

After The Great Resignation, Is The Great Grievance Next?

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28 July 2022

2021 was the start of the Great Resignation, when millions of workers left their jobs. This year, there are signs of a new workplace trend, one that is impacting employers and employees alike. Workplace mediators are seeing a significant increase in employee disputes being referred for mediation *after* a grievance has been raised, indicating that employees are favoring formal 'complaints' processes over earlier, informal resolution. Considering the impact grievance processes have on individuals and organizations, understanding what's behind this shift, and taking steps to address it, could help employers avoid 2022-23 becoming the era of the 'Great Grievance.'

The fall and rise of the grievance

Staff members who experience a conflict situation at work have a number of choices. They can speak directly to the other person involved; get support from their manager to facilitate a conversation; seek specialist help from an independent mediator; or make a formal complaint, such as a grievance. In recent years, many companies have recognized that early and informal dialogue is much more likely to resolve an issue.

Although informal routes are more likely to lead to resolution, the increase in workers turning to grievance procedures suggests some interesting factors are at play. Shifting working patterns over the pandemic era is one likely contributor. Many employees got used to being at home, where they were not managed in the same way as when working physically with their manager and colleagues. Now they are back in the workplace, they need to re-adjust to different relationship dynamics and potentially a style of management they are no longer used to. In some instances, this is causing tension and conflict.

External factors also influence the perceived 'contract' between employee and employer. The pandemic affected perceptions of work-life balance, with many workers expecting more flexibility. If a manager can't grant a flexible working request, this may lead to a breakdown in trust and erode a manager-employee relationship, which could lead to a formal process down the line.

The impact on individuals and organizations

Resolving workplace conflict through formal routes is costly to both an organization and the individuals involved. Formal processes tend to take a long time, and they are stressful and uncertain, which impacts the health and well-being of those involved. Formal processes are also resource-intensive, involve more people, and bring reputational risk, especially in a world where conflict often goes 'viral.'

Importantly, disputes addressed by a formal process are generally harder to resolve. Workplace mediators who mediate cases that come to mediation after a grievance, for example, find that

parties have become more entrenched in their views, and less likely to harbor any feelings of trust towards the other party.

By lodging a grievance, the employee gives over responsibility to a third party to decide on the outcome. If more employees go down this route, it could indicate that workers are feeling disempowered and not taking personal accountability for their workplace outcomes.

Avoiding the Great Grievance

A good foundation for avoiding unnecessary grievances is to help staff and managers understand the alternatives and provide resources to enable them to address issues informally and collaboratively. There is often a lack of awareness amongst employees of the options and support available. This is partly due to a lack of communication and because those who have benefitted from support don't tend to talk about it. Leaders who speak openly about challenges they've faced can help to position conflict not as something 'bad' that needs to be reported, but as a learning opportunity that can strengthen working relationships.

Line managers also play a crucial role. With some training support, managers can spot the signs of conflict and help team members address it. It's also the case that a significant proportion of conflict in organizations can be between a staff member and their manager, so upskilling managers in conflict management can serve the dual purpose of management development and conflict prevention.

Although grievances are costly and time-consuming, there's another way to look at them. A rise in grievances could signify that staff are recognizing conflict, and instead of resigning, are speaking up. So, rather than going from the Great Resignation to the Great Grievance, perhaps organizations have the opportunity to move to the 'Great Resolution' instead.