

Adare Human Resource Management warns organisations in the Non-Profit Sector of increase in Workplace Conflicts and Disputes

A warning has been issued for employers in the Non-Profit sector about the potential increase in incidence of workplace conflict and disputes as businesses continue to reopen over the coming weeks and months. As it stands, 22nd October will see the lifting of all remaining restrictions, so Organisations in the sector who still may have staff working remotely or restricting some of their community work will be able to fully return.

There are a number of challenges for Organisations around clashing expectations on the part of employers and employees about working arrangements, as well as re-integrating employees and new employees onboarded during Covid-19. These are seen as serious threats to productivity within the Non-Profit sector.

It is also expected that the cost of managing workplace conflicts and disputes is on the rise. Research carried out as part of the HR Barometer earlier this year shows that one in five (21%) organisations nationally highlighted increased costs in 2021¹. For 2019, the last time workplaces were fully open, the number of businesses stating increased costs in managing conflict and disputes was almost double (37%).

The reasons for the expected increases include differing priorities as people return to the workplace that will cause some challenges. From an employee's perspective, commutes and childcare will again become a headache while employers will be keen to get back to normality as quickly as possible. However, what's key to getting the balance right and avoid potential issues is communication.

As well as the increased costs associated with managing workplace conflict, if the situation becomes untenable and the employee leaves there are costs associated with replacing them. The HR Barometer Report identified that the costs associated with replacing an employee in the Non-Profit is considerably higher than the average at €4,200 compared with €3,200.

Ensuring a constructive two-way conversation is the best way to understand and manage potential issues. Our advice for employers is to continue to be as flexible as practical and be empathic towards employees who may be struggling getting back to the workplace full-time. And, also be mindful that employees could be juggling caring responsibilities beyond just children so might be uncomfortable returning to the workplace on health and safety grounds. Employers will need to demonstrate that they are continuing to provide a safe workplace as they are obliged to do under legislation.

We would also warn employers that they will need to be mindful of how requests from employees to work remotely are managed, to avoid inviting accusations of perceived discrimination. When agreeing to any requests to work remotely, employers need to be clear in how they make their decisions. While remote working may suit certain roles, it won't necessarily be a blanket decision. So clear communication is vital to avoid claims of potential discrimination or unequal treatment.

We would point out that issues that may have existed pre-Covid may well raise their head again including disputes amongst work colleagues. The significant numbers of employees who have been

¹ Research was conducted by Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A) on behalf of Adare Human Resource Management. The research was carried out by telephone interview in April 2021 with 160 HR Directors and Managers. The study covers over 32,500 employees from organisations representing a cross-range of sectors nationwide.

working from home has meant office clashes all but disappeared. However, they could raise their head again and will need careful management.

Finally, it is worth pointing to delays in hearings at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). The WRC has not been operating at full capacity for the last year and a half, leading to a considerable backlog. Together with a potential flurry of new claims, it could take months for claims to be heard, leading to a challenging employee relations landscape. And we would also remind employers that changes to the WRC now mean that hearings can be heard in public with parties identified, potentially impacting negatively on the reputation of organisations.

If your Organisation needs support in managing conflicts and disputes, please get in touch with our expert-led team at Adare Human Resource Management.