CAHRS Working Group – The Evolving Landscape of Employee Relations
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Participating Companies:

Accenture
Bloomberg
Caterpillar
Docusign
Medtronic
Prudential Financial
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Background

Over the past several years, organizations have experienced profound changes in the employee-employer relationship. In the past, the psychological contract between employees and employers revolved around a reciprocal set of commitments made by both parties. A few years ago, however, employees increasingly began to voice their expectations from their employers on a broad set of internal and external issues, including organizational values and voice, collective representation (in both traditional and non-traditional forms), conflict resolution, employee influence and autonomy, and the integration of work with personal life.

Since then, organizations have continued to face additional disruptive forces including artificial intelligence (AI), workforce restructuring, return-to-office mandates, economic uncertainty, evolving labor markets, and shifting societal expectations. Together, these forces may not only be further redefining what employees expect from their employers, but also what employers are willing or able to deliver in return.

This working group examined whether the recent changes in the employee-employer relationship continue to hold true and explored how today's workplace disruptions are reshaping employee expectations, engagement, workforce voice, labor relations, and organizational strategy. Key themes that emerged from the discussion are highlighted below.

Key Themes

1. AI in ER Workflows and Skills

- Organizations deploy Copilot and custom agents in “work mode” for secure transcription, summaries, disciplinary templates, Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) creation, and quality checks; anonymization is not required in protected environments. AI outputs demand human moderation to counter hallucination and extreme tone; legal review addresses confidentiality. Employee Relations (ER) skill profiles shift toward strategic judgment, business acumen, and cross-pollination with HR Business Partners (HRBPs), while centralization improves case quality.

2. Risk Management vs. Mitigation

- Some organizations have shifted from risk mitigation to risk management, which includes raising thresholds for investigations, offshoring tactical work with onshore oversight, and reducing heavy anti-union interventions. Mutual separation and pay-in-lieu programs offer faster, lower-risk exits, differentiated from restructuring severance. Leaders test risk tolerance without adverse outcomes.

3. DEI/ERG and Culture Integration

- Given the shifting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) landscape, some organizations have restructured Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to empower local chapters, aligned national leaders to strategy/compliance, and strengthened executive sponsorship. Culture is articulated as performance- and outcome-focused, with transparency framed as care. The overall goal is to embed DEI more in the business.

4. Employee Voice, Complaints, and Triage

- Formal channels experience heavy volumes, including minor interpersonal disputes. Triaging complaints and facilitated conversations can avert mandatory investigations for low-risk cases. Younger employees prefer app-based, low-confrontation reports; anonymous hotlines pose investigatory limits and cynicism risk if action is not feasible during periods of significant transformation.

5. RTO Policies, Enforcement, and Equity

- Firms move to a required hybrid Return to Office (RTO) - often three days. Compliance monitored via badge/IP systems; “coffee badging” and device movers addressed with consequences up to termination. Employees resist mandates citing costs, decentralized teams, and virtual-meeting overload onsite. To realize collaboration value, companies experiment with no-meeting blocks, camera/professionalism norms, synchronized schedules, and role-based tiers. Outcome-based evaluation is emphasized to retain high performers.

6. Social Media Governance and Third-Party Concerns

- Clear policies enforce termination for discriminatory/harassing/violent posts, while balancing brand control with protected speech on workplace conditions. Investigations consider safety, confidentiality, and work-time violations; third-party complaints (including retaliatory) assessed on their merits. Fake job postings prompt takedown and employee education. Closeout letters and transparency with subjects are used to manage escalations.

7. Engagement Surveys and Listening Cadence

- Some organizations pause surveys during turbulence to avoid asking for feedback they cannot act on; others maintain rigorous cadences with high participation targets (~85%), handheld device access, quarterly roundtables, and mandatory site-level action plans (e.g., audits triggered when satisfaction drops below specified levels). Automated agents parse large volumes of comments; leaders focus on team-level accountability.

8. Legal and Compliance Landscape

- Federal contractor requirements drive program reviews while sustaining inclusion. State personnel file access laws shape document segregation and turnaround compliance (investigation notes are kept in separate systems). AI prompts/notes are discoverable; retention policies govern archives. Global HR transformations confront cross-border data privacy and confidentiality constraints.



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