 2% of men). This does not affect the seriousness with which we should treat sexual harassment, and the acceptable incidence of it is zero. The majority of UK employers have a positive approach to equality, but clearly there's still a minority of organisations that are not fostering inclusive workplaces, for women in particular.

Younger employees are more likely to report experience of sexual harassment at work in the past three years: 8% of employees aged 18–34, compared with 4% aged 35–44 and 3% aged 45–64.

Any form of discrimination or harassment is totally unacceptable from a moral and legal standpoint, and any signs of any type of unfair treatment need to be addressed head on. It's disturbing, therefore, that our employee survey finds almost a quarter (24%) of employees do think that challenging issues like bullying and harassment are swept under the carpet in their organisation (52% disagree).

Has the #MeToo movement made a difference?

It's hard to pin down any potential changes in workplace attitudes and practices around sexual harassment to a particular movement or event. But we were keen to explore whether the increased attention the issue has received in society and the media, for example through high-profile scandals involving celebrity figures and large-scale awareness campaigns, have had an impact in the workplace. We therefore asked employees, and employers, a range of questions to help assess whether there have been positive changes around sexual harassment over the past two years.

There has been positive change in the past two years in employees' confidence about tackling sexual harassment: a third (33%) feel more confident to challenge it and almost the same proportion (29%) feel more confident to raise a complaint about it (see Figure 15). An even bigger proportion (38%) say they feel more confident to challenge other forms of inappropriate behaviour like bullying or racism. There is very little significant difference in these findings according to sector, but women are significantly more likely to feel more confident to challenge sexual harassment (35% versus 31% for men), raise a formal complaint about it (32% versus 26%) and challenge other forms of inappropriate behaviour (40% versus 36%).

We also asked employees whether other colleagues' behaviour has changed or not over the past two years. Our findings show that three in ten (29%) think it's more likely that their colleagues will challenge sexual harassment if they see it (compared with 7% who say it's less likely). A similar proportion (30%) report that their colleagues are more likely to challenge other forms of inappropriate behaviour (compared with 9% who say less likely). Positive change is also evident in terms of people manager behaviour, with a quarter (24%) of employees with a manager indicating that their people manager is more likely to role-model respectful behaviour (12% said less likely).

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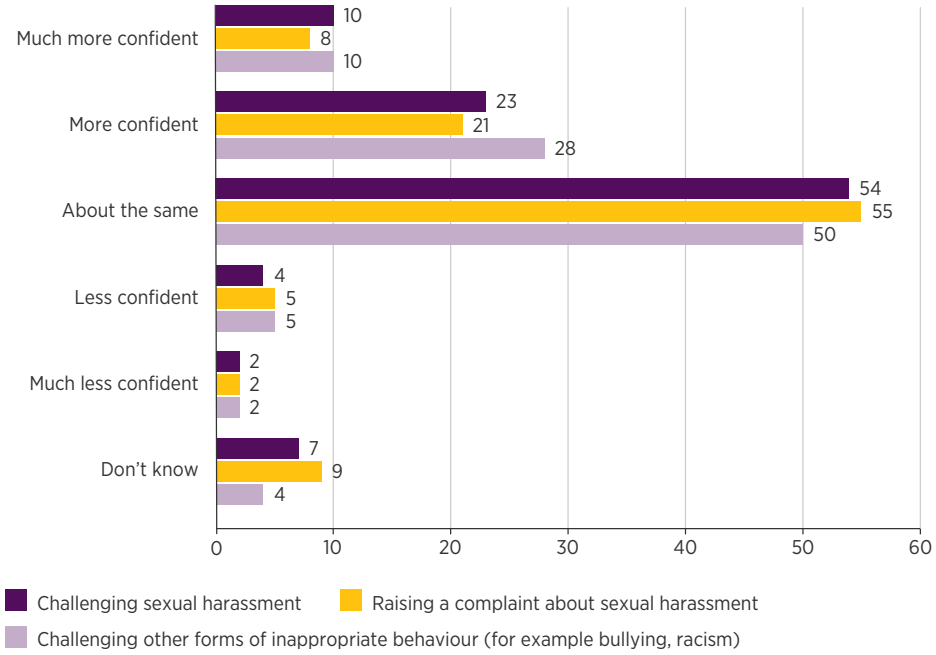
Figure 15: Thinking about the last two years, are you personally more or less confident about... (%)



Base: all employees (n=2,211)

Organisational change

The most common organisational change over the past two years reported by employers is that employees are more confident about challenging other forms of inappropriate behaviour than they were before (see Figure 16). It's encouraging that a significant proportion of employers report positive behavioural change among senior leaders, managers and employees. Senior and middle managers have a defining influence on the working culture and set the tone for expectations around dignity and respect. How they role-model respectful behaviour will be instrumental in setting the right expectations for everyone. More practical changes, such as introducing new guidance or training around sexual harassment, are less common. These findings can only be fully appreciated within the wider context of knowing what behaviour and attitudes were like beforehand, however, and it's possible that some organisations already had in place respectful working environments and frameworks.

Employers who report organisational change relating to inappropriate behaviour are most likely to attribute the changes to general cultural shifts around sexual harassment and the fact that HR was doing this work anyway (see Figure 17).

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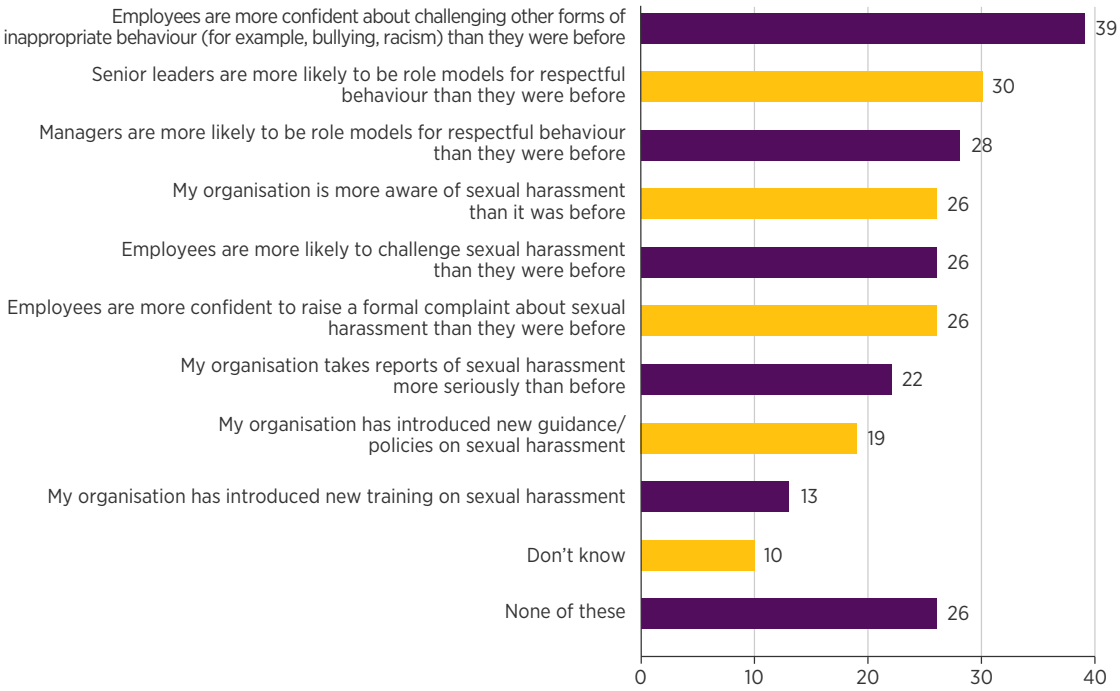
Figure 16: Organisational changes over the past two years (since 2017) (% UK employers)



Base: all employers: (n=1,016), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019

Figure 17: Why have there been changes related to managing inappropriate behaviour since 2017? (% of UK employers)

Base: all employers reporting changes (n=624), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019

It's much easier for people to assess how their own attitudes have changed over the past two years compared with how their organisation may or may not have changed. Many employees may not be in a position to make an informed judgement, and so it's not surprising that one in five (21%) employees don't know if there have been changes in their organisation around sexual harassment (see Figure 18). A further half report that there haven't been any organisational developments, but it's still encouraging that one in six say their organisation takes reports of sexual harassment more seriously and is more aware of sexual harassment than it was before.

Where employees report there have been changes at work around sexual harassment since 2017, they are more likely to attribute these changes to external factors such as general shifts around the issue and awareness-raising campaigns like Time's Up and #MeToo,

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as opposed to internal developments (see Figure 19). These findings underline the fact that we don't operate in a vacuum at work, and broader societal events will affect how people, as well as organisations, react. Overall, six in ten (60%) employees report a change around sexual harassment at work since 2017, be it change on a personal, co-worker or organisation level.

Figure 18: Thinking about the last two years, what has happened in your organisation? (%)

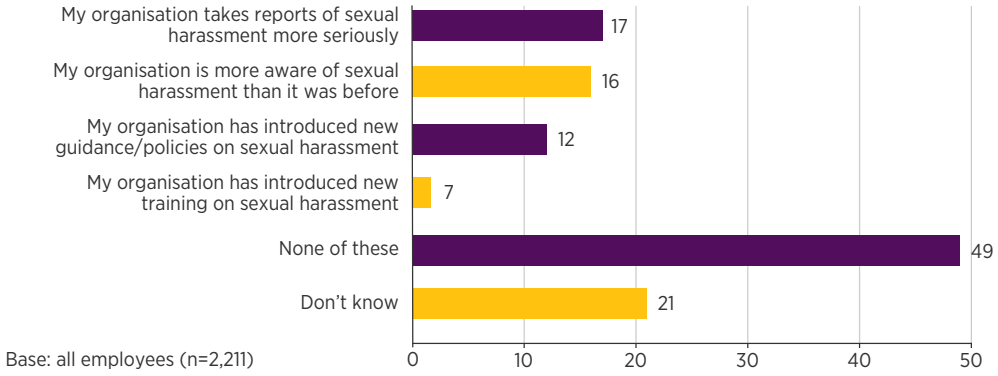
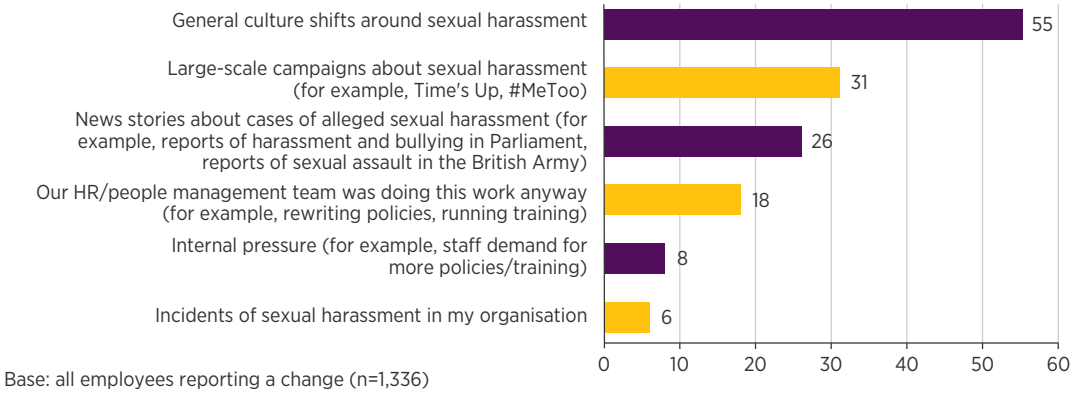


Figure 19: Why have there been changes related to sexual harassment since 2017? (%)



7 Speaking up at work – how easy and effective is it?

Key findings

- There's a good level of confidence shown by employers and employees around people's ability to speak up at work. More than three in four (77%) employers agree that *'employees would feel confident raising issues about conflict in my organisation'* (just 9% disagree). The majority of employees (60%) agree they are confident about raising issues in their organisation. Four in five employees (80%) say they know how to report bullying or harassment.
- Speaking up is one thing, but how well do organisations handle conflict and complaints when they arise? Less than half (46%) of employees agree that *'my organisation has effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict'*. And the

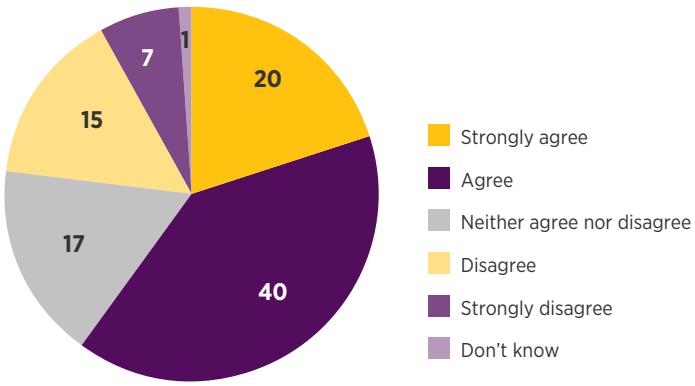
majority (53%) of people who had experienced bullying or harassment in the past three years didn't report the most recent incident.

- The main barriers people faced in not reporting the bullying or harassment include fears that their complaint wouldn't be taken seriously, that action wouldn't be taken against the alleged perpetrator and/or that it could harm their relationships at work.
- Less than half of employees who had a serious conflict in the last 12 months (44%) say the conflict or difficult relationship has so far been fully or largely resolved, with over a third (36%) reporting it has not been resolved. This is not an impressive conflict resolution rate.
- Just 37% of employees are satisfied, while 34% are dissatisfied, with how their organisation dealt with the conflict or difficult relationship; almost half (48%) felt *'the other person's interests took precedence over mine'*.

The aim of every organisation should be to create a culture based on dignity and respect, where people have the confidence to speak up and call out inappropriate behaviour. It's encouraging that the majority of employees agree they are confident about raising issues in their organisation, although a significant proportion do not (Figure 20). Respondents to our employer survey are more positive about this, with more than three in four (77%) agreeing that *'employees would feel confident raising issues about conflict in my organisation'* (just 9% disagree).

Speaking up is the first step, but people also need to know there's an effective framework in place for handling any complaints. Less than half (46%) of employees agree that *'my organisation has effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict'*. However, a much higher proportion (80%) say they know how to report bullying or harassment in their organisation.

Figure 20: I feel confident raising issues in my organisation (%)



Base: all employees (n=2,211)

Around a third of employees taking part in our survey have experienced workplace conflict over the past 12 months. We asked them how they responded to the conflict or difficult relationship, and the results are shown in Figure 21. Ideally, organisations should try to resolve low-level conflict informally and at the earliest opportunity, and so it's encouraging that the most common response to conflict is discussion with a people manager followed by informal discussion with another person. It's understandable that people confide in

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a friend or family member outside work, although this is unlikely to help resolve the issue inside work. A minority say they turned to a formal process or procedure, but the proportion of employees who used mediation to help resolve the conflict is tiny.

Female employees are significantly more likely to report that they discussed the conflict with their people manager, or someone outside of work. They are also more likely to look for another job.

One in five employees didn't do anything in response to the conflict, either suggesting that the conflict wasn't deemed serious enough to pursue or the individual couldn't face confronting it. Over half (53%) of employees who had experienced bullying or harassment over the past three years didn't report the most recent incident (44% did report it). Of those who did report bullying or harassment, employees were most likely to report it to their people manager, followed by HR (see Figure 22).

Employees' responses to why they didn't report the conflict they experienced:

'Fear is the biggest factor. You're singled out when something happens to you and it's having the strength and confidence to see what can be a long and tiresome process through to the end.'
(focus group participant who had experienced conflict)

'I think some people are scared they are "overreacting" – I got told that on numerous occasions; some people may not know who or how to report it.'
(focus group participant who is a manager)

Just 4% of people reporting bullying or harassment used a confidential channel (for example, a telephone helpline); presumably one wasn't available, or the employee wasn't aware of it or chose not to use it if one was available. Given the sensitive and potentially complex nature of some harassment issues in particular, and the understandable reluctance for many people to report such behaviour, organisations may want to consider using more proactive reporting channels. Anonymous and/or confidential methods like telephone helplines run by third parties to provide support, and/or online reporting tools to report harassment, could be reassuring for people and encourage better reporting. This view is backed up by our survey findings: around one in five employees cite worries about confidentiality and/or the lack of a channel to raise a concern confidentially or anonymously as reasons why they didn't report their experience of bullying or harassment (see Figure 23).

The main barriers people faced in not reporting the bullying or harassment they experienced didn't relate to a lack of knowledge about how to report the unfair treatment, but to a whole range of issues suggesting a lack of confidence in how the organisation would respond to a complaint. There were also concerns about whether the individual's working relationships or career would suffer a detriment.

These findings are reinforced by the employees who had experienced workplace bullying or harassment and took part in our online focus group. Most participants perceived multiple barriers to reporting an issue, with not wanting to 'relive' the experience again when informing others also a factor for some.

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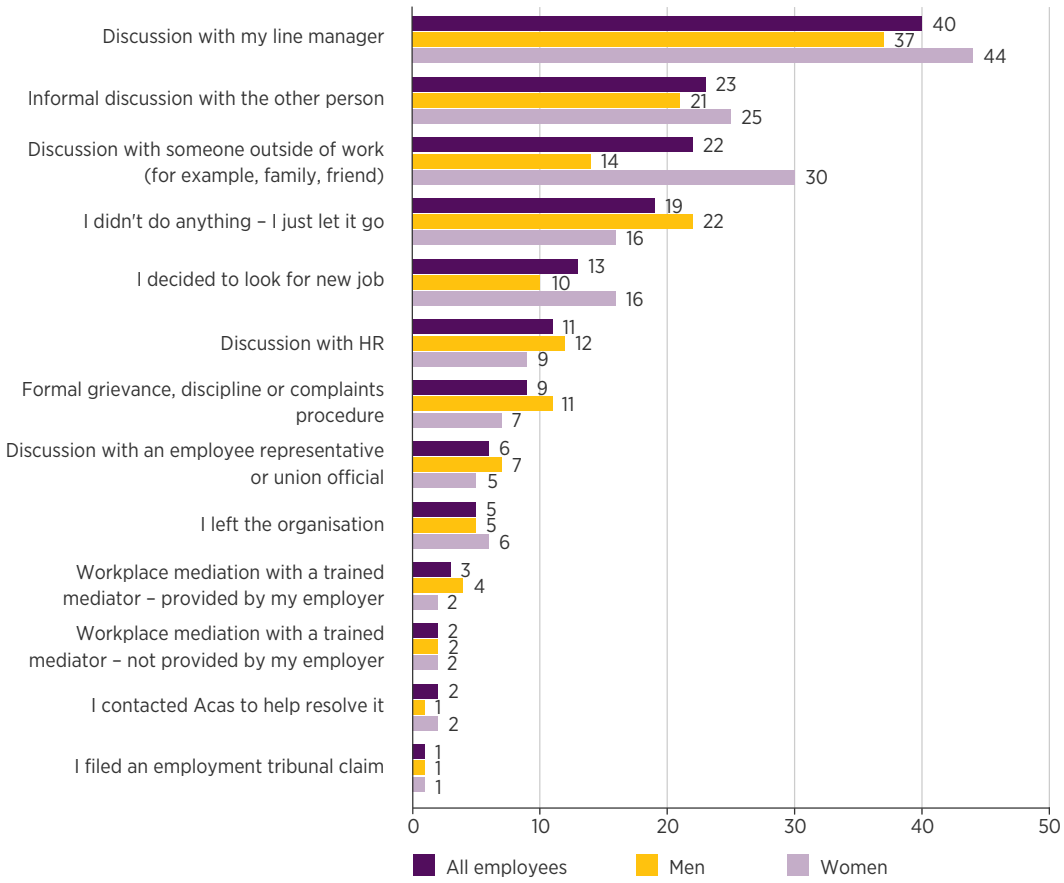
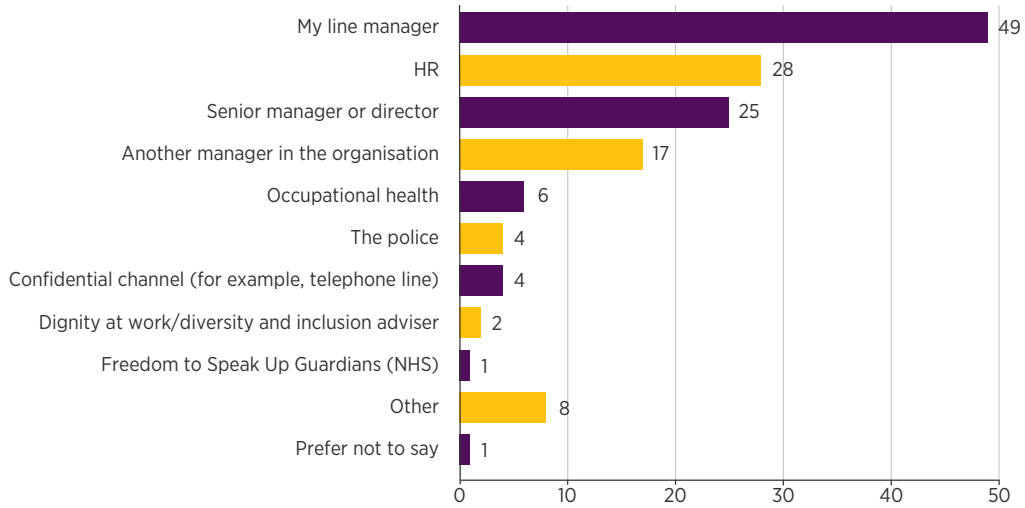
Figure 21: How employees responded to conflict (%)



Base: all employees who knew their most serious conflict experienced in the past 12 months (n=701)

Figure 22: To whom did you report the bullying or harassment? (%)



Base: all employees who experienced bullying or harassment in past three years and reported it (n=176)

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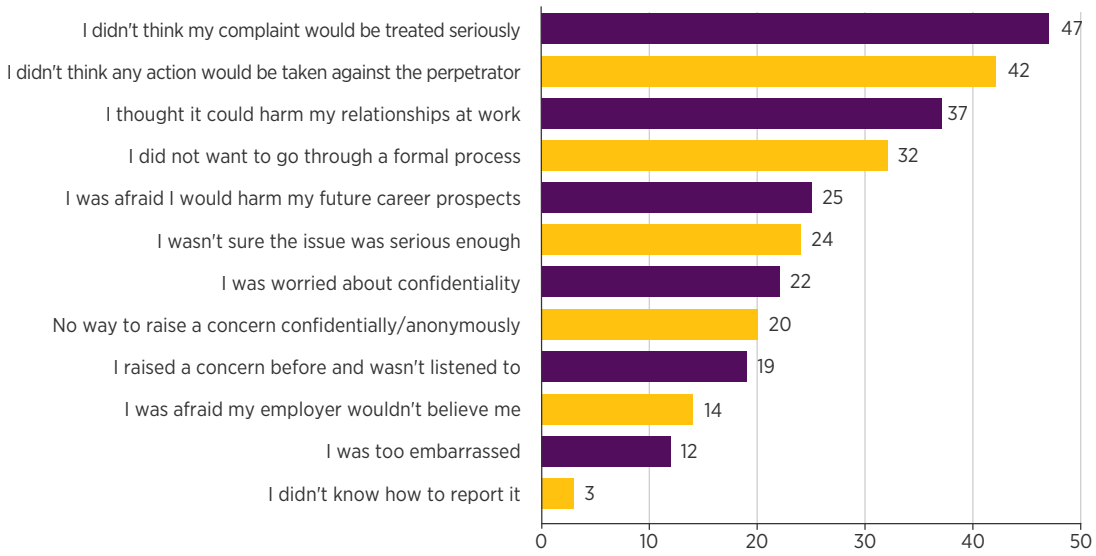
Figure 23: Why didn't you report the bullying or harassment? (%)



Base: all employees who experienced bullying or harassment in past three years but didn't report it (n=227)

Box 3: Employee focus group: views on enablers to reporting conflict

A key enabler to reporting an issue is knowing that others have also complained about the same person, as well as knowing that HR will take it seriously.

Confidence in HR and people managers

- having confidence that their HR team is impartial and well trained, for example in the laws around harassment
- having the confidence that the complaint will be believed, that is, having an open and trusting culture, and a general awareness in the workplace of the impacts of bullying
- being reassured that the complaint will be kept confidential
- awareness that similar issues have been taken seriously before
- supportive and well-trained people managers (often first point of call)
- having a second reporting people in case the problem is the people manager

Knowledge of procedures and policies

- having the knowledge of how to report the issue – clear and accessible policies can help here
- having a range of reporting channels, including email, text, phone, face to face and anonymously

Feeling supported

- safety in numbers: feeling more confident when others have or are reporting the same person
- being offered external support, for example via a union or counsellor

Source: Online focus group with employees who had experienced workplace bullying or harassment.

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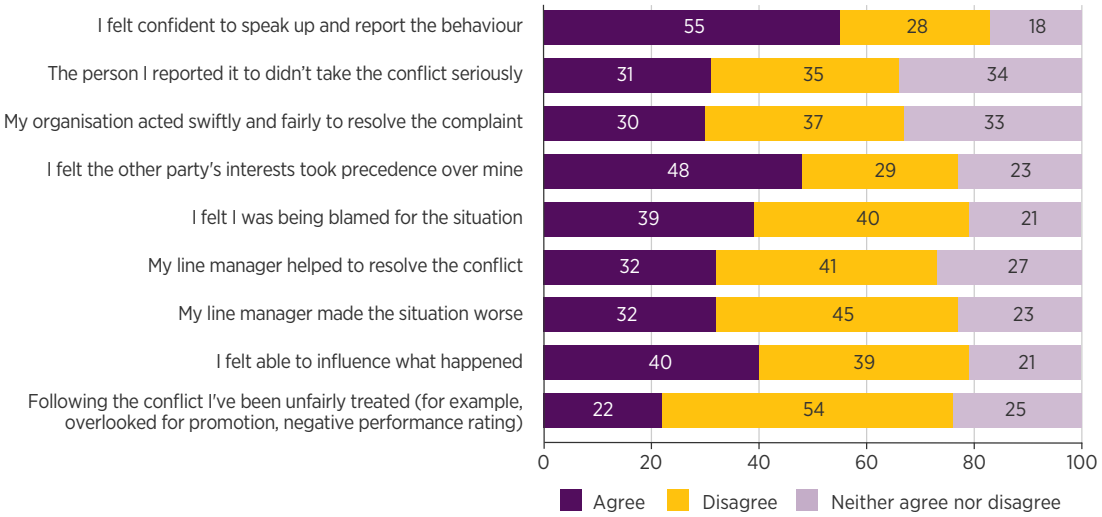
What was the outcome of the conflict?

Less than half of employees (44%) report that the conflict or difficult relationship has so far been fully or largely resolved, while over a third (36%) say it hasn't been resolved. This means the conflict continues to hang over a significant number of people, with all the potentially negative impacts that can have on the individuals concerned as well as the organisation.

There are very mixed, and disappointing, results in relation to how satisfied respondents are with how their organisation dealt with the conflict or difficult relationship: 37% were satisfied and 34% were dissatisfied. This pattern is also reflected in Figure 24, showing the findings when we asked employees to agree or disagree with a number of statements about how the conflict was handled by the organisation. Almost half felt *'the other person's interests took precedence over mine'*, and four in ten think they were blamed for the situation. A lot of ambivalence is evident in the effectiveness of people management, with a third even agreeing that the manager made the situation worse.

Figure 24: Thinking about the conflict or difficult experience... (%)



Base: all employees who knew their most serious conflict (n=701)

Box 4: Mediation – what is it and how can it help?

Mediation is a voluntary process led by an impartial third party that organisations can use to resolve conflict. Mediation seeks to provide a speedy solution to individual workplace conflict, and can be used at any stage of a disagreement or dispute. The process is flexible and voluntary, and any agreement is morally rather than legally binding. The process aims to provide a safe, confidential space for those involved (the 'parties') to find solutions that are acceptable to each side. Specifically, mediation provides the potential to:

- help parties involved in conflict to hold open conversations that would normally be too difficult to have constructively
- help parties to understand and empathise with each other's emotions and situations
- explore all parties' issues and concerns and use joint problem-solving to find a solution that each side feels is fair
- encourage communication and establish workable relationships.

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Mediation is preferable to more formal legalistic processes in various ways:

- It makes parties less rather than more entrenched in their views and thus more open to compromise.
- It can maintain and improve relationships.
- It is less stressful for those involved.
- It avoids the costs involved in defending employment tribunal claims.

Mediation isn't a panacea for every dispute or disagreement in the workplace, but there are signs it is underused. There aren't any hard and fast rules governing when and how mediation should be used, but some principles include:

- **Who?** Mediation can be used for conflict involving colleagues of a similar job or grade, or between those with different jobs and levels of seniority. It can also be used where there's a disagreement between a people manager and a member of staff, or groups of staff.
- **When?** It can be used at any stage in the conflict, including after a formal dispute has been resolved to rebuild relationships. Used in the early stages of a dispute, it has the benefit of stopping it from escalating.
- **What?** It can be used to address a range of workplace issues, including relationship breakdown, personality clashes, communication problems, and bullying and harassment.

Mediation may be unsuitable if, for example:

- a decision about right or wrong is needed, such as in cases of criminal activity or overt abuse, when disciplinary procedures are more appropriate
- an individual bringing a discrimination or harassment case wants it investigated formally
- it's clear the parties don't have the authority to settle the issue.

Source: CIPD factsheet: Mediation at work.

8 How do organisations deal with conflict?

Key findings

- Around three-quarters of employers think their organisation is doing enough to both manage and prevent conflict between people at work, and almost the same proportion agree that it has effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict.
- Employer perceptions of how well their organisation deals with conflict are not matched by employee perceptions of how well their organisation handled the conflict they experienced, with very mixed levels of satisfaction. Employers should have closer insight into their employees' experience of raising issues to ensure their culture is one that encourages people to speak up. The organisation should foster a climate where complaints are taken seriously and dealt with fairly and quickly.

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- Where possible, organisations should encourage people to resolve conflict informally, at the earliest possible stage, but they are most likely to use formal approaches to handle conflict. Disciplinary action and grievance procedures are the most frequently used methods.
- Informal approaches are less common, but over a third (36%) of organisations train people managers in handling difficult conversations or managing conflict and a quarter (26%) use facilitated discussion/troubleshooting by HR.
- Less than one in five (17%) organisations taking part in our employer survey said their organisation experiences barriers to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment. Given the incidence and complexity of conflict at work, it's quite surprising that so few employers think it's a challenging area.

There's a high level of confidence among respondents to our employer survey in relation to how their organisation handles conflict. For example:

- three in four (76%) agree their organisation is doing enough to manage conflict between people at work (19% disagree)
- three in four (74%) agree their organisation is doing enough to prevent conflict between people at work (20% disagree)
- almost seven in ten (69%) agree their organisation has effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict (12% disagree).

However, some of the findings we report in sections 5, 6 and 7 about *employees'* experience of conflict and harassment, and speaking up at work, suggest this level of confidence on the part of employers could be slightly misplaced. For example, a quarter (24%) of employees think that challenging issues like bullying and harassment are swept under the carpet in their organisation. And less than half of employees (44%) who experienced a conflict in the last 12 months say the conflict or difficult relationship they have experienced has so far been resolved, with over a third (36%) reporting it has not been resolved. Further, just 37% of employees are satisfied, while 34% are dissatisfied, with how their organisation dealt with the conflict or difficult relationship.

Public sector employers are significantly more likely than those in the private sector to report that their organisation is *not* doing enough to both *manage* (27% versus 17%) and *prevent* (27% versus 17%) conflict between people at work.

Formal versus informal approaches

Organisations are most likely to use formal approaches to handle conflict, with disciplinary and grievance procedures the most frequently used (see Figure 25). Their use by employers is less common than five years ago, when we last surveyed employers on managing conflict: in 2015, 57% of employers used disciplinary action and 54% used the grievance procedure in the past 12 months compared with 44% and 41%, respectively, in 2020.[16]

In 2015, we were encouraged by the tentative signs showing employers' increased willingness to use early, more informal methods to resolve conflict. However, use of the two most popular informal approaches has also fallen in 2020, with 36% now *'training line managers in handling difficult conversations or managing conflict'* (versus 47% in 2015) and 26% using *'facilitated discussion/troubleshooting by HR department'* (versus 38% in 2015). Therefore, it doesn't appear that the decrease in the use of formal methods to deal with conflict in this survey has been prompted by interest in fostering earlier, more informal

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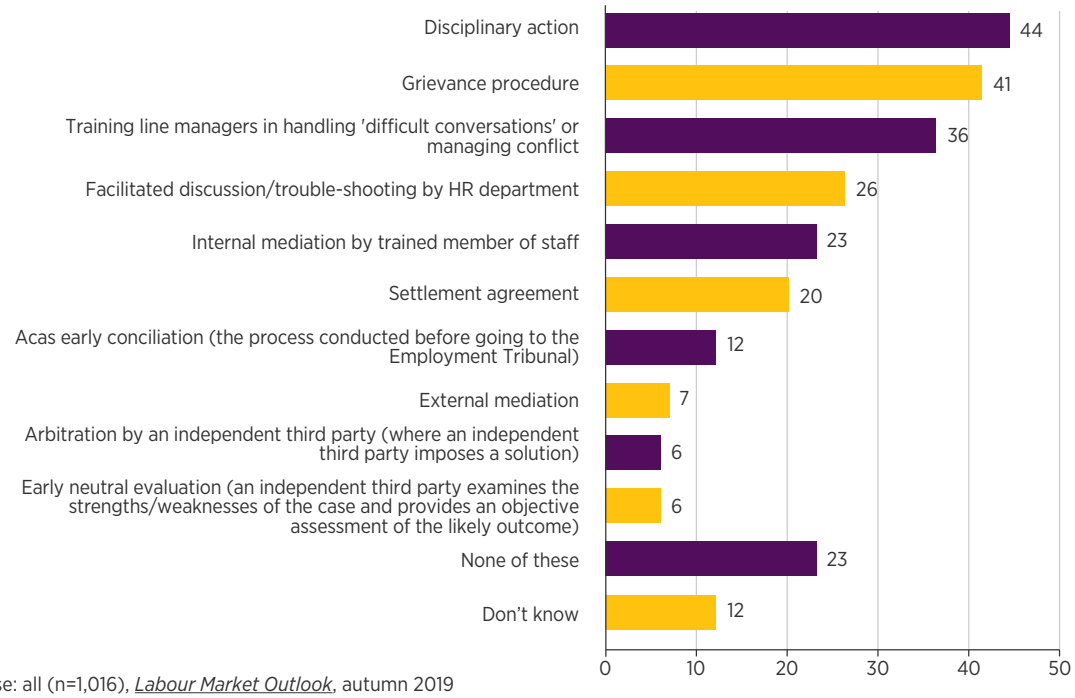
conflict resolution techniques. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that employers' use of other alternative dispute resolution approaches such as mediation, arbitration and early neutral evaluation haven't shifted since 2015.

The use of settlement agreements stands at 20% compared with 32% in 2015, although they were then referred to as *compromise or settlement agreements*.

Figure 25: Methods of dealing with workplace issues used in the last 12 months (%)



Base: all (n=1,016), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019

Public sector more likely to use formal and informal methods

Organisations in the public sector are more likely to use most early, informal methods to deal with conflict than those in the private and voluntary sectors (for example, 42% used internal mediation by a trained member of staff compared with 18% in the private and 25% in the voluntary sectors, and 56% trained people managers in handling 'difficult' conversations or managing conflict compared with 32% and 34%, respectively). The reasons for this could be varied: for example, the public sector has a much greater incidence and tradition of trade union representation, giving conflict and other employment relations issues a higher profile.

There may also be a greater aspiration in the public sector to adopt 'good practice', but the findings could also reflect higher levels of conflict. The latter point is borne out by the fact that public sector organisations are also significantly more likely to use formal methods to deal with conflict: 54% use disciplinary action (versus 41% in the private and 38% in the voluntary sectors) and 56% use grievance procedures (versus 38% in the private and 36% in the voluntary sectors).

Barriers to managing conflict: spotlight on senior leaders

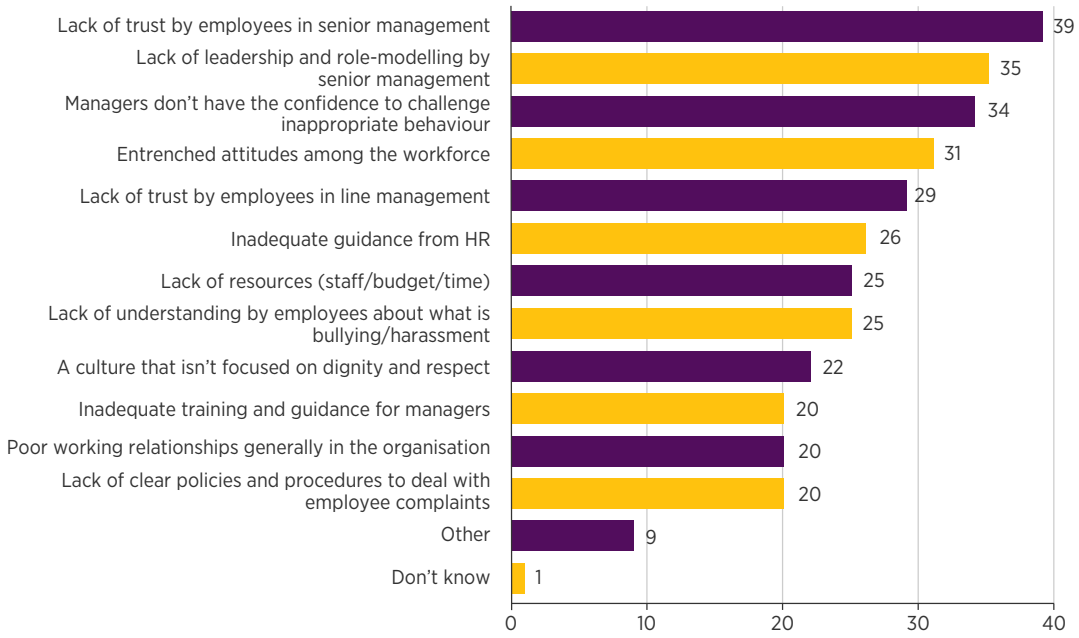
Less than one in five (17%) employers taking part in our employer survey said their organisation experiences barriers to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment (67% said no and 16% didn't know). Given the incidence and complexity of conflict at work, it's quite surprising that so few employers think it's a challenging area.

We didn't ask employers in this study why or why not they encountered barriers, but there are wider organisational factors that could influence perceptions. There is debate as to whether or not conflict is even recognised in some organisations, for example. One Acas paper highlights research showing *'a deep antipathy to the notion of managing conflict among senior managers, who were hostile to any idea that the discourse of "conflict" should be accepted as part of organisational life'*.[17] If 'conflict' isn't acknowledged as an inevitable part of the employment relationship, it's quite likely that many senior managers will perceive there aren't challenges associated with managing it. It also means organisations are less likely to develop a strategic approach to managing conflict, an oversight also highlighted in the Acas research.

We asked the minority of organisations experiencing barriers to managing conflict to select up to five main barriers (see Figure 26). The problems are laid firmly at the door of senior management in terms of lack of trust in them and a lack of leadership and role-modelling by them. Senior managers could also indirectly be held responsible for other key barriers, in particular managers not having the confidence to challenge inappropriate behaviour and wider cultural issues. Everyone has a responsibility for fostering a healthy and inclusive working environment, but senior leaders have a defining influence on the organisation's culture. Their messaging, actions and the importance they attach to issues will cascade down the layers of management and set the tone for how people behave and how conflict is handled. The top team has a role to play in addressing nearly all of the issues highlighted as barriers in Figure 26, as many of the barriers are interrelated; for example, inadequate training and guidance for managers will have a direct impact on their confidence to challenge inappropriate behaviour, employees' level of trust in them and whether or not the culture is focused on dignity and respect.

The key point is that organisations, in particular senior managers, need to focus attention on all of these barriers to deal with conflict effectively. People professionals clearly have their role to play across many of these areas too, for example in educating people so that everyone understands what constitutes bullying and harassment and for providing clear policies for all and training for people managers, as well as doing all that's necessary to build a culture based on dignity, trust and respect.

Figure 26: Top five barriers experienced by organisations in managing conflict (% of employers)



Base: all organisations experiencing barriers (n=160), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019

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9 How well do managers manage conflict?

Key findings

- Managers tend to be most confident about the technical aspects of their role, such as meeting deadlines and managing projects compared with the 'people' aspects, such as managing conflict and holding 'difficult' conversations.
- However, nine in ten managers (90%) say they would nip conflict between team members in the bud, and that they understand what kind of behaviour constitutes bullying. Around three in four (74%) say they understand their organisation's formal procedures for discipline and grievance.
- Employers also report a relatively high level of confidence in the ability of managers in their organisation to deal with different aspects of conflict.
- There's a slightly different story when employees are asked how effective their people manager was in dealing with conflict they experienced, either an isolated dispute or incident or ongoing difficult relationship: one in three (32%) agree their people manager made the situation worse (45% disagree).
- Less than half (40%) of people managers say their organisation has provided them with training in people management skills to support them in their management role. It's a shame that so many employers don't invest in this crucial area, because employers are significantly more likely to report a number of tangible outcomes in their ability to handle conflict where they have trained managers in people management skills.

Are managers confident to manage conflict?

Over the past decade or more the trend has been to devolve responsibility for people management activities down the line to managers. Managing people is a big job and typically comes with a number of important responsibilities, such as implementing people policies, managing performance and absence, supporting employee health and well-being, recruitment and, of course, managing conflict. Carrying out any of these activities on top of an operational role can be challenging. If a manager hasn't been trained to be knowledgeable and competent, and doesn't receive ongoing support and guidance, the task could be very challenging.

How confident do managers feel about performing the people management dimension of their role? Managers tend to be most confident about the technical aspects of their role, such as meeting deadlines, managing projects and delegating tasks, compared with the 'people' aspects, such as managing conflict and difficult conversations (see Figure 27). This is far from surprising given the low level of investment in equipping them for their people management role (see Box 5).

However, managers report high levels of confidence in relation to how they feel about key aspects of managing conflict in their organisation: 90% say they would nip conflict between team members in the bud, and that they understand what kind of behaviour constitutes bullying. Around three in four say they understand their organisation's formal procedures for discipline and grievance (74%), that they would immediately challenge another manager if they made a discriminatory remark (72%) and that they feel confident about using informal resolution approaches to resolve conflict (78%). However, just under a quarter (23%) say they feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues with their team.

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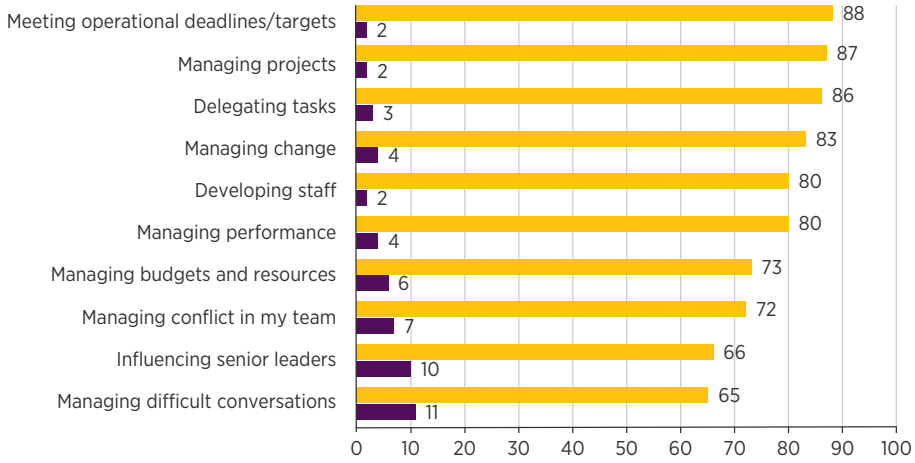
Employers also report a relatively high level of confidence in the ability of managers in their organisation to deal with different aspects of conflict, although they also report less confidence in how comfortable managers would feel in discussing personal issues with their team (see Figure 28).

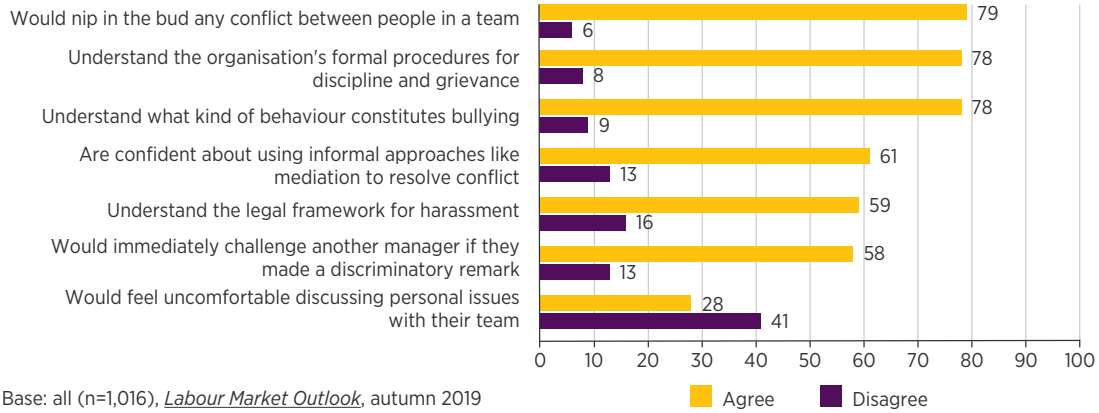
There's a slightly different story when employees are asked how effective their people manager was in dealing with conflict they experienced, either an isolated dispute or incident or ongoing difficult relationship (see Figure 24 above). A third (32%) agreed their people manager made the situation worse (45% disagreed), and two in five (41%) disagreed that their people manager helped to resolve the conflict (32% agreed).

Figure 27: Confidence of line managers in... (%)



Base: all line managers (n=1,011)

Figure 28: Do you agree, or disagree, that managers in your organisation... (% of employers)



Base: all (n=1,016), *Labour Market Outlook*, autumn 2019

Conflict management guidance for people managers

It's clear from our research that people managers play a critical role in addressing conflict at its early stages. However, in order to effectively nip conflict in the bud, the organisation needs to provide people managers with adequate people management training. You can learn how to deal with conflict head on by reading our new, practical guidance for people managers.

Explore the guide

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Box 5: The value of people management training

The findings from our employee survey reveal a significant lack of investment in training for managers: only two-fifths (40%) of the 1,011 people managers in our sample say their organisation has provided them with training in people management skills to support them in their management role. Public sector organisations are much more likely to provide training: 56% compared with 36% of private and 32% of voluntary sector organisations. Large organisations (250-plus employees) are almost twice as likely to train their managers: 51% of employers compared with 26% of SMEs (2–249 employees).

Of the 406 managers in our employee survey who said they had received people management training, the training included:

- how to have difficult conversations (67% of managers)
- conflict resolution skills (62%)
- discipline procedures (57%)
- grievance procedures (51%).

If organisations were aware of the potential benefits of training managers, perhaps more would be keen to invest. Respondents to our employer survey are significantly more likely to report a number of tangible outcomes in their ability to handle conflict where they have invested in people management skills training for their managers. For example, where managers have been trained:

- 17% agree that *'conflict in my organisation is a common occurrence'* compared with 25% of organisations where managers haven't been trained
- 83% agree that *'employees are confident raising issues about conflict in my organisation'* compared with 67% of organisations where managers haven't been trained
- 79% agree that *'if there is conflict within a team, a line manager would help to resolve this quickly'* compared with 61% of organisations where managers haven't been trained
- 81% agree that *'if there is conflict within a team, a line manager would help to resolve this effectively'* compared with 63% of organisations where managers haven't been trained
- 82% agree that *'line managers help their team to build healthy relationships (for example, positive, strong)'* compared with 56% of organisations where managers haven't been trained.

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10 Encouraging early, informal ways to resolve conflict

Key findings

- The use of informal approaches hasn't increased over the past five years, and yet our findings show that many employees are open to mediation, with the majority view being that it should be required before the use of a formal grievance procedure.
- More organisations should invest in ensuring their managers are capable and confident to support early resolution: less than half of employees overall (including managers themselves) agree that *'if there is conflict in my team, my line manager helps resolve this **quickly**'* (47%) and that *'if there is conflict in my team, my line manager helps resolve this **effectively**'* (49%).
- Mediation seeks to provide a speedy solution to individual workplace conflict, and can be used at any stage of a disagreement or dispute. The process is flexible and voluntary, and any agreement is morally rather than legally binding.
- There could be real opportunities for organisations that embrace dialogue and early conflict resolution as part of their culture: formal processes can be drawn out and damage the employment relationship beyond repair.

Conflict between individuals is best dealt with at source, and at the earliest opportunity. This requires confidence and competence on the part of managers, who are in the front line of promoting healthy relationships in their teams. They should also be able to spot tensions between people and address conflict head on, before it escalates. Of the 406 managers in our employee survey who said they had received people management training, six in ten (62%) told us the training included conflict resolution skills – not a high proportion of the managers overall who took part in our survey.

Our survey findings show that managers themselves and employers may report relatively strong levels of confidence in their ability to deal with conflict, but what do employees think? There could be a perception–reality gap, because less than half of employees overall (including managers themselves) agree that *'if there is conflict in my team, my line manager helps resolve this **quickly**'* (47%) and that *'if there is conflict in my team, my line manager helps resolve this **effectively**'* (49%).

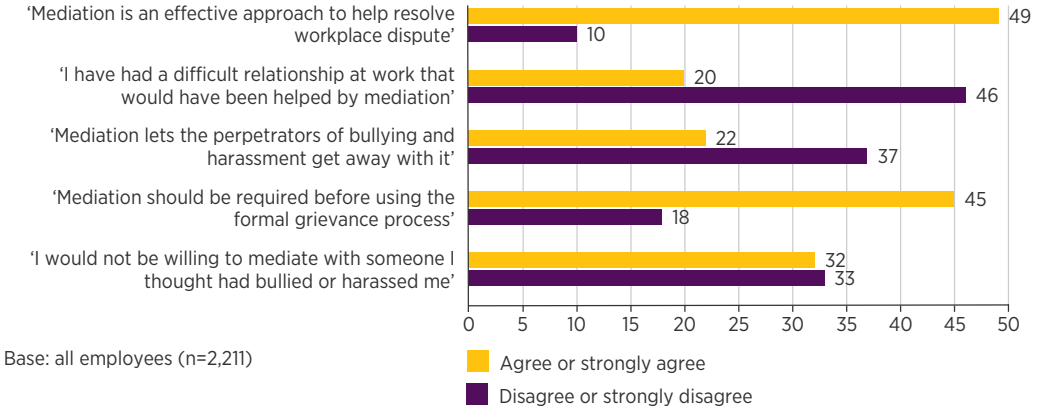
Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) approaches like early conflict resolution, facilitation and mediation can help to encourage dialogue and mutually acceptable outcomes to disagreement and difference. 'Mediation' is a voluntary process facilitated by a trained, independent third party to help resolve conflict informally (see Box 4): just over one in ten (12%) employees overall in our employee survey reported that they had taken part in mediation to help resolve conflict they had experienced at work. Our employee survey reveals a high degree of openness about the potential of mediation, with a popular view that *'mediation is an effective approach to help resolve workplace disputes'* and that the process should be required before using the formal grievance process (see Figure 29).

If an allegation of harassment is serious, and/or the person on the receiving end of the unfair treatment wants to pursue a formal complaint, it may be most appropriate to go straight to a formal grievance and/or disciplinary process. But even harassing behaviour can take place across a very wide spectrum of behaviour and be unintentional, and there

could be circumstances where mediation is appropriate. Employee views are more mixed on this issue, but our findings reveal a level of openness by employees to using mediation even where bullying or harassment has taken place.

Our employer survey shows that the use of informal approaches to managing conflict, such as mediation and training people managers in this area, has not increased in the past five years (see section 8, Figure 25). This is disappointing and shows that employers are not tapping into the openness with which many people view the potential of mediation to resolve disputes at work. There could be real opportunities for organisations who foster an employment relations culture based on dialogue and problem-solving; if conflict can be resolved at the earliest possible stage, the outcome is likely to be better for both parties, as well as the organisation.

Figure 29: What do employees think about mediation? (% of employers)



Base: all employees (n=2,211)

11 Background to the research

This report, exploring conflict, and bullying and harassment in UK workplaces, is based on findings from:

- a survey of employers: a series of questions about managing conflict included as part of the CIPD's autumn 2019 *Labour Market Outlook* (LMO) conducted by YouGov Plc
- a survey of employees conducted by YouGov Plc
- two online focus groups with (1) managers and (2) employees who have experienced conflict in the workplace.

Method for survey of employers

The total sample was 1,016 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6 September and 27 September 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK business by size, sector and industry.

Weighting

Rim weighting is applied using targets on size and sector drawn from the *Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2018*. The following tables contain unweighted counts.

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Table 1: Breakdown of the sample, by number of employees in organisation

Employer size band	Count
2–9	175
10–49	190
50–99	81
100–249	93
250–499	99
500–999	83
1,000 or more	295
Total	**1,016**

Table 2: Breakdown of sample, by sector

Sector	Count
Private sector	761
Public sector	176
Third/voluntary sector	79
Total	**1,016**

Table 3: Breakdown of sample, by industry

Industry	Count
Voluntary	79
Manufacturing and production	164
Manufacturing	92
Construction	54
Primary and utilities	18
Education	106
Healthcare	71
Private sector services	525
Wholesale, retail and real estate	65
Transport and storage	25
Information and communication	56
Finance and insurance	88
Business services (eg consultancy, law, PR, marketing, scientific and technical services)	119
Hotels, catering and restaurants/Arts, entertainment and recreation	73
Administrative and support service activities and other service activities	99
Public administration and defence	60
Police and armed forces	11
Total	**1,016**

Table 4: Breakdown of sample, by region

Region	Count
North-east of England	31
East Midlands	60
West Midlands	66
Scotland	58
London	186
South-west of England	62
East of England	48
Wales	36
South-east of England	122
North-west of England	88
Yorkshire and Humberside	49
Northern Ireland	9

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Method for survey of employees
The total sample size was 2,211 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16 August and 3 September 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK employees.

Method for two online focus groups
Two online focus groups were conducted by YouGov in September 2019 with managers and employees who have experienced conflict in the workplace. All respondents were recruited from the CIPD's *Conflict in the Workplace* employee survey, which was live on YouGov's online research panel. The groups were 1.5 hours in length and comprised between eight and nine respondents per group. The discussion loosely followed the structure and themes of the quantitative survey, in order to explore the topics in greater depth.

Group 1: Managers: Primary criteria was selection of managers/supervisors of more than two employees; secondary criteria was a mix of age, gender, ethnicity and region as well as a mix of business and sector.

Group 2: Employees who experienced conflict: Primary criteria was selection of employees who had experienced bullying or harassment at work, as well as a mix of different characteristics of harassment, forms of bullying/harassment, perpetrators and places where the bullying/harassment took place; secondary criteria was a mix of age, gender, ethnicity and region as well as a mix of business and sector.

12 Notes/additional reading

1 CIPD. (2016) *Growing the health and well-being agenda*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

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9 Ibid.

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11 Saundry, R., Adam, D., Ashman, I., Forde, C., Wibberley, G. and Wright, S. (2016) *Managing individual conflict in the contemporary British workplace*. London: Acas.

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