

CIPD

Report  
September 2024

How employers  
are tackling bullying  
and harassment  
at work

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With over 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Report

# How employers are tackling bullying and harassment at work

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# 1 Introduction

This report examines whether employers think they are doing enough to prevent and manage unfair treatment such as bullying and harassment in the workplace. By examining this aspect of UK workplaces, this report aims to assess the level of unhealthy conflict, such as bullying and harassment, and its impact on individuals and organisations.

We found that while both employers and employees generally report a positive workplace climate and good working relationships between people, our research also reveals several pinch points that underline how common workplace conflict can be. For example, a quarter (25%) of employees have experienced conflict or abuse in the last 12 months. One in five (20%) also agreed that “people in my team can sometimes reject others for being different”, a clear reminder that organisations need to take firm proactive steps to challenge stereotypical views and promote inclusive attitudes and behaviours.

There is a high level of employer confidence in having effective procedures for resolving conflict, but there is a sharp disconnect in the experience of individuals who report conflict at work. For example, just 36% of employees say that the conflict has been fully resolved and many simply ‘let it go’, a stark sign of a poor resolution rate in many organisations.

This report examines the state of employee relations and the health of working relationships in UK organisations by outlining the results of our survey of over 2,000 employers about their experiences and insights relating to interpersonal conflict at work.

These findings are drawn from the CIPD’s spring 2024 *Labour Market Outlook*. It also draws on the findings of over 5,000 workers, representative of the UK workforce, through our 2024 *CIPD Good Work Index*.

The research explores the effectiveness of organisations in preventing and dealing with conflict and identifies the gaps in workplace policy and practice. It delves into how organisations deal with sexual harassment at work and their experience of using non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), such as confidentiality clauses in settlement agreements, where there are sexual harassment complaints.

The report also scrutinises the vital part people managers play in addressing bullying and harassment. There are conflicting views on the role of people managers in tackling bullying and harassment. Employers’ confidence in line management capability is high in several areas, such as their ability to resolve conflict effectively and quickly, and their understanding of what constitutes bullying. In sharp contrast, half (49%) of employers agree that line managers can be a cause of conflict in their teams, rising to 61% in public sector organisations. Crucially, the findings point to a firm need for more investment in people management capability, particularly for training and guidance, to ensure managers are equipped to prevent and manage unhealthy interpersonal conflict.

The consequences of unhealthy conflict can be devastating for individuals and for organisations. A [2021 Acas report](#) based on CIPD data estimated the cost of conflict to UK organisations was £28.5 billion – the equivalent of more than £1,000 for each employee.

Conflict is an inherent part of the employment relationship, but there are many practical steps that employers can take to foster working environments based on dignity, respect and inclusion. This report makes clear recommendations for how people professionals can foster inclusive and respectful work cultures and tackle bullying and harassment at work.

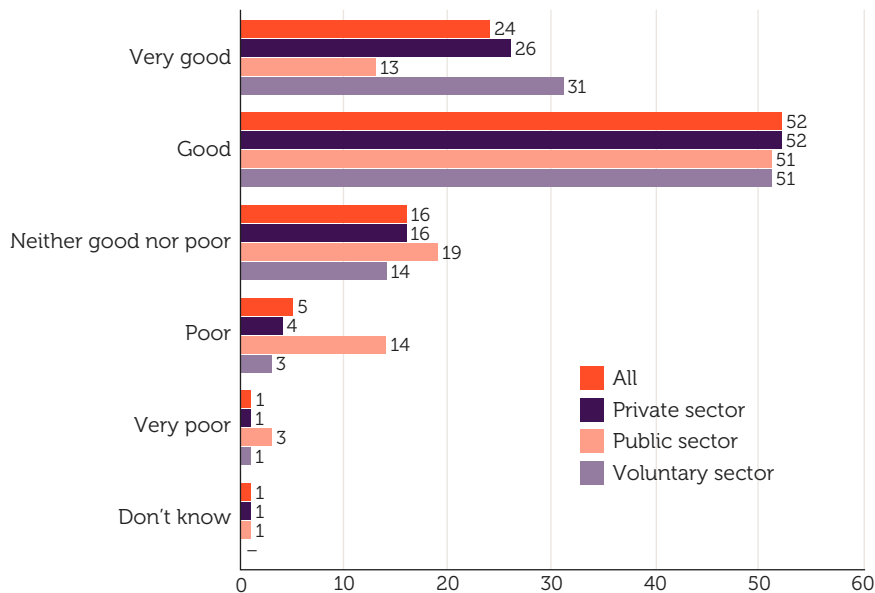
## 2 The workplace climate

Employers are generally positive about the overall workplace climate in their organisation, with three-quarters (76%) rating the working environment and culture as 'good' or 'very good' (Figure 1). This finding reflects little change since our [2020 research](#), when 78% reported the same view.

However, public sector respondents are significantly less likely to report a good employment relations climate compared with their private and voluntary sector counterparts. They are also significantly more likely to rate it as poor or very poor (16% versus 5% and 4%, respectively).

These findings aren't surprising given the recent history of collective conflict and industrial action about pay across many UK public services. It has been challenging for many organisations running frontline services in this sector, and these pressures can filter through to individual as well as collective relationships in the workplace.

**Figure 1: How employers rate the working environment and culture at their organisation (%)**

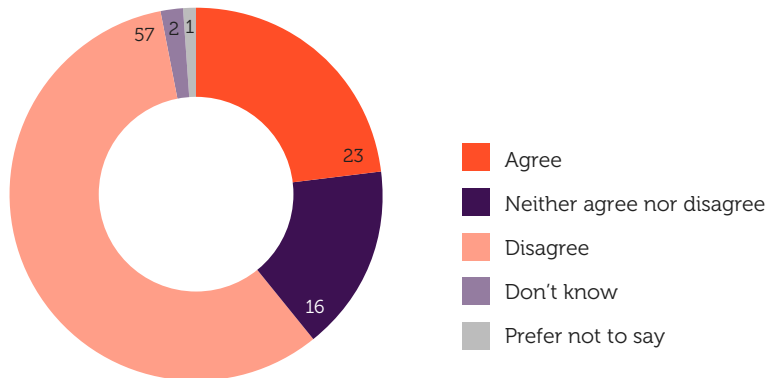


Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

In another similar finding to our 2020 research, almost a quarter (23%) of all employers agree that “conflict in my workplace is a common occurrence”, with little difference between the public and private sectors. This shows how endemic conflict can be in many organisations regardless of sector (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Employers who agree with the statement: “Conflict in my workplace is a common occurrence” (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

### The experience of employees

Using the *CIPD Good Work Index* (an annual snapshot of job quality that surveys more than 5,000 UK workers) to look at the experience of employees, we see that a quarter (25%) of respondents to the 2024 survey experienced conflict or abuse in the last 12 months.

Among those who experienced conflict, the most common experiences were:

- being humiliated or undermined (48%)
- being shouted at or in a very heated argument (35%)
- verbal abuse or insult (34%)
- discriminatory behaviour because of a protected characteristic, such as sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, or age (20%).

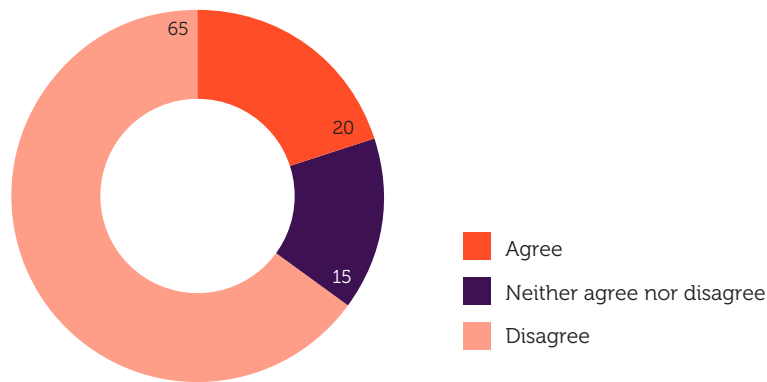
Other forms of conflict, such as assault and physical threat, were relatively uncommon, typically reported by 1–2% of all employees. Unsurprisingly, those with protected characteristics reported more conflict, with women more likely to report conflict than men (28% of women versus 22% of men).

### Relationships in the team

Four in five (80%) employees report a good relationship with their line manager or supervisor, with the same proportion reporting that the relationship with team colleagues is also good.

However, other findings demonstrate that organisations need to develop a deeper understanding of the workplace climate and look beyond the surface to assess how truly inclusive the culture is. For example, one in five employees (20%) agreed with the statement that “people in my team can sometimes reject others for being different” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Employees who agree with the statement: “People in my team can sometimes reject others for being different” (%)**



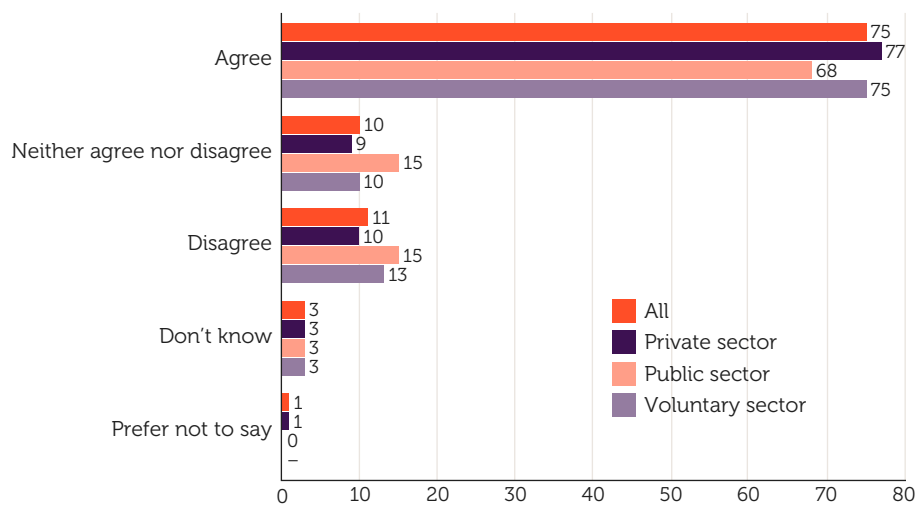
Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults (n=4,660).

Attitudes and behaviours do not have to come in the form of overt prejudice for someone to feel excluded; organisations need to take proactive steps to prevent stereotypical attitudes from creeping into the culture.

**Do organisations foster a ‘speak up’ culture?**

Organisations should aim to create a culture based on dignity and respect, where people have the confidence to speak up and call out inappropriate behaviour. There’s a good level of confidence shown by employers in this regard, with three-quarters (75%) reporting that employees would feel confident raising issues about conflict in their organisation (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Employers who agree with the statement: “Employees would feel confident raising issues about conflict in my organisation” (%)**



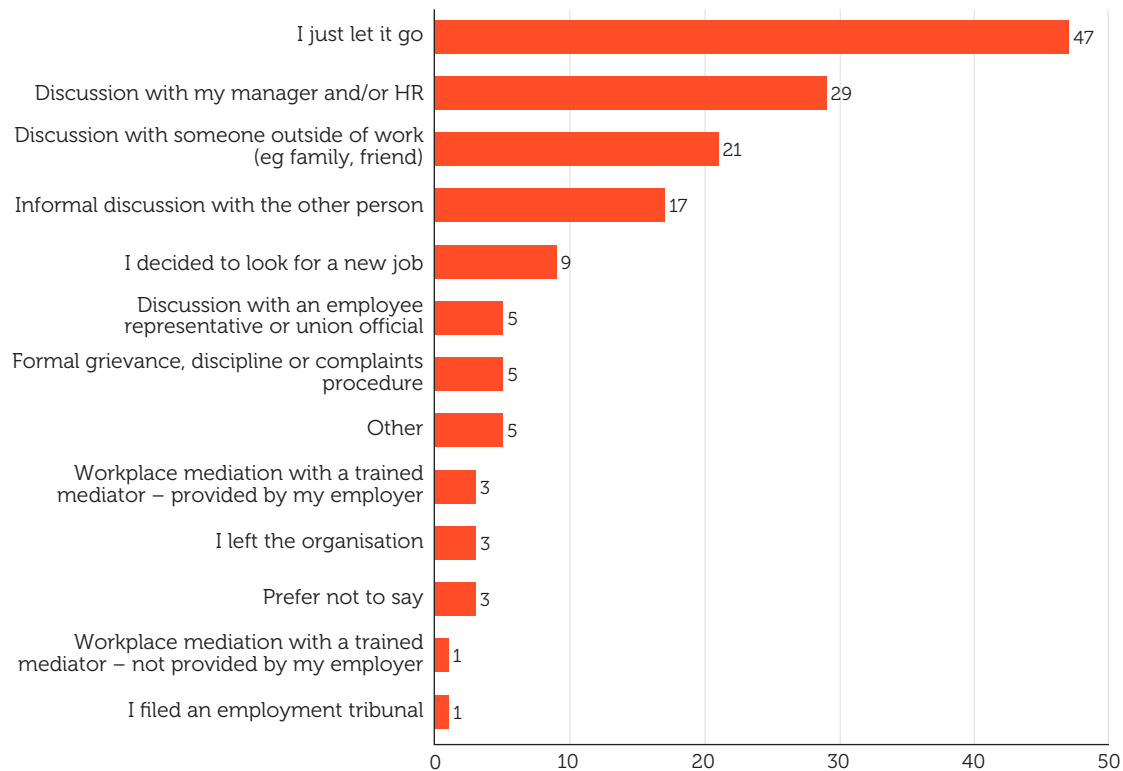
Source: Labour Market Outlook spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

Private sector employers are significantly more likely to agree with this statement than public sector (77% versus 68%). This is surprising given the much higher level of collective voice, including trade union representation, in public services.

However, the confidence of most employers in creating a workplace climate where people feel safe to speak up is not reflected in our employee survey findings. Almost half (47%) of those experiencing conflict at work reported that they ‘just let it go’, while less than a third (29%) discussed it with their manager and/or HR (Figure 5). Less than a fifth (17%) had the confidence to initiate an informal discussion with the other person.

Nearly one in 10 (9%) reacted to the conflict by deciding to look for another job, an important reminder of the potentially negative impacts of unhealthy conflict on both the individual and organisation.

**Figure 5: How employees deal with conflict (%)**



Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.

Base: all working adults who report having experienced conflict in the last 12 months (n=1,365).

### What does this tell us?

Our survey findings show that there is generally a good working environment reported by both employers and employees in most UK organisations. However, there is evidence of more conflict among public sector organisations, not surprising given the collective disputes in this sector in recent years. These can easily affect the wider employment relations climate and spill over into individual relationships.



### Recommendations

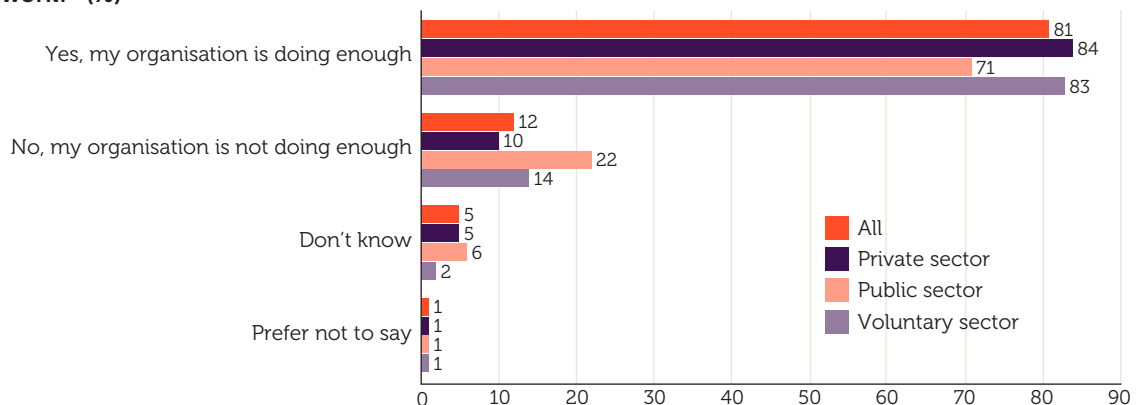
There is a clear gap between employers' confidence in having the policies and procedures to handle conflict and employees' confidence to take forward a complaint and seek resolution. Many organisations need to develop a more in-depth understanding of conflict in their teams and encourage more employees to have the confidence to raise concerns. This means implementing a comprehensive framework for conflict resolution with a strong emphasis on positive and early routes to resolution.

# 3

## Managing and preventing bullying and harassment

Overall, there's a high level of confidence shown by employers in managing bullying and harassment (not including sexual harassment), with four-fifths (81%) thinking they do enough (Figure 6). Private and voluntary sector organisations are significantly more likely to think they are doing enough compared with those in the public sector.

**Figure 6: Employers responding to the statement: "In your opinion, is your organisation doing enough to manage bullying and harassment (not including sexual harassment) between people at work?" (%)**

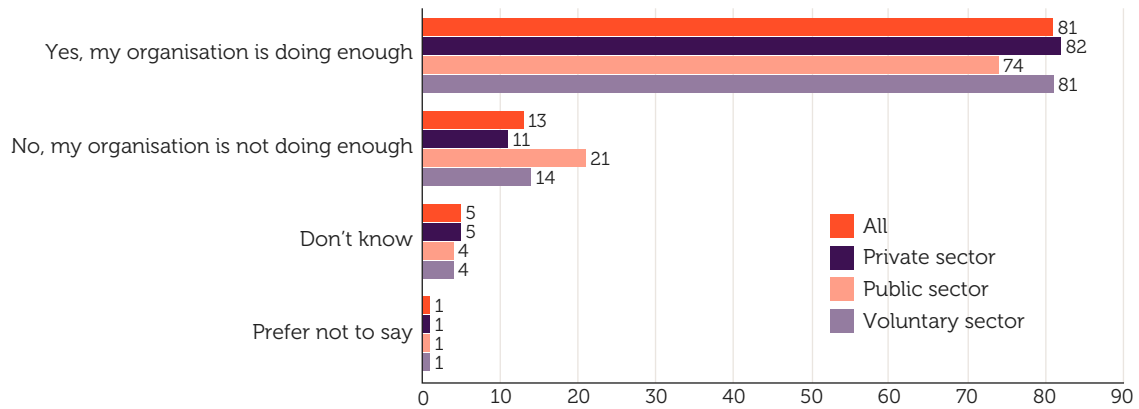


Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

The same level of confidence is evident among organisations about preventing bullying and harassment (not including sexual harassment), as Figure 7 shows. Again, public sector respondents are more likely to say they are not doing enough, particularly compared with their private sector counterparts (21% versus 11%).

**Figure 7: Employers responding to the statement: "In your opinion, is your organisation doing enough to prevent bullying and harassment (not including sexual harassment) between people at work?" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

It's not straightforward to draw clear conclusions in relation to the differences in perspectives between respondents in different sectors. The experiences and insights of people can also vary considerably across different organisations, regardless of sector.

#### What does this tell us?

Although it's encouraging that organisations think they are doing enough to both prevent and manage bullying and harassment at work, it's also a little surprising given that a quarter (25%) of employees overall experienced conflict or abuse in the last 12 months, according to the *2024 CIPD Good Work Index*.

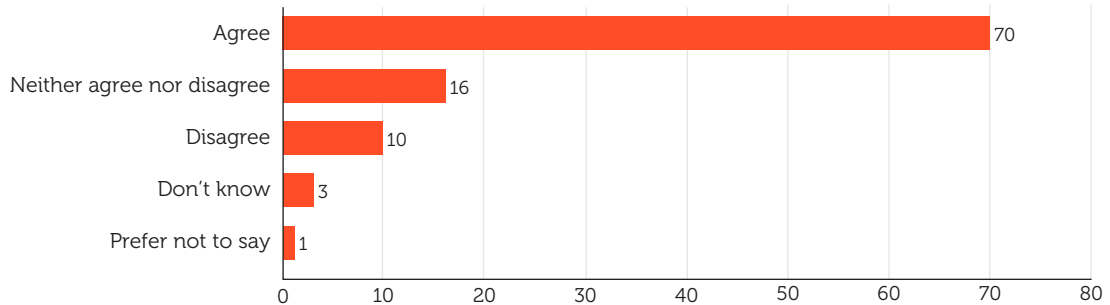
#### Recommendations

Without doubt, the aim of employers should be to prevent unfair treatment happening in the first place, but this requires action on a lot of fronts, such as visible and values-led leadership on the issue, confident and capable people management, and education and training across the workforce. All these factors need to be aligned and mutually reinforcing to have full impact.

## 4 Procedures for dealing with conflict

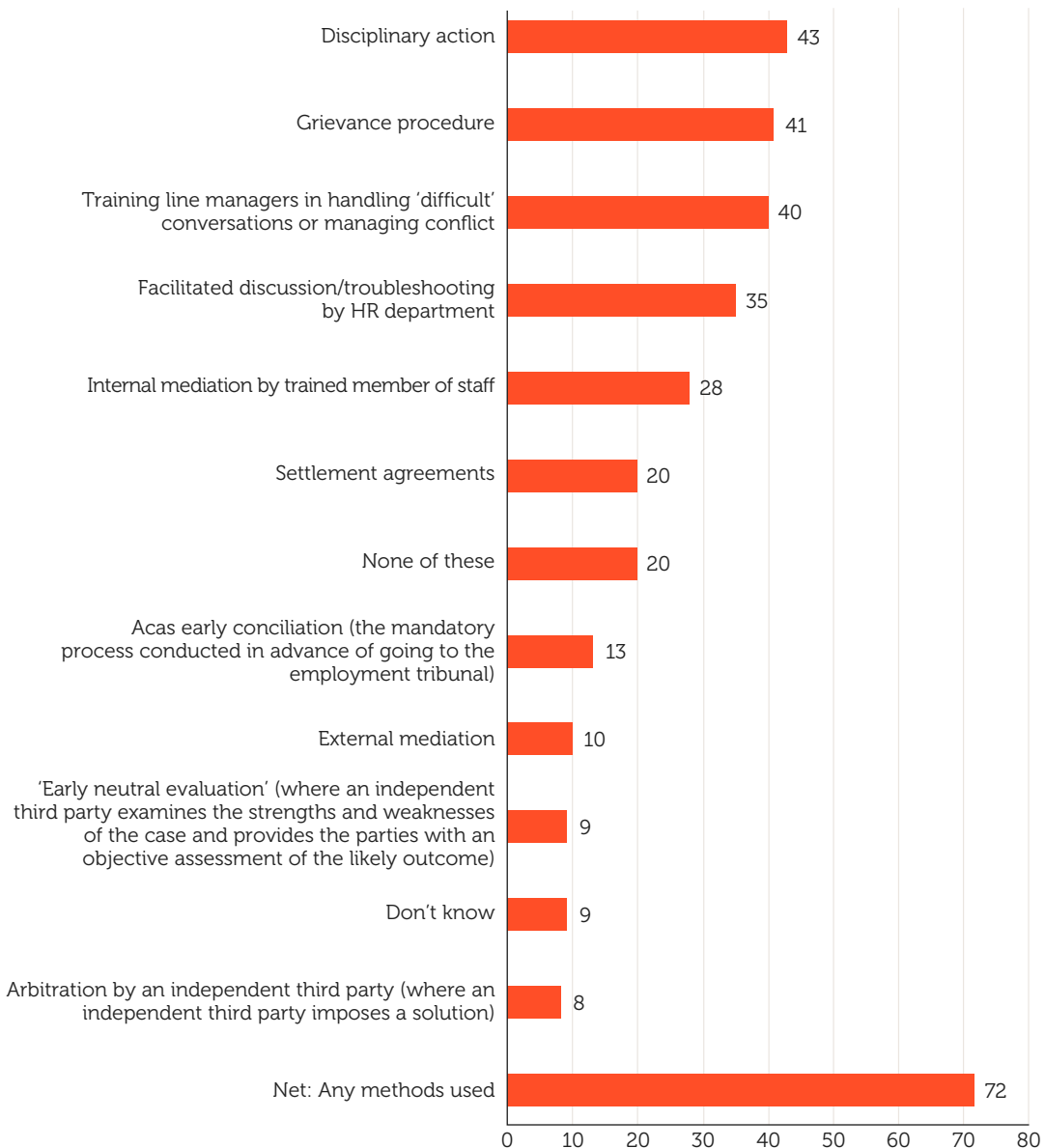
Seven in 10 employers (70%) agree that they have effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict (Figure 8), and there is a wide range of dispute resolution approaches employed by organisations in the last 12 months (Figure 9). These range from the formal (disciplinary and grievance procedures) to the informal, such as training line managers in handling 'difficult conversations' or managing conflict (40% of organisations) and facilitated discussion/troubleshooting by HR (35%).

**Figure 8: Employers responding to the statement: “My organisation has effective procedures for resolving interpersonal conflict” (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
 Base: all employers (total: n=2,009).

**Figure 9: Employers responding to the question: “Which of the following methods of dealing with workplace issues, if any, has your organisation used in the last 12 months?” (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
 Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

Where possible, organisations should encourage people to resolve conflict informally, at the earliest possible stage. This approach is more effective because it helps to prevent disagreements from escalating and developing into more serious disputes. However, the findings show that informal and early approaches to resolving conflict are less common in organisations.

As was the case in our 2020 research, public sector organisations are more likely to have used both formal and informal methods to deal with conflict over the last 12 months than those in the private sector (apart from early neutral evaluation and settlement agreements). For example:

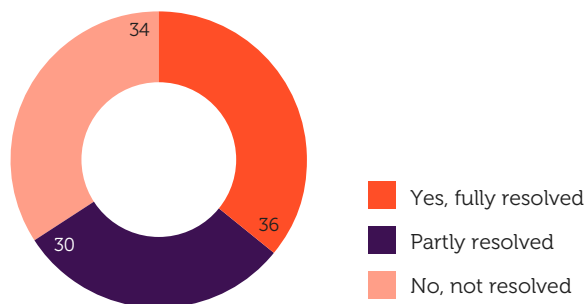
- **Formal approaches:** 59% used disciplinary action compared with 39% in the private sector, while 58% used grievance procedures compared with 36% in the private sector.
- **Informal approaches:** 59% trained line managers in handling 'difficult' conversations or managing conflict compared with 35% in the private sector. Forty-five per cent have used internal mediation by a trained member of staff in the public sector compared with 24% in the private sector.

There could be many reasons contributing to the greater use of both formal and informal conflict resolution techniques in the public sector. Aside from our research showing a greater incidence of conflict in this sector, public services also have a much higher level of trade union representation, giving employment relations issues like conflict and conflict resolution a higher profile.

### A poor resolution rate for employees

The high level of employer confidence in having effective procedures for resolving conflict is not matched by the experience of employees who experience conflict, with just 36% reporting that it has been fully resolved and 30% reporting it's been 'partly resolved' (Figure 10). These findings suggest that organisations need to assess how well their procedures are implemented when conflict occurs, and whether the wider workplace climate supports positive resolution.

Figure 10: Employees who feel the conflict they experienced has been resolved (%)



Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.

Base: all working adults who report having experienced conflict in the last 12 months (n=1,365).

### What does this tell us?

The findings show the disconnect between employers' views and the experience of employees in relation to how well conflict is managed in the workplace. Employers have a much rosier picture of how effectively their organisation resolves individual disputes.

**Recommendations**

Employers need to develop a greater awareness of employees' experiences in their own organisation and examine the effectiveness of their conflict resolution practices.

**5**

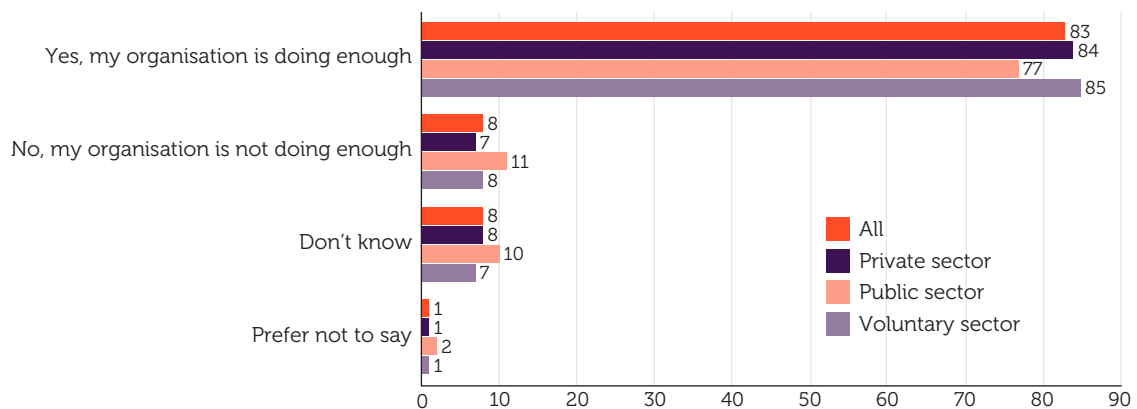
# Managing and preventing sexual harassment

The last few years have seen increased focus on sexual harassment, with high-profile scandals reported in the media, public policy scrutiny and the #MeToo movement. Hopefully, greater awareness about the need to tackle and prevent sexual harassment has helped to change workplace attitudes and practices. Just 2% of employees reported experiencing unwanted attention of a sexual nature in the last 12 months, according to our 2024 CIPD Good Work Index, with female employees more likely to experience it compared with male employees (3% versus 1%). No employees surveyed reported experiencing a sexual assault.

**What does this tell us?**

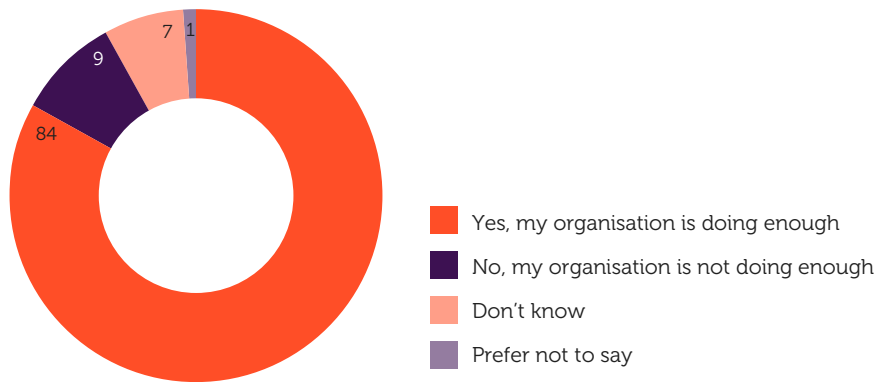
The low incidence of reported sexual harassment is welcome but in no way lessens the importance of tackling it. The acceptable incidence of it is zero. While most UK employers have a positive approach to equality, there's still a minority that are not fostering inclusive workplaces, for women in particular. This view is backed up by our employer survey findings, with 8% reporting that their organisation is not doing enough to manage sexual harassment at work and 9% that not enough is being done to prevent it (Figures 11 and 12).

**Figure 11: Employers responding to the question: "In your opinion, is your organisation doing enough to manage sexual harassment between people at work?" (%)**



Source: Labour Market Outlook spring 2024.  
 Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

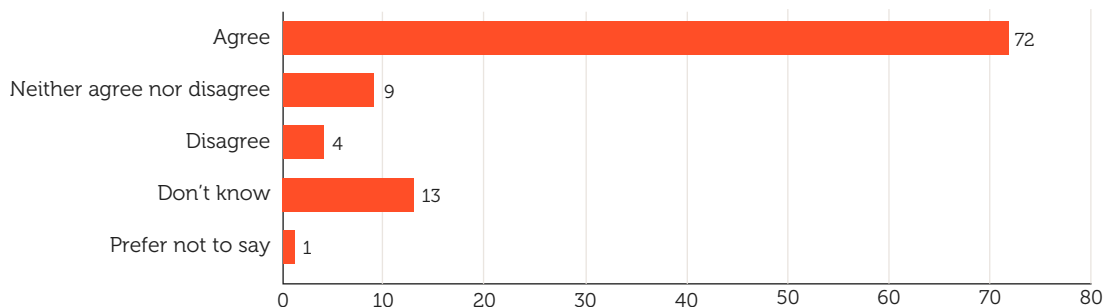
**Figure 12: Employers responding to the question: "In your opinion, is your organisation doing enough to prevent sexual harassment between people at work?" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

Less than three-quarters (72%) of employers think that "sexual harassment claims are dealt with promptly and effectively in my organisation", while 4% do not believe that sexual harassment claims are dealt with promptly and effectively (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Employers responding to the question: "Sexual harassment claims are dealt with promptly and effectively in my organisation" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

### Recommendations

Organisations need to convey to their workforce that any form of harassment is totally unacceptable from a moral and legal standpoint, and any signs of any type of unfair treatment will be dealt with fairly but robustly. An important way of reinforcing this message is treating all claims of sexual harassment seriously and acting quickly to address them.

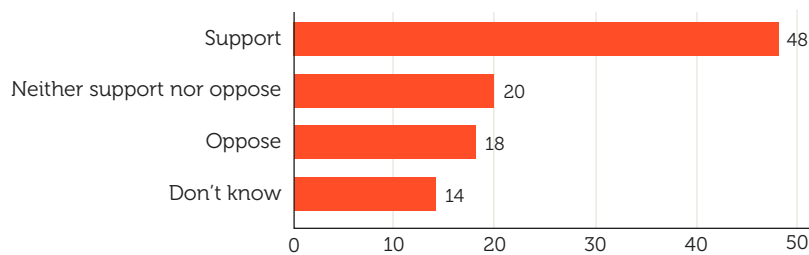
More advice is available for CIPD members in our [guide on tackling sexual harassment](#).

# 6 The use and misuse of NDAs

There has been a spotlight on the misuse of confidentiality clauses in settlement agreements, often referred to as ‘non-disclosure agreements’ (NDAs). This follows well-placed concern that a minority of employers use them to silence employees from reporting inappropriate behaviour such as harassment or discrimination.

The unacceptable practice of NDAs being used to potentially prevent victims of harassment from speaking out, while protecting the alleged perpetrator from being held to account, has led to strong calls for their ban. A key focus of concern is in cases of alleged sexual harassment. Employers taking part in our *Labour Market Outlook* survey are much more likely to support than oppose a statutory ban on the use of confidentiality clauses/NDAs in the workplace in cases where any form of harassment or other discrimination is alleged (Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Employers responding to the question: “To what extent would you support or oppose a statutory ban on the use of confidentiality clauses (non-disclosure agreements/NDAs) in the workplace in cases where any form of harassment or other discrimination is alleged?” (%)**



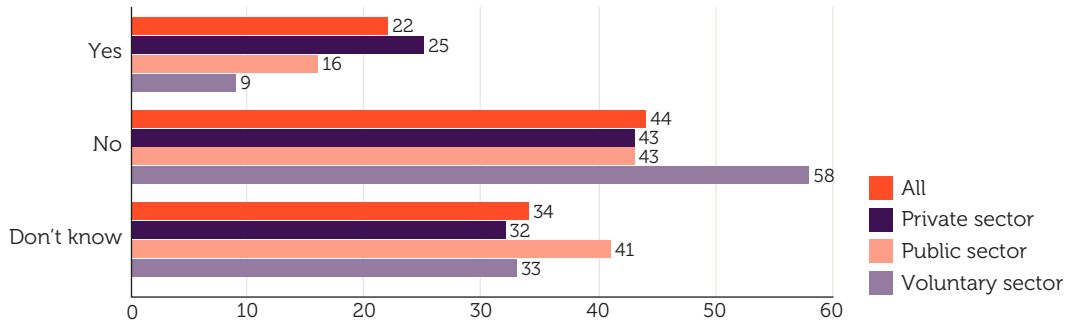
Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
 Base: all employers (n=2,009).

However, the latest UK [government inquiry](#) has resisted calls for their outright ban. Acas guidance on [non-disclosure agreements](#) does now make clear that, combined with broader limitations on their use, confidentiality clauses should not be used ‘as a matter of routine’.

Our employer survey found that just over a fifth (22%) of employers use NDAs if dealing with allegations of sexual harassment, while over a third don’t know.

Private sector organisations are significantly more likely to use them compared with public and voluntary sector organisations (25% compared with 16% and 9%, respectively) (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Employers responding to the question: “To the best of your knowledge, does your organisation use confidentiality clauses, also known as non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), if dealing with allegations of sexual harassment?” (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

Most respondents (65%) whose organisations use settlement agreements in cases of alleged sexual harassment didn't know the extent of their use. Among those who did, the majority response (60%) is that between one and three were agreed in the last 12 months (Table 1).

**Table 1: Number of settlement agreements used by employers in the last 12 months (%)**

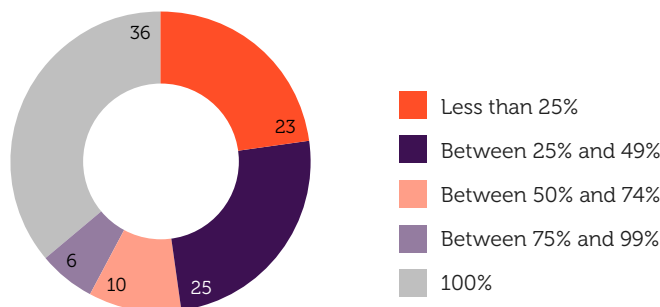
Number of settlement agreements	% of employers who used them in the last 12 months
0	8
1–3	60
4–6	20
7–10	3
11–20	3
20+	6

Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers who knew how many settlement agreements their organisation had used in cases of alleged sexual harassment in the last 12 months (n=360).

We also asked employers what proportion of these contained a confidentiality clause/ NDA. Again, many respondents (42%) didn't know. However, among those who did know, over a third (36%) said that every settlement agreement contained an NDA (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Employers responding to the question: “Approximately what proportion of these settlement agreements contained a confidentiality clause/NDA?” (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers who had used settlement agreements in cases of alleged sexual harassment (n=360).



### What does this tell us?

Employers need to be careful that NDAs aren't used as a matter of course in their organisation, as they can be open to misuse.

### Recommendations

The people profession has an important role to play in supporting the ethical use of NDAs. This means ensuring that the organisation's culture and working practices don't encourage inappropriate use, particularly where there are concerns and/or complaints about sexual harassment.

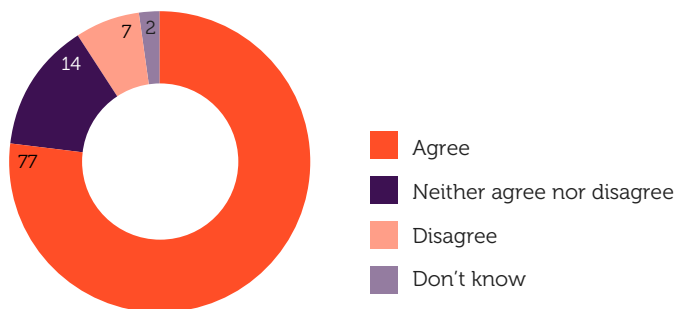
CIPD members in the UK can access [clear and practical advice on the proper use of non-disclosure agreements \(NDAs\)](#) and how to avoid inappropriate use.

# 7

## The role of people managers

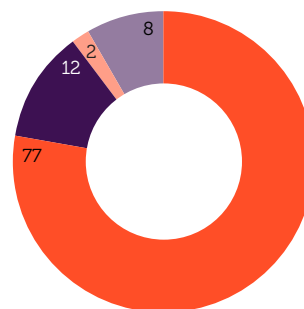
Responsibility for people management is now devolved primarily to line managers, who have a central role in preventing and tackling conflict in their teams. Employers report a good level of confidence in the ability of managers in their organisation to deal with different aspects of conflict, with over three-quarters reporting that managers both understand the organisation's formal procedures for discipline and grievance (77%) and understand what kind of behaviour constitutes bullying (77%) (Figures 17 and 18).

**Figure 17: Employers responding to the statement: "Managers in my organisation understand the organisation's formal procedures for discipline and grievance" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

**Figure 18: Employers responding to the statement: "Managers understand what kind of behaviour constitutes bullying" (%)**

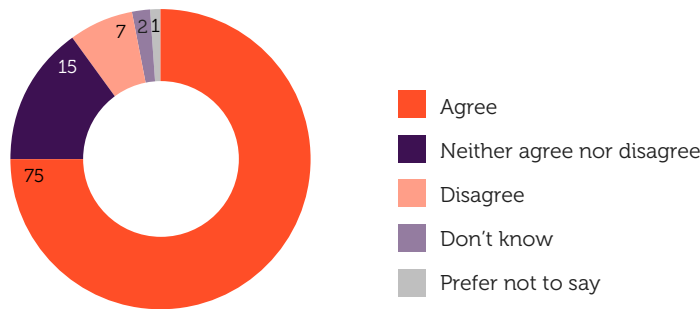


Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

There is also a good level of confidence in managers' ability to resolve conflict, as Figures 19 and 20 show:

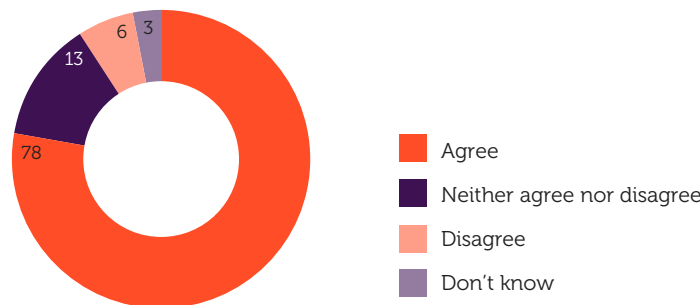
- 75% agree that, if there is conflict in a team, a line manager would help to resolve this effectively
- 78% agree that, if there is conflict between people in a team, the manager would try and nip it in the bud (ie resolve it at an early stage).

**Figure 19: Employers responding to the statement: "If there is conflict in a team, a line manager would help to resolve this effectively" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

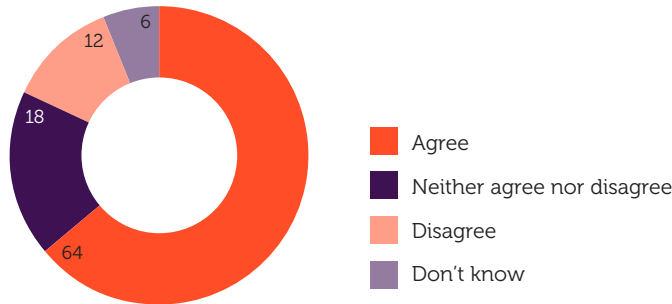
**Figure 20: Employers responding to the statement: "If there is conflict between people in a team, the manager would try and nip it in the bud (ie resolve it at an early stage)" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

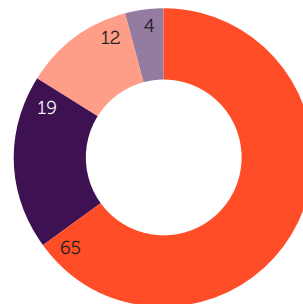
However, fewer respondents are confident that, if a manager made a discriminatory remark, another manager would immediately challenge them (64%). Fewer also report that managers are confident about using informal approaches like mediation to resolve conflict (65%), but that could also be because the organisation does not encourage the use of mediation (Figures 21 and 22).

**Figure 21: Employers responding to the statement: "If a manager made a discriminatory remark, another manager would immediately challenge them" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

**Figure 22: Employers responding to the statement: "Managers are confident about using informal approaches like mediation to resolve conflict" (%)**

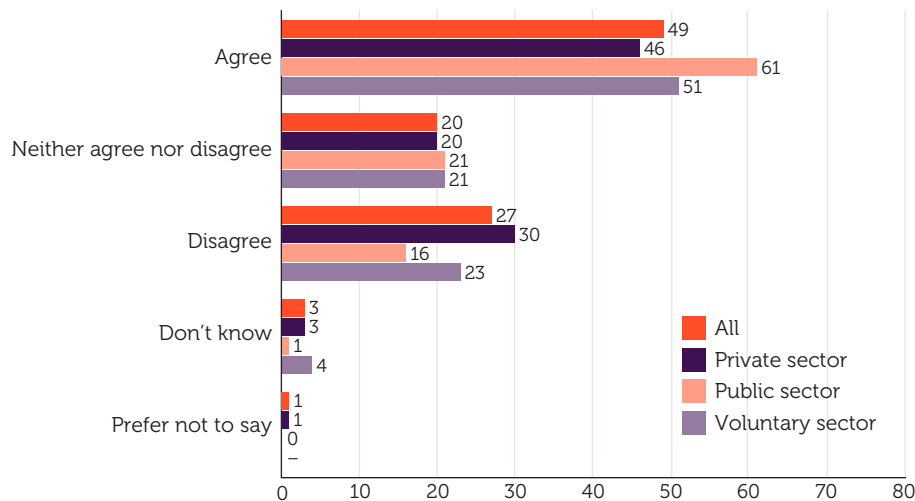


Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (n=2,009).

The seemingly positive role that line managers play in managing conflict is seriously undermined by the finding that half (49%) of employers agree that line managers can be a cause of conflict in their teams. This rises to 61% in public sector organisations.

This chimes with our [2020 research](#), which found that, according to those who had experienced conflict, a line manager was most likely to be the perpetrator of bullying and harassment. In this 2024 research, when we asked employees how effective their line manager was in dealing with conflict – either an isolated dispute or incident or ongoing difficult relationship – a third (32%) agreed their line manager made the situation worse (45% disagreed) (Figure 23).

**Figure 23: Employers responding to the statement: "Line managers can be a cause of conflict in their teams" (%)**

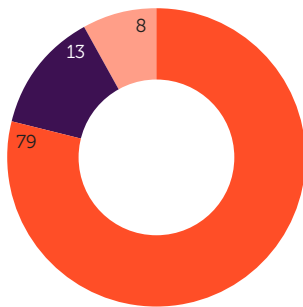


Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.  
Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

### How do employees rate their manager?

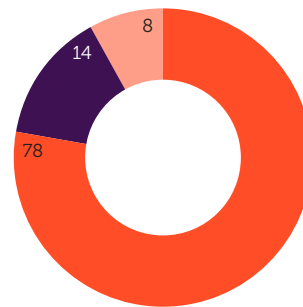
Employees are generally positive about line management more generally, with almost four-fifths reporting that their line manager respects them as a person and treats them fairly (Figures 24 and 25). Around the same proportion (77%) say their line manager is supportive if they have a problem (Figure 26).

**Figure 24: Employees responding to the statement: "My line manager respects me as a person" (%)**



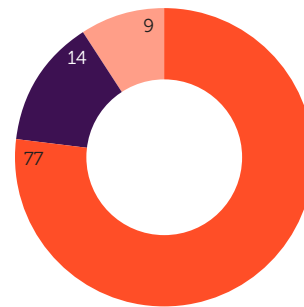
Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,620).

**Figure 25: Employees responding to the statement: "My line manager treats me fairly" (%)**



Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,728).

**Figure 26: Employees responding to the statement: "My line manager is supportive if I have a problem" (%)**

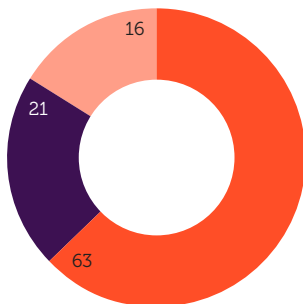


Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,665).

Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree

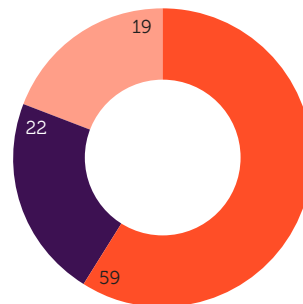
However, levels of trust in line management and confidence in managers acting as a role model are lower, with less than two-thirds (63%) of employees saying that their line manager can be relied upon to keep their promise and 59% believing that their manager leads by example (Figures 27 and 28). Almost a fifth (18%) believe that, if team members make a mistake, their manager or supervisor would hold it against them (Figure 29).

**Figure 27: Employees responding to the statement: "My line manager can be relied upon to keep their promise" (%)**



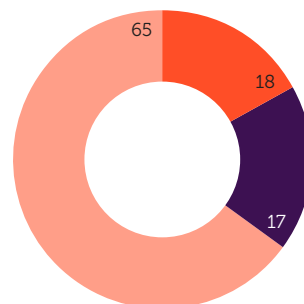
Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,612).

**Figure 28: Employees responding to the statement: "My line manager leads by example" (%)**



Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,680).

**Figure 29: Employees responding to the statement: "If team members make a mistake, my manager or supervisor will hold it against them" (%)**



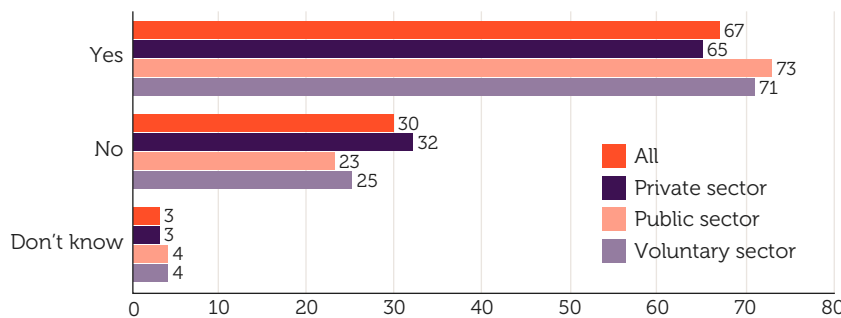
Source: CIPD Good Work Index 2024.  
Base: all working adults with a manager (n=4,489).

Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree

### Developing line manager confidence and capability to manage conflict

Line managers can't be expected to perform their people management role well and manage interpersonal conflict in their teams unless they are equipped with the skills and education to do so. But three in 10 employers don't provide any training in people management skills to support managers with their line management responsibilities (Figure 30).

**Figure 30: Employees responding to the question: "Does your organisation provide managers with training in people management skills to support them in their line management role?" (%)**



Source: *Labour Market Outlook* spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

#### What does this tell us?

The fact that a lack of line management capability and confidence are reported as some of the most significant barriers to managing bullying and harassment is not surprising given that many managers don't receive training (Figure 32). It also partly explains the high proportion of employers reporting that line managers can be a cause of conflict in their teams.

#### Recommendations

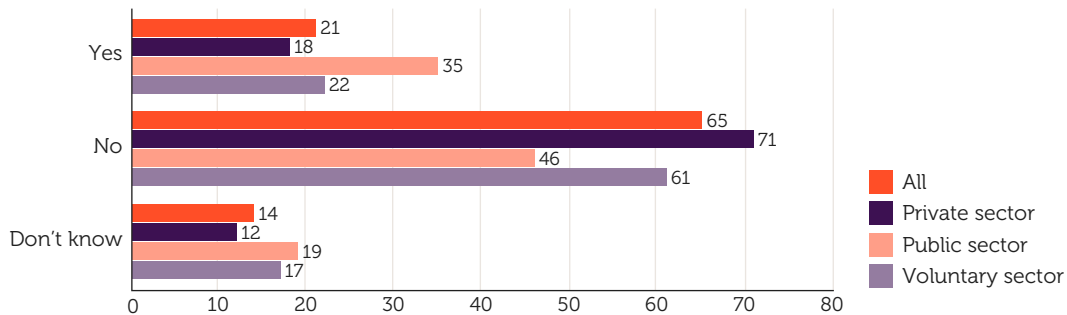
These findings point to an urgent need for wider and more effective training, education and guidance for line managers so that they can be a proactive force for preventing and managing conflict.

## 8

# Barriers to dealing with bullying and harassment

Overall, just a fifth of employers (21%) said their organisation experiences barriers to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment (65% said no and 14% didn't know) (Figure 31). Given the incidence and complexity of conflict at work, it's quite surprising that so few employers think it's a challenging area. However, public sector respondents were almost twice as likely as their private sector counterparts to report barriers (35% versus 18%).

**Figure 31: Employers responding to the question: “Does your organisation experience barriers to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment?” (%)**

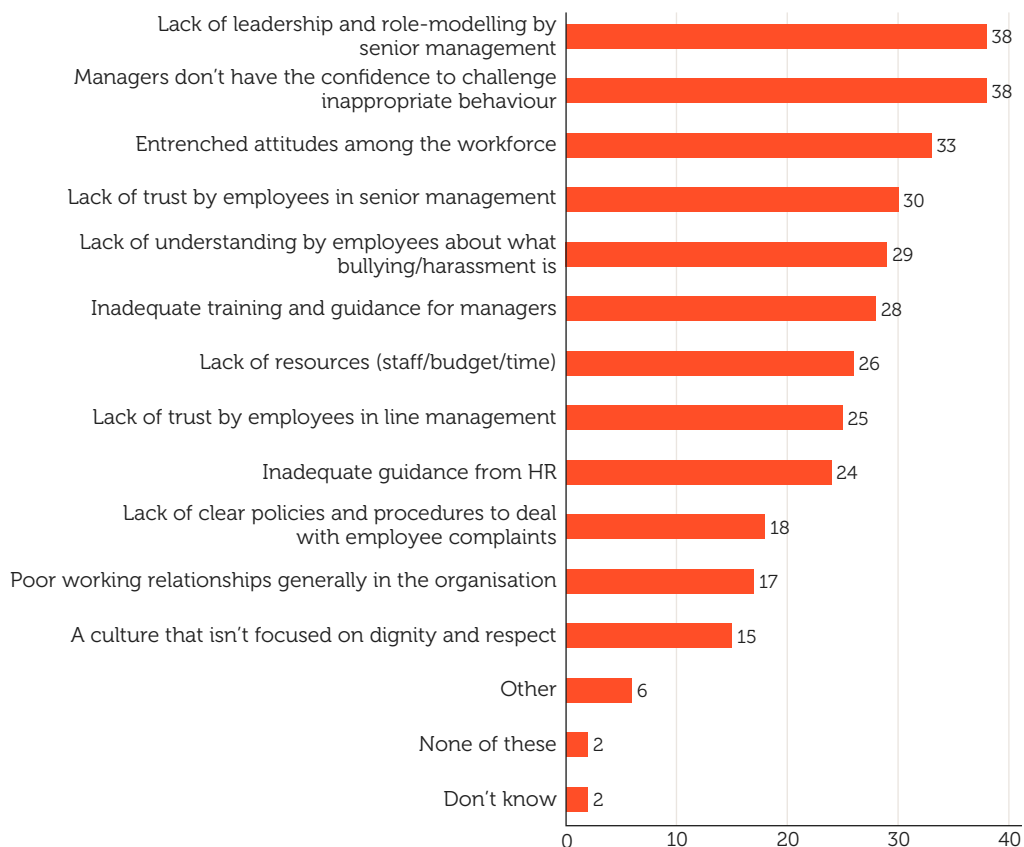


Source: Labour Market Outlook spring 2024.

Base: all employers (total: n=2,009; private: n=1,507; public: n=372; voluntary: n=130).

Those employers experiencing barriers cite a wide range of reasons, with a lack of role-modelling and leadership by senior management, and managers not having the confidence to challenge inappropriate behaviour both topping the table at 38% (Figure 32). A lack of trust in senior management and line management are also mentioned (30% and 25%, respectively), reinforcing the need for an employment relations framework that prioritises strong values-based leadership and quality people management practices.

**Figure 32: Reasons given by employers responding to the question: “In your opinion, what are the barriers in your organisation to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment?” (%)**



Source: Labour Market Outlook spring 2024.

Base: all employers who experience barriers to managing conflict, including bullying and harassment (n=380).

Respondents were allowed to select a maximum of five options.

Entrenched attitudes among the workforce, a lack of understanding by employees about what bullying/harassment is and inadequate training and guidance for managers are also reported as key barriers to managing conflict.

**What does this tell us?**

All these challenges point to the need for more effective education and development interventions for people, with specific training and guidance for line managers, who play such a key role in preventing and managing conflict in their teams.

## 9 Implications and recommendations for organisations

**Build a positive employment relations climate**

- Communicate and reinforce standards of behaviour that reflect the positive values of dignity and respect.
- Focus on building an employment relations climate where any form of inappropriate behaviour is known to be unacceptable and where people feel empowered to speak up. This means putting in place effective employee voice mechanisms and fostering healthy working relationships between people at all levels of the organisation.
- Positive relationships at work should be underpinned by an open and collaborative management style, good teamworking and healthy interactions between managers and employees. There should be a strong focus on employee engagement and a systematic framework for measuring and analysing employee attitudes in relation to their working life.

**Promote inclusive policies and practices**

Policies dealing with equality and diversity, and bullying and harassment are important but will have impact only if they are brought to life across the organisation. It's important to:

- review all policies and procedures to ensure they are aligned and espouse the positive values of the organisation
- communicate policies and procedures to managers and staff
- educate the workforce about dignity and respect
- proactively encourage inclusive behaviours, for example through management competencies that are reinforced via performance management

- deliver training interventions for staff that challenge stereotypical attitudes and unconscious bias
- develop role models at all levels of the organisation to demonstrate behaviours built on dignity, respect and inclusion
- champion a diverse range of employee resource groups to play an active role in shaping the organisation's policies and activities.

### **Ensure leaders treat conflict resolution as a strategic priority**

Leaders set the tone for the working climate. They have a responsibility to be visible role models for respectful behaviour and treating everyone fairly. They need to:

- understand that conflict is an inherent part of the employment relationship and view conflict resolution as a strategic priority
- champion the positive values of the organisation at every opportunity, for example in internal all-staff communications and via people management policies
- make clear that any inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated, and complaints will be dealt with seriously and promptly
- monitor the employment relations climate through employee data and management feedback
- oversee the operation of the organisation's dispute resolution procedures, including incidence of any bullying and harassment complaints, settlement agreements and the use of NDAs/confidentiality clauses.

### **Communicate effective reporting channels**

The organisation needs to create a 'speak up' culture, where individuals feel safe to share their concerns and report any alleged cases of bullying or harassment. This should include:

- ensuring employees know how to call out inappropriate behaviour and/or raise a complaint
- dealing promptly, seriously and discreetly with any issues that are raised
- considering the establishment of a 'dignity at work' adviser role, someone who is impartial and knowledgeable about issues like bullying and harassment and can offer individuals a 'safe' source of informal support and advice
- introducing 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.

### **Implement a framework based on early conflict resolution**

Conflict needs to be approached from a strategic, preventative standpoint rather than primarily dealt with in a reactive, ad hoc way. Too often, formal procedures become the default option instead of coming into play only when there is no hope of resolution through a more positive approach. 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 policies and procedures still have their place, but need to be used appropriately and effectively.

To develop a resolution-focused framework that empowers managers and employees to settle disputes informally, where possible:

- ensure people managers are equipped to nip conflict in the bud
- consider the potential of early dispute resolution approaches to help settle interpersonal differences at source, at the earliest stage in the workplace
- implement and encourage the use of techniques such as problem-solving, facilitated discussion and early neutral evaluation
- consider setting up an internal mediation scheme and training volunteers to act as mediators.

### **Develop employee relations (ER) skills for people professionals**

The people profession needs to attach more value to ER as an HR discipline. The ongoing challenges and constant change facing the workplace mean that core ER knowledge and skills in areas such as negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution have never been more needed.

People teams need to ensure they develop core ER standards and competencies in line with the [CIPD Profession Map](#), including:

- developing and reviewing the ER culture to be resolution-focused and improve business outcomes
- developing and applying people policies which improve the worker experience and employer brand, and mitigate risk
- driving effective working relationships through consultation and negotiation
- balancing individual and business expectations regarding employee/worker relationships
- managing high-risk and complex disputes, both individual and collective, and knowing when to use legal routes.

### **Train and support people managers**

Managing people on top of an operational role can be challenging if a manager isn't equipped with the training and confidence to manage conflict. It's important to:

- provide them with education and training on people management policies and procedures, including how to be good role models for behaviours based on dignity and respect
- ensure that line managers understand what bullying and harassment is, and that they have the confidence to challenge any form of inappropriate behaviour
- encourage managers to build trust-based relationships, and be alert to any simmering tension between individuals in their team
- offer all managers specific training in areas such as 'having difficult conversations' and conflict resolution

- train all managers involved in implementing formal procedures such as investigations and grievance hearings
- provide tailored support and guidance for managers if they are dealing with a complex individual dispute.

# 10

## Background to the surveys

### **CIPD Labour Market Outlook**

All figures for the employer sample, unless otherwise stated, are from the CIPD's spring 2024 *Labour Market Outlook*, a forward-looking indicator of the UK labour market. It is a quarterly survey providing analysis on recruitment, redundancy and pay intentions combined with unique insights on labour market topics.

The total sample size was 2,009 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26 March and 18 April 2024. The survey was conducted online by YouGov Plc. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK employment by organisation size, sector and industry.

Rim weighting is applied using targets on size and sector drawn from the BEIS *Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2021*.

### **CIPD Good Work Index**

All figures for the employee sample, unless otherwise stated, are from the 2024 *CIPD Good Work Index*, an annual snapshot of job quality in the UK.

The 2024 survey was conducted in January and February 2024 by YouGov Plc and provides a total sample of 5,496 workers. To make the samples representative of the UK as a whole, quotas are used to target the sample, and subsequent weights based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures are applied to the dataset. The sample is representative of the UK workforce in: the intersection of gender by full- or part-time work status; organisation size within sector; industry; and age.

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