



## **How to solve workplace conflict when no-one is present**

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**Modern working practices have brought a new world of workplace conflict. Tania Coke asks what can be done to support healthy human relations in the age of absence.**

You might say the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the age of absence.

We are absent to the colleague sitting next to us when we skype with a client on the other side of the world. We are absent to our family when we check our work emails during dinner.

Flexible working allows us to be physically absent from the workplace even during working hours.

This proliferation of ways to be absent while at work is affecting the kinds of conflict that emerge in our working relationships.

### **Three factors**

We can identify three factors fueling conflict in this age of absence. The first is the rise of technologies that allow us to be elsewhere while at work. This is a factor that crops up repeatedly in the cases that Consensio mediates.

In one workplace mediation, an employee was infuriated by the amount of time her colleague spent online shopping. She claimed it was demotivating and distracting to see her colleague browsing for clothes and holidays while she herself was hard at work.

The colleague replied that the nature of her job was to be available when clients needed her, but that in moments of downtime she was entitled to do whatever she wanted.

In the days before internet perhaps she might have engaged in less obvious time-fillers. It is hard to disguise an Amazon browser.

### **Technology trials**

In another case the technology issue surfaced in the mediation room. It was during a break in the middle of a day of mediation. One of the parties reached for her phone and sent an email to a colleague.

The other party (her boss) was outraged. She assumed the email must be about the mediation and saw it as a breach of confidentiality.

The mediation nearly ground to a halt, until the first party was able to convince her boss that the email was a reply to a work-related query, and nothing to do with the mediation.

What this case shows is that any means of communication that is not transparent to bystanders, such as email and messaging, can feed mistrust and fuel fears. Unlike the online shopping example, in this case it wasn't the fact that the employee was absent that caused the problem – it was the fact that her boss did not know what she was up to, and assumed the worst case scenario.

## **Working patterns**

The second factor we can point to is the introduction of new patterns of working – flexible working is a prime example.

There was one case in which an employee was turning up for work at 11am in the morning. During mediation, her boss told her she found this unacceptable since the organisation was going through a merger.

The boss felt that the team should be physically present and together at such a critical time. The employee insisted that she was present, but at different times from others, and that she was working more than her contracted hours.

Hot-desking is another workplace innovation that can trigger disputes. In one case there was an employee who arrived late every morning, and as a result never managed to get a desk near the rest of his team, causing problems which eventually led to a facilitated conversation with a workplace mediator. Again, the conflict centred on the issue of presence and absence.

## **Time pressure**

Third we have to acknowledge the growing time pressures facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century worker.

In almost every workplace mediation the parties refer to time pressure as a factor in their conflict: the pressure to check emails outside working hours, the pressure to communicate daily with customers or shareholders via SMS, the pressure to keep up with the avalanche of information that floods their inboxes every day.

These are all pressures unknown to the workers of the 1960s onwards, pressures which have given rise to a kind of frenetic hyperactivity which can make us absent to the people around us.

In this state of breathlessness and bottomless to-do lists, it is hard to take the time to listen deeply to what someone is saying, praise a job well done, or offer constructive feedback.

Instead we often feel defensive and under threat. We assume the worst in others, and jump to conclusions instead of stopping to enquire 'What did you mean by that?'.

In short, we retreat into ourselves, viewing the outside world through a dense filter of our own needs and preconceptions, blind to the needs and preconceptions of others.

No wonder conflict is rife.

### **Divisive practices**

This trio of factors – the rise of new technology and media, changing patterns of working, and spiraling pressures on our time – can be seen as driving people apart, as shown in the cases above.

Of course these factors, especially the new technologies and working patterns, have many positive effects as well. But we should still take care to do what we can to counteract the negative effects.

We need to find ways to make people more present to one another: more supportive, more inquisitive and more attentive to one another's needs, even in this age of absence.

First and foremost, we can do it by trying to set a good example: by being as present as possible to the people around us. We can also do it by offering and promoting training that nurtures communication skills, courageous conversations and self-awareness. Finally, we can do it by creating opportunities for people to be present with one another away from the frantic working environment.

### **Making a difference**

While workplace conflict may be more prevalent in the fast-paced 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has been, and will always be, a natural part of organisation life.

We need to embrace the numerous benefits of new technology and flexible working practices, as well as helping employees to be ever more present to one another, even in conflict situations.

If we can make this shift from absence to presence, it will be a great step forward for employee wellbeing.

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