



## Why the increased demand for conflict resolution services?

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Numerous factors are contributing to significant increases in demand by organisations for conflict resolution services, particularly mediation. Worryingly, organisations are also experiencing an escalation of formal employee grievances.

Some of the reasons for this relate to the disruption to our lives caused by the pandemic, which has put extensive pressure on HR professionals and managers. This has been compounded by adjustments to new working patterns, Covid fatigue, long Covid, and labour shortages, not to mention the growing pressure on employees due to increases in the cost of living.

Here are two factors that are exacerbating the demand for conflict resolution services.

### **Virtual versus in-person communication**

Remote and hybrid working don't lend themselves to the same quality of communication as in-person interactions.

There are many advantages to hybrid and remote working, however, organisations need to be aware of how virtual working may impact workplace relationships and look at how HR and managers can be upskilled to effectively and confidently deal with new terrains of workplace conflict.

For some people, remote and hybrid working has meant a reduction in workplace conflict because they no longer work physically together with someone they perceive as challenging.

For others, conflict has escalated because virtual communication lacks the nuance and tone of in-person communication; conversations become more formal, transactional, and impersonal, and they lack the empathy needed when people are under pressure.

Virtual communication increases the probability of misinterpretation and misconstruction, which contributes to workplace conflict.

In-person interactions allow us to quickly and easily clarify issues and increase our understanding of other people's perspectives. When we work physically together, we can walk over to someone's desk to clarify an email that came across as disrespectful or share with a colleague that we feel undervalued at work.

There is a growing body of research on working from home during the pandemic, for example Microsoft's annual Work Trend Index in 2022, which suggests that although employees reported more meetings, they also reported more isolation and less connection.

The research also shows that companies became more siloed during the pandemic. This is what we are seeing on the ground in our conflict resolution work with clients.

The relationship-building aspect of in-person communication is more difficult to replicate virtually. Virtual communication tends to be more task-oriented and transactional. In a physical workspace, on the other hand, we have the opportunity to interact with each other as 'whole people.' We might ask about someone's weekend before a meeting or discuss our family or a new hobby. These conversations foster trust and enable people to feel part of a team.

We can minimise some of the disadvantages of hybrid and remote working by training HR and managers on improving their virtual communication skills.

Managing a remote team is different to managing an in-person team, and it is paramount that managers learn how to keep remote workers motivated, engaged, and connected when working virtually.

### **Reactive versus proactive approach to conflict resolution**

Another reason for the increased demand for conflict resolution services is that organisations are still being reactive when it comes to conflict resolution, when what is required is a proactive approach.

A reactive approach means dealing with issues only once relationships have broken down.

Mediation, for example, is sometimes being offered as a last resort, months – sometimes years – after a conflict first started. In many cases, mediation is being offered after a formal grievance process, when a relationship has been damaged even further due to the investigation process.

When issues aren't nipped in the bud early and informally, a conflict that could have easily been resolved through an informal and collaborative conversation, will fester and grow.

Investing time and resource into a strategic proactive conflict resolution approach includes upskilling those at the forefront of conflict to enable issues to be dealt with early, informally and collaboratively.

This includes training HR and managers in conflict management, facilitation, and conflict coaching skills. Incorporating this into an organisation's management development programme will empower people managers to support team members to confidently deal with issues quickly and informally, in-person and virtually.

These skills will then be role-modelled to employees throughout the organisation, which will contribute to a culture where conflict conversations become normalised. It will also relieve the burden on HR.

Budgets may be tight and schedules full, but there could not be a better time to invest in the vital skills of informal conflict resolution.