

Institution: University of Plymouth		
Unit of Assessment: UoA17		
Title of case study: Conflict Management in the UK Workplaces – Shaping Policy and Strategy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Richard Saundry	Professor of HRM and Employment Relations	01.06.2013 – 31.07.2019
Sue Kinsey	Associate Professor of HR and Leadership Studies	16.05.2011 – present
Virginia Fisher	Associate Professor of HR and Leadership Studies	01.05.2010 – 31.07.2019 01.09.2020 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 to December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>This case study reports on a programme of research which has shaped the strategy and policies of the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) and directly influenced government decision-making. The research has embedded conflict management as a core strategic priority for Acas and provided the underpinning rationale for key objectives including the early resolution of conflict, the effective use of informal approaches, and promotion of the benefits of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). In addition, the research informed the development of Acas guidance on productivity and the government's review of the Acas Code of Conduct on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>The impact outlined in this case study maps on to three related strands of research: the practice of discipline and grievance and the potential for early and informal conflict resolution; the roles played by key stakeholders (line managers, HR practitioners and employee representatives) in the management of conflict; and the development of workplace mediation and other innovative approaches to conflict management.</p> <p>The first strand involved two projects, both funded by Acas. In 2014, a quantitative analysis of data from the Workplace Employment Relations Studies of 2004 and 2011 [P1] concluded that formal procedure and compliance-based approaches still predominated in UK workplaces [3.1]. The second project, a major assessment of conflict handling in UK workplaces [P2], was commissioned by Acas in response to a decision by the UK government to review the Acas Statutory Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures. The government was concerned that the existing Code of Practice was inflexible and encouraged formalised responses to conflict. Led by Saundry, the project was carried out by a consortium of four Universities (Plymouth, Warwick, Leeds and UCLAN). The final report published in 2016 [3.2] concluded that the goal of</p>		

early and informal resolution was not reflected in managerial practice and that conflict management and dispute resolution in British workplaces was dominated by procedural compliance.

The second project [P2] also found that the Acas Code of Practice did not preclude early and informal resolution and that there was little appetite among key stakeholders to change the Code and wider Acas advice and guidance. However, reinforcing earlier Acas-funded research led by Saundry [3.3 and 3.4], it suggested that low levels of skill and confidence among front-line managers made early intervention less likely and encouraged a reliance on rigid procedure. This was exacerbated by increasingly remote models of HR advice. In 2017, the role played by HR practitioners in the management of conflict was further explored in a subsequent research project, commissioned by Acas [P3]. This suggested that evolution of business partnering, HR outsourcing and poorly trained line managers undermined the high-trust relationships necessary for early and informal conflict resolution [3.5].

In parallel, there has been sustained research into innovations in conflict management with a particular emphasis on workplace mediation. Between 2010 and 2013, Acas commissioned a series of organisational case-studies [P4, P5, P6], the last of which evaluated one of the few examples of a conflict management system found in the UK, at Northumbria Healthcare Trust. The findings [3.6] underlined the importance of a strategic approach to conflict management in generating transformational impacts on employment relations and the incidence of bullying and harassment. Despite the potential benefits of innovative approaches to conflict management, the research programme has also found limited evidence that they have been widely adopted by UK organisations [3.2] [3.4].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Wood, S., Saundry, R. and Latreille, P. (2017) 'The Management of Discipline and Grievances in British Workplaces: the evidence from 2011 WERS', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 48, Iss.1, 2–21.
- 3.2 Saundry, R., Adam, D., Ashman, I., Forde, C., Wibberley, G. and Wright, S. (2016) Managing individual conflict in the contemporary British workplace, *Acas Research Papers*, 02/16.
- 3.3 Jones, C. and Saundry R. (2016) 'A crisis of confidence? Front-line managers and the complexities of conflict', in Saundry, R. et al. (eds.) *Reframing Resolution - Innovation and Change in the Management of Workplace Conflict*, Palgrave MacMillan.
- 3.4 Saundry, R., Wibberley, G. and Jones, C. (2015) 'The Challenge of Managing Informally', *Employee Relations*, 37:4, 428 - 441.
- 3.5 Saundry, R., Fisher, V. and Kinsey, S. (2020) 'Disconnected HR? Proximity and the (mis)management of workplace conflict', *Human Resource Management Journal*. doi:10.1111/1748-8583.12318
- 3.6 Latreille, P. and Saundry, R. (2016) 'Toward a System of Conflict Management? Cultural Change and Resistance in a Healthcare Organization', in David B. Lipsky, Ariel C. Avgar, J. Ryan Lamare (ed.) *Managing and Resolving Workplace Conflict (Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations*, Volume 22, 189 – 209.

Related Research Projects

[P1] The Handling of Discipline and Grievance Using WERS 2011 and WERS2004 (Acas, £9,912), 2013.

[P2] Conflict management and the handling of discipline and grievance (Acas, £11,875), 2014.

[P3] The Impact of HR Structures on the Management of Conflict (Acas, £9,528), 2016.

[P4] Transforming conflict management in the public sector (Acas, £6,500), 2010.

[P5] Mediation, conflict management and informal resolution (Acas, £8,734), 2011

[P6] Exploration of Conflict Management and Early Dispute Resolution Strategies – Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (Acas, £9,724), 2013.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research outlined above has had a broad impact in developing Acas policy and embedding conflict management as a key plank of its current strategy. Moreover, it has directly informed UK government policy in relation to dispute resolution and has played a broader role in shaping workplace practice.

Acas Strategy and Policy

Dispute resolution and managing conflict is one of three strategic aims for Acas outlined in its 2016-2021 Strategic Review [5.1]. This agenda has been shaped by the work led by Saundry in close consultation with senior staff at Acas [5.2]. Gill Dix, Head of Workplace Policy Strategy for Acas, states that Saundry's programme of research has 'provided insightful evidence on new and impactful strategies for conflict handling and have unpacked the challenges of approaches to dispute resolution that are often longstanding, complex and carry significant cost to the economy business and individuals. She writes that, overall, it has been 'of central importance in shaping Acas' future and addressing much wider economic challenges' [5.2]. The influence of Saundry's research is clearly reflected in the objectives linked to this strategic aim. Two key objectives shaped by the research are to 'resolve conflict as early as possible to avoid negative impacts on organisational effectiveness and efficiency...' and to 'manage conflict effectively using informal approaches...'. The influence of Saundry's research on these objectives was shown in the Acas publication 'Workplace Trends 2015' which had a dedicated section addressing the question "Will conflict be better managed informally in the workplace?" [5.3]. Richard Saundry and Gemma Wiberley (UCLAN) wrote one of the three responses on this topic, while a number of contributors cited research led by Saundry and outlined in section 2.

A further objective of the Strategic Review was to '*help organisations acquire the capability to manage conflict and support individual managers to have the personal skills to respond confidently to potential and actual dispute*'. This reflects the research noted in section 2 that identified the lack of managerial capability as a key barrier to early, informal conflict resolution. The role of the research in developing Acas thinking on this issue is illustrated by a blog 'Mind the Gap(s)' (15 June 2016), published on the Acas website and written by Gill Dix [5.4].

Moreover, the programme of research became central to Acas thinking as to how to address the continued prevalence of traditional and formalised approaches to the management of disciplinary and grievance issues, and instead promote early and informal resolution alongside more systemic and strategic approaches to the management of conflict. This is illustrated by

Saundry being commissioned by Acas to develop a policy paper, 'Fairness, justice and capability - repositioning conflict management' [5.5], which was designed to draw on the research conducted to date and develop innovative ideas as to how the key tenets of conflict management can be embedded in organisational practice. The extent to which this research was influential at the highest levels of Acas was further demonstrated in a 2019 article authored by Acas Chair, Sir Brendan Barber in Personnel Today [5.6] and a blog from the Head of Acas Workplace Policy [5.7], which were both based on Saundry's policy paper and Saundry, Fisher and Kinsey's work on the importance of 'connected' HR practitioners in effective conflict resolution. This has work continued to influence Acas thinking, for example, commenting on the prospects for the economy emerging from the pandemic, Sir Brendan further highlighted better management of conflict as one of the key dimensions of a new social contract at work [5.8].

Saundry's research has also been used to inform the development of Acas' work on solving the UK's productivity puzzle. This was demonstrated by the significant Acas report 'Building Productivity in the UK' (June 2015) [5.9] and the launching of an online diagnostic tool, designed to 'help employers develop their thinking about where they could make productivity gains in their workplaces'. In total, the tool had approximately 8,000 registered users. Acas point out that the tool 'is based on research and new thinking Acas has undertaken in this area'. Three of the seven levers of productivity identified in the report (managing conflict, skilled managers and trust) are illustrated with material drawn from the research identified in section 2. This report was subsequently cited in Acas' submission to the UK government's call for evidence in relation to business productivity [5.10].

Government Policy – UK System of Dispute Resolution

The research outlined in section 2 also directly informed policy towards the Acas Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures, a core component of the UK's system of dispute resolution and the most widely used of Acas' codes, downloaded 250,000 in 2020 alone. In 2014, Richard Saundry was commissioned by Acas to lead the project 'Conflict management and the handling of discipline and grievance' which was explicitly designed to assess the potential for any revision to the Acas Code. According to Acas, this research 'represented an important step in our understanding of how the framework of procedures works in practice' [5.2]. On 16th January, 2015, the Secretary of State for Business Vince Cable asked Acas to conduct a review of the Code. Saundry presented the results of this national project to the Acas Council at a meeting on 1st October 2015. The recommendation of the research was that there was no substantive case for revision as the Code itself did not provide an obstacle to efficient and early dispute resolution. Moreover, it was felt that the Code provided all stakeholders within an important and flexible framework for conflict management. This was accepted by the Acas Council and consequently reflected in the Acas submission to the Government on this issue [5.2]. The research not only informed this crucial decision, 'but also provided insight on areas for change in the accompanying non-statutory guidance' [5.2].

Wider Effects on HR Practice

The research has also been important in informing the delivery of Acas services and 'supporting everyday practice in the workplace' [5.2]. Moreover, it has influenced the work of Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in relation to conflict management, being widely referenced in the CIPD's publication 'Conflict management: a shift in direction' [5.11] and in 2019, its high-profile report 'Managing Conflict in the Modern Workplace' [5.12], where two publications [3.2] [3.5] were the only academic papers cited. The latter was awarded the Ian Beardwell prize for best applied research article by the CIPD in 2021. Saundry was also consulted on the development of the survey which underpinned this report. Furthermore, the research has influenced consequent CIPD guidance to people managers emphasising the importance of early and informal intervention in conflict [5.13]. Research focussing on workplace mediation and conflict management has also influenced policy and guidance in the NHS. In particular,

the evaluation of Northumbria Healthcare Trust (NHCT) [5.6] formed the basis of a good practice guide on developing conflict competence published by NHS employers [5.14] and was cited in a BMA report on how to address bullying and create supportive and inclusive cultures [5.15]. Furthermore, the NHCT research added to Acas' 'understanding of both the individual approaches employers can deploy in response to conflict, but also what drivers underpin how a more strategic approach can help' [5.2].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Acas Strategy 2016-2021 revised April 2019
https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/4573/Acas-Strategy-2016---2021/pdf/Acas_Strategy_2016-2021_revised_April_201E9.pdf
- 5.2 Letter from Gill Dix, Head of Workplace Policy, Acas.
- 5.3 Workplace trends of 2015 <https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/4214/Workplace-trends-of-2015/pdf/Workplace-trends-of-20151.pdf>
- 5.4 Gill Dix Workplace conflict blog post July 2016
<https://archive.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5772>
- 5.5 Fairness justice & capability repositioning conflict management
https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/6327/Fairness-justice-and-capability---repositioning-conflict-management/pdf/Fairness_justice_and_capability_-_repositioning_conflict_management.pdf
- 5.6 Sir Brendan Barber Why we need conflict Personnel Today
<https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/sir-brendan-barber-why-we-need-conflict-acas/>
- 5.7 The conflict slot Acas <https://www.acas.org.uk/the-conflict-slot>
- 5.8 Building back making working lives better <https://www.acas.org.uk/building-back-making-working-lives-better-html>
- 5.9 Building productivity in the uk <https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/4299/Building-Productivity-in-the-UK/pdf/Building-productivity-in-the-uk.pdf>
- 5.10 Acas response to government consultation on actions to improve business productivity
https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/5948/Acas-response-to-government-consultation-on-actions-to-improve-business-productivity/pdf/Acas_response_to_government_consultation_on_actions_to_improve_business_productivity.pdf
- 5.11 Conflict management a shift in direction Report CIPD
<https://www.cipd.asia/knowledge/reports/conflict-management>
- 5.12 Managing conflict in the modern workplace CIPD
<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/disputes/managing-workplace-conflict-report>
- 5.13 Dealing with conflict at work a guide for line managers
<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/disputes/workplace-conflict-people-manager-guide>
- 5.14 Northumbria Health Care building conflict competence <https://www.nhsemployers.org/-/media/Employers/Publications/Northumbria-Healthcare-NHSFT---comms-edits.pdf>
- 5.15 BMA bullying and harrasment policy report <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/1100/bma-bullying-and-harassment-policy-report-oct-2019.pdf>