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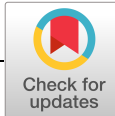
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Disconnected human resource? Proximity and the (mis)management of workplace conflict

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Abstract

The development of more remote sources of advice has been a notable feature of the contemporary human resource (HR) function. However, the consequences for the management of workplace conflict are largely ignored within the academic literature. This study draws on data from two qualitative studies, which examine the experiences of HR practitioners (HRPs), line managers and trade union representatives in handling and resolving conflict. It explores how different dimensions of organisational proximity shape the relationships between HRPs and other key stakeholders, and the impact of this on conflict management. The findings suggest that formal, risk averse approaches to conflict are not simply a result of geographical distance. Instead, functional specialisation has not only eroded cognitive and social proximity between HRPs, line managers and employee representatives but also within the HR function itself. This has triggered the reinforcement of bureaucratic control and embedded responses that emphasise compliance rather than resolution.

KEYWORDS

business partner, conflict management, conflict, dispute resolution, HR department, HR professional, line manager, proximity

Abbreviations: Acas, Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service; ADR, alternative dispute resolution; CIPD, Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development; HR, human resource; HRBP, human resource business partner; HRP, human resource practitioner.

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Practitioner notes**What is currently known?**

1. Handling workplace conflict is a key part of human resource (HR) practice
2. There is increased emphasis on informal and alternative approaches to conflict resolution
3. High-trust relationships between stakeholders underpin early and informal resolution
4. It is argued that off-site HR advice inhibits informal resolution

What this paper adds?

1. Provides the most detailed exploration of HR's role in conflict management to date
2. Explores implications of changing HR structures for conflict resolution
3. Takes a unique approach by using multiple dimensions of proximity to examine relationships between HR, line managers and employee representatives

The implications for practitioners

1. Early and informal resolution is not only inhibited by off-site HR
2. Specialisation and business partnering can also erode trust and hinder early intervention
3. More generalist HR functions are most likely to facilitate effective early conflict resolution

1 | INTRODUCTION

The erosion of collective employment relations over the last 2 decades has been reflected in changing patterns of workplace conflict and the increased incidence of individual employment disputes (Dix, Forth, & Sisson, 2009). The initial response of policymakers and practitioners to this centred on the extension of workplace procedures to ensure consistency and legal compliance. More recently, the perceived burden of formal process and the sustained threat of litigation has led to more informal approaches and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Currie, Gormley, Roche, & Teague, 2017; Gibbons, 2007).

Despite their increasing responsibility for informal resolution and the management of disputes procedures, line managers and their more senior colleagues often lack the skills and confidence to manage conflict (Teague & Roche, 2012). Consequently, conflict handling and the provision of procedural and legal advice still dominates day-to-day human resource (HR) practice (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Simultaneously, the importance of early intervention and informal resolution has become embedded in the discourse of HR practitioners (HRPs) (Saundry et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, there is little discussion of the role of HRPs in the contemporary conflict management literature. This predominantly focusses on the development of integrated strategies, mainly in the United States, aimed at creating environments and cultures which encourage managers to address, contain and resolve conflict at the earliest stage (Lipsky, Avgar, & Lamare, 2020; Lynch, 2001). However, these accounts not only underplay the importance of environmental and organisational factors in shaping organisational responses but also reflect the United States' unique institutional context (Roche, Teague, Gormley, & Currie, 2019; Teague, Roche, Currie, & Gormley, 2020).

In contrast, a programme of research funded in the UK by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) has provided insights into the part played by HRPs in conflict management. Early findings tentatively suggested that remote HR advice emphasised procedural and legal compliance while undermining informal processes of resolution (Jones & Saundry, 2012). Problematically, this was based on a narrow range of organisational case studies and was largely atheoretical, relying on a crude geographical proxy of remote HR based on whether HR was physically located on- or off-site. It therefore failed to account for variations in HR structures and practitioner attitudes.

This study draws on more recent Acas-funded research to make an important contribution to the existing literature in two respects. First, it draws on a rich and unique qualitative dataset to provide the most detailed assessment to date of the roles played by HRPs in managing workplace conflict. The data span two linked studies. An initial project comprising 22 focus groups of HRPs, trade union representatives and line managers suggested that changes in the HR function influenced conflict management. Consequently, this was examined more closely through 31 additional semi-structured interviews with HRPs. Second, it provides a novel conceptual focus by using the lens of proximity, more usual in studies of organisational learning and innovation. Here, proximity is not simply defined in terms of physical distance (geographical proximity) but incorporates cognitive, organisational, social and institutional dimensions (Boschma, 2005).

The study poses three specific questions: What impact does proximity have on relationships between HRPs, line managers and employee representatives? What are the implications of different HR structures for dimensions of proximity? To what extent can the concept of proximity explain the resilience of formal approaches to conflict management? Overall, the findings suggest that formalised, risk-averse responses to conflict are not simply a result of more remote HR. Instead, functional specialisation has eroded cognitive and social proximity between HRPs, line managers and employee representatives and also within the HR function. This, in turn, has triggered the reinforcement of bureaucratic control and embedded approaches to conflict, which emphasise compliance rather than resolution.

1.1 | Managing conflict in the UK

In the UK, practice and policy in relation to the management of workplace conflict has revolved around two interrelated themes. The first relates to the development of innovative and strategic approaches to conflict management. The second reflects a tension between formal and informal approaches to dispute resolution.

For some time, the US researchers have highlighted the growing diversification of ADR practices as a central element in contemporary employment relations (Colvin, 2003). In particular, they have pointed to the development of integrated conflict management systems (ICMSs) driven by strategic organisational imperatives as opposed to environmental and contextual shocks. Research conducted by Lipsky et al. (2014, 2020) found that one-third of Fortune 1000 firms had ICMSs, an increase from 17% in 1997, with over four in five companies using workplace mediation. Critically, such systems recognise the complementarity of formal rights-based procedures and interest-based processes, such as mediation. Moreover, they emphasise the building of managerial capacity to resolve disputes informally and at an early stage (Bendersky, 2003; Lipsky, Seeber, & Fincher 2003).

However, Teague et al. (2020) argue that this reflects the unique context of the United States, for example, the high cost of litigation and the role of dispute resolution mechanisms in union substitution. In contrast, in the UK and Ireland, innovation has largely focussed on workplace mediation. Although there is evidence of internal mediation schemes having positive impacts on employment relations and stimulating informal conflict resolution (Currie et al., 2017), there is little sign that conflict management is widely seen as a strategic priority and ADR development is often 'improvised' or 'incremental' (Roche et al., 2019).

The main focus of conflict management in the UK has been the promotion of early informal resolution to avoid the 'burden' of formal procedures. Traditionally, dispute resolution policy reflected the notion that conflict was best managed through institutions and formal procedures, inside and outside the workplace. This included the introduction of the legal right to claim unfair dismissal, the extension of the employment tribunal system and the establishment of Acas. This formalisation was deepened by the spread of written disciplinary and grievance procedures as employers sought to reduce the risk of litigation. By 1990, approximately 90% of workplaces employing 25 employees or more had written procedures (Millward, Stevens, Smart, & Hawes, 1992). This created a critical role for HR professionals as the guardians of process and as 'neutral' defenders of fairness and equity (Harris, 2007).

In the wake of employer concerns over the costs imposed by formalisation, the Gibbons review of the UK's system of dispute resolution recommended the simplification of rules and advice around discipline and grievance alongside greater use of ADR (Gibbons, 2007). Consequently, following changes to Acas guidance in 2009, organisations streamlined procedures foregrounding informal resolution (Rahim et al., 2011). Although there are no systematic evaluations of the comparative efficacy of informal processes and formal procedures, a dominant narrative quickly emerged around the importance and effectiveness of early intervention and informal discussion (Saundry, 2019).

In some respects, the binary choice between informal processes and formal procedures is false; informal 'stages' are commonly built into disciplinary and grievance procedures, and informal discussions often shadow formal process, reflecting the opaque boundaries between formal and informal HR practices (Marchington & Suter, 2013; Wilkinson, Townsend, & Burgess, 2013). Nonetheless, key stakeholders generally support early and informal intervention, arguing that it provides an opportunity to repair employment relationships. Indeed, the importance of 'nipping issues in the bud' has become something of a mantra for HR professionals (Saundry et al., 2016).

However, despite the rhetoric of early and informal resolution, there is scant evidence of a fundamental change in the way conflict is managed in the UK workplaces. Instead, it is argued that conflict management remains 'dominated by notions of procedural compliance' (Saundry et al., 2016, p. 46). This view was further reinforced in 2020 by a representative survey of employees conducted by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), which found that there had been no increase in the use of informal approaches in the previous 5 years (CIPD, 2020).

1.2 | HR practice and the management of conflict

The role played by HRPs in developing organisational approaches to conflict management has received surprisingly limited academic attention (see e.g., Mahoney & Klass, 2014). In the US literature, the professionalisation of HR and the rise of strategic HRM are linked to increased 'sophistication in the handling of people issues', implying that this fosters more innovative approaches to conflict management (Lipsky et al., 2003, p. 62; see also Currie et al., 2017). While no substantive evidence is provided to support this assertion, Roche et al.'s (2019) study of conflict management in Ireland suggests that the nature and stance of the HR function can be influential in deciding conflict management's place among competing organisational priorities.

Furthermore, there is little contemporary research into the day-to-day work done by HRPs in responding to conflict 'on the ground'. This reflects a dearth of literature exploring HR processes (Truss & Gill, 2009) and a lack of attention paid to conflict within HRM specifically (Godard, 2014). Nonetheless, there is some case-study evidence which suggests that HRPs can facilitate early and informal resolution in three ways: first, they can act as intermediaries between managers and employees; second, they can work closely with employee representatives to find constructive solutions; and third, they can build the conflict competence of managers through coaching, support and guidance (Saundry & Wibberley, 2014).

However, these approaches are dependent on high-trust relationships (Oxenbridge & Brown, 2004) without which HR professionals may be forced to retreat to a more processual and regulatory role (Hall & Torrington, 1998). Indeed, HRPs have exhibited a tendency to resist innovation and focus on conventional grievance and disciplinary procedures (Currie et al., 2017). This can be counterproductive, as the involvement of HR professionals can 'polarise' issues and lead to 'defensive behaviours', making early and informal resolution difficult (Purcell, 2014).

This, in turn, reflects how the place of conflict within HR practice has changed with the emergence of strategic business partnering (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Undoubtedly, the handling of individual workplace conflict has been seen as the type of 'transactional' activity ripe for devolution or outsourcing (Jones & Saundry, 2012). Furthermore, the agenda for HR business partners is arguably defined by a 'pro-market ontology'

that prioritises reward, talent and performance management over employment relations (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018, p. 377). Consequently, the employee 'champion' or 'advocate' roles envisaged by Ulrich have been sidelined as HRPs have prioritised business partnership and organisational goals (Francis & Keegan, 2006; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Marchington, 2015).

These developments have profound consequences for the ability of organisations to resolve conflict. Despite being dubbed as transactional, the challenges faced by line managers are becoming more complex as organisational pressures to reduce absence and improve performance grow (Hales, 2006; Newsome, Thompson, & Commander, 2013). Thus, it is more likely that managers will be faced with 'difficult conversations' and will find themselves in conflict with their subordinates. However, whether they have the skills required to minimise and manage conflict, without the active intervention of HR, is open to question (Purcell, 2014; Teague & Roche, 2012).

1.3 | Remote HR and proximity

One explanation for the continued domination of formalised approaches to conflict management is the physical distance between HRPs and those they advise. Jones and Saundry (2012) have argued that off-site HRPs find it more difficult to engage in the informal discussions needed to find creative solutions to conflict and which are crucial in building and sustaining the trust that underpins social processes of resolution. However, this notion of remote HR posits a simplistic relationship between physical distance and procedural formality. Moreover, in creating a simple dichotomy between off- and on-site HR advice, it underplays the potential importance of different HR roles and structures.

A more nuanced framework is offered by the idea of proximity, which reflects a view that 'the ability to form and maintain effective social relations' is a key organisational competence based on both codified and tacit knowledge (Amin & Wilkinson, 1999, p. 121). Conceptualising conflict resolution in these terms and exploring how this is influenced by different proximities provides a richer analysis of the interaction between key actors and how this shapes orientations to workplace conflict.

Boschma (2005) describes five dimensions of proximity as follows: geographical, organisational, social, cognitive and institutional. How these different dimensions of proximity shape relationships between HRPs, operational managers and employee representatives is outlined in Table 1.

Geographical proximity refers to physical distance. A clear distinction can be made between HR advice that is provided on-site as opposed to off-site. Boschma (2005) argues that 'short distances, literally bring people together, favour information contacts and facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge' (p. 69). This reflects findings that on-site HRPs are better placed to hold discussions with other parties face-to-face, allowing them to contextualise advice and gain insights into complex issues (Jones & Saundry, 2012; Reilly, 2000). Importantly, they can react more quickly than 'remote' practitioners, facilitating early intervention.

Social proximity relates to the extent of trust built on mutuality and reciprocity, and reflected in strong social ties. The distancing of HR advice is arguably predicated on an assumption that conflict management is simple and transactional (Ulrich, 1997). In contrast, the complexity of many workplace disputes reinforces the importance of trust and reciprocal relations. Socially embedded relationships are vital to facilitating the transfer of nuanced information and complex knowledge (Granovetter, 1985). For example, effective relationships between HRPs and line managers are more likely where both parties have confidence in the capability, knowledge and understanding of the other (McCracken, O'Kane, Brown, & McCrory, 2017). Similarly, Truss and Gill (2009) argue that understanding context helps HRPs to build relational social capital which reinforces perceptions of HR effectiveness. In turn, high trust facilitates less formal and more creative paths to resolution (Saundry & Wibberley, 2014). Nonetheless, strong social ties can also be a form of weakness, limiting innovation (Uzzi, 1997).

TABLE 1 Dimensions of proximity and employment relations

Proximity	High	Medium	Low
Geographical	Location of ER advice On-site ←————→ Off-site		
Social	Quality of relationships High trust ←————→ Low trust		
Institutional	Employment relations Partnership ←————→ Adversarial		
Cognitive	Knowledge base Shared values ←————→ Misunderstanding		
Organisational	Control Procedural compliance ←————→ Autonomy		

The quality of relationships at the level of the organisation can be seen in terms of institutional proximity. Where institutional proximity is high, unions and senior management will work in partnership, potentially providing a context within which the parties feel confident in placing faith in informal conflict resolution processes (Oxenbridge & Brown, 2004). This also has the potential to stimulate more strategic and innovative approaches to conflict management (Currie et al., 2017). In contrast, low institutional proximity reflects adversarial employment relations, which will inevitably encourage management and unions to fall back on formal process (Saundry et al., 2016).

Cognitive proximity is created through shared knowledge bases, values, norms, heuristics of attribution and decision-making (Noteboom, Van Haverbeke, Duysters, Gilsing, & van den Oord, 2007). Accordingly, high cognitive proximity is underpinned by tacit and idiosyncratic skills which help organisational actors to absorb and process new knowledge. As noted above, there is extensive evidence of skills deficits among line managers, who often prioritise narrow operational objectives over people management (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010). Indeed, there are signs in the literature of cognitive gaps between HRPs and line managers, with the latter seeing HR as a constraint and the former doubting managerial capability (Lopez-Cotarelo, 2018). This arguably generates risk-averse approaches to conflict management. Low cognitive proximity could also exist within the HR function due to specialisation and the creation of silos of expertise (Noteboom, 1999).

Of course, where values and perspectives are too close, learning and innovation may be crowded out. Actors may be locked into rigid perspectives which are shaped by vested interests. For example, relationships between HR and unions could become too ‘cosy’ or line managers could be dependent on HR (Keegan, Huemann, & Turner, 2011; McCracken et al., 2017). Nevertheless, if cognitive proximity reduces there is a danger that trust is eroded, triggering a need for higher organisational proximity. Boschma (2005) explains organisational proximity in terms of principal-agent relationships. High organisational proximity exists where HRPs exert significant control over line managers, for example, by playing a ‘policing role’ and regulating procedure (Renwick, 2003). While devolution of people management to the line implies greater managerial agency and therefore lower organisational proximity, this can be limited by the codification of knowledge through policy and procedure.

This discussion suggests that different dimensions of proximity are important in sculpting the relationships between key organisational actors and their responses to workplace conflict. However, dimensions of proximity do not operate in isolation. Howells (2002) argues that geographical proximity underpins social and cognitive proximity. We might argue that physical closeness makes it easier for HRPs to forge positive relationships by being able to meet regularly and respond quickly to problems. Moreover, informal structures which create the opportunity for

regular communication can help to create a shared identity and purpose (Truss & Gill, 2009). Consequently, practitioners 'sitting down' with managers and coaching them through issues may build tacit and idiosyncratic skills which are critical to conflict resolution (Andretsch & Stephen, 1996).

However, this is not straightforward—if one accepts the suggestion, implicit in Table 1, that dimensions of proximity operate along a continuum, their effects may be both counteractive and reinforcing. For example, high geographical proximity may reduce the autonomy of line managers and make them dependent on HR (Keegan et al., 2011; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Furthermore, these dimensions are likely to be shaped by dynamic contextual and environmental factors, including technological advances which might reduce the importance of geographical proximity. Therefore, this study draws on a significant dataset to explore how the development of the HR function has shaped dimensions of proximity and the consequent implications for relationships between key actors and the way in which they combine to deal with workplace conflict.

2 | RESEARCH METHODS

Our research questions address the shaping of relationships between key actors in the management of workplace conflict. This reflects an interpretivist and constructionist philosophical approach, underpinned by a desire to explore phenomena 'from the interior' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In contrast to scientific approaches which emphasise explanations of behaviour, constructionism foregrounds a search for understanding. Social meanings are created by social interactions and are continually constructed and revised, reflecting the complex dynamics of conflict and its resolution. Rather than attempting to quantify relationships between variables, we examine the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of the social phenomena embedded in this research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014).

Consequently, using focus groups and semi-structured interviews allows a meaningful exploration of the construction and co-creation of these relationships and understandings. The findings are derived from a thematic-driven, in-depth analysis of a high-volume collection of rich, dense and complex qualitative data. We do not claim that the sample is representative of the population and while we cannot generalise about the prevalence of the phenomena uncovered, the findings can be inferred to similar settings and the theoretical positions drawn from this study have a more general application. It is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made from qualitative data that is crucial (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Our data are drawn from two separate but related research projects, funded by Acas. The first, conducted in 2014–2015, provided a broad overview of conflict management in the UK workplaces. Focus groups were the main method employed because they allowed the exploration of social processes that underpin attitudes to conflict management and the behaviour of key stakeholders, while accessing a much wider sample than would have been possible otherwise. Sample selection targeted the key actors involved in the management of conflict: HRPs, trade union representatives and line managers. These were drawn from three UK regions (the South of England, the North East and the North West) to reflect differences in industrial composition and levels of unionisation. Participants were recruited through the business networks of the academic institutions involved in the study (Universities of Plymouth, Central Lancashire, Leeds and Warwick) and via regional Acas offices. In total, the data used here come from 22 focus groups involving 123 HRPs, line managers and trade union representatives (Table 2).

Each of the focus groups lasted for approximately 2 hours and was based on a common topic guide with three sections: the first explored the scale and scope of conflict and key issues related to its management; the second examined respondents' responses to specific conflict situations; and the third looked directly at Acas guidance and advice.

A key theme to emerge from this initial project was the influence of HRPs, and their relationships with line managers, on the management of workplace conflict. Furthermore, there was evidence that this was mediated by:

TABLE 2 Focus groups

Region	Human resource practitioners	Trade union reps	Line managers	Completed groups	Participants
South	2	4	2	8	51
North east	2	1		3	9
North west	6	3	2	11	63
Total	10	8	4	22	123

whether employment relations advice was provided off-site, changing HR structures, increasing specialisation and the development of business partnering. Consequently, in 2017–2018, a further project was undertaken to explore the attitudes of HRPs in detail. The sample used in this research (Table 3) sought to reflect:

1. Organisational characteristics—in terms of size and sector. Just over one-quarter of the sample worked in organisations with 500 employees or less, while the sample was roughly split between public (17) and private/third sector organisations (14)
2. Seniority—defined by three broad levels—director (5), manager/business partner (12) and advisor (14)
3. Structure—including HR functions which had a business partner structure (20) with specific practitioner handling employment relations and those that had a generalist orientation (11)
4. Location—the sample differentiated between off- (9) and on-site employment relations advice (22).

All participants were recruited through professional networks linked to the lead academic institution (University of Plymouth) and CIPD local branches. In total, 31 interviews were conducted providing around 35 hours of data. Twenty-six interviews were carried out face-to-face and five by telephone. A generic topic guide and semi-structured approach was used, focussing on building a detailed picture of the attitudes and experiences of respondents.

All the focus groups and individual interviews across both research projects were recorded and transcribed—any identifying features or comments were removed from transcripts to maintain anonymity. Both datasets were analysed using an iterative process of open coding—the starting point was the identification of broad codes derived from the topic guides. These included conflict type, conflict cause, conflict management approach, ADR, HR characteristics and organisational context. Those codes which generated the most references were developed, while others were discarded. The dominant codes (HR structure, formal procedure, informal resolution and line managers) were then broken down into sub-codes. For example, line managers' sub-codes included confidence, skill, support, trust and proximity. Finally, the codes were organised into four main themes which mapped on to the analytic framework outlined in Table 1. These were location of advice, social proximity and trust, HR structures, and formality and control. The findings presented in the next section examine our data in relation to each of these central themes. The full coding schema can be found in the technical appendix attached to this paper.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Location and informal resolution

As with previous research in this area (Jones & Saundry, 2012), the importance of location and geographical proximity emerged as a key theme. 'On-site' HRPs argued that this promoted early intervention and informal resolution by enabling a quick response to emerging conflict and maintaining regular contact with line managers or employee

TABLE 3 Breakdown of sample

No.	Sector	Size	Seniority	Structure	Location
1	Tourism/hospitality	150-250	HRA	Generalist	On-site
2	Manufacturing	150-250	Director	Generalist	On-site
3	Manufacturing	150-250	HRA	Generalist	On-site
4	Manufacturing	250-500	HRA	Generalist	On-site
5	Public sector	1000+	Director	Business partner	Off-site
6	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
7	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	Off-site
8	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
9	Public sector	1000+	HRM	Business partner	On-site
10	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
11	Public sector	1000+	HRBP	Business partner	On-site
12	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
13	Private services	100-150	HRM	Generalist	On-site
14	Retail	1000+	HRM	Business partner	Off-site
15	Private services	150-250	HRM	Generalist	Off-site
16	Tourism/hospitality	500-1000	Director	Generalist	Off-site
17	Manufacturing	1000+	HRBP	Business partner	On-site
18	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
19	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
20	Not-for profit	250-500	Director	Generalist	On-site
21	Private services	1000+	HRM	Generalist	Off-site
22	Public sector	1000+	Director	Business partner	Off-site
23	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	Off-site
24	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Generalist	On-site
25	Public sector	1000+	HRM	Business partner	On-site
26	Public sector	1000+	HRM	Business partner	On-site
27	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site
28	Retail	1000+	HRM	Business partner	Off-site
29	Manufacturing	500-1000	HRM	Generalist	On-site
30	Manufacturing	1000+	HRBP	Business partner	On-site
31	Public sector	1000+	HRA	Business partner	On-site

Abbreviations: HRA, HR assistant; HRBP, HR business partner; HRM, HR manager.

representatives highlighted problems that were 'bubbling under the surface'. A practitioner working in a non-unionised organisation explained that working on-site allowed natural 'day to-day interactions' and conversations facilitating an exchange of ideas 'which sometimes rescues a situation' (Interview 29—HR manager, on-site, generalist structure).

The converse was also true—union representatives highlighted the problems caused by the centralisation of employment relations advice off-site:

HR back in the day...you could go to and have a quiet chat and my issue would be resolved. It's not that anymore. They're not on the top floor or in a separate corridor, they may be in a different building, they may be in a centralised building or more recently, they may not be called HR. (Trade union representative, Focus Group 3)

Telephoning HR or arranging a meeting could delay an intervention and introduced some formality. Managers who lacked confidence felt more comfortable and able to seek advice in face-to-face conversations. An HR director of a large public sector organisation explained:

...people are reluctant to call you and email you, because they don't know if you're judging them...if you have a face to face conversation...they can see your body language and your face and then suddenly your reassurance and your conversation makes them feel more comfortable....So people will tell you more and will be more prepared to be honest. (Interview 5—HR director, off-site, business partner structure)

As discussed earlier, existing research has pointed to low levels of managerial skills and confidence in conflict handling (Currie et al., 2017; Teague & Roche, 2012). Consequently, if managers are to resolve conflict without the safety of formal process, they often need HR support. However, in our sample, this was hampered by low geographical proximity:

[HR] generally aren't anywhere near where you are...and are quite hard to contact...managers are trying to do things at a quick pace to try and nip things in the bud...what managers want is actually someone there.... (Line manager, Focus Group 10)

If they felt that HRPs were unlikely to be available, managers would be inclined to ignore the issue and hope it would disappear. This sense of a lack of support was common where HR advice was off-site. HRPs also felt that low geographical proximity would mean that they were less likely to understand the relationships involved in, and the context of, a particular conflict and therefore their advice would inevitably revolve around procedural compliance and the law.

3.2 | Social ties, institutional proximity and trust

Across the sample, higher social and institutional proximity were more likely in organisations with on-site HR. Critically, location facilitated the day-to-day interactions that helped to develop relationships that underpinned early and informal resolution. Working on-site gave HRPs the opportunity to become more socially and institutionally embedded, which in turn underpinned credibility and trust. For example, a practitioner in an NHS trust explained that managers trusted her judgement because of her knowledge of the organisation: 'I know when we're in black bed status for instance, I know how the rostering system works so we have safe staffing levels' and she was able to build rapport with managers:

...we have a little bit of banter and sometimes a great laugh. We do the work, but we build up a relationship. And that makes them unafraid to come and contact me...and they are more likely to listen and learn. (Interview 8—HR advisor, on-site, business partner structure)

High institutional proximity in the form of partnership working was also supported by the ability of HRPs to meet regularly with employee representatives. Through off-the-record discussions, HRPs were able to tap into the tacit knowledge of union representatives to explore creative resolutions:

I've relied heavily on unions being involved in my cases because I would say 90% of them have helped by us having those conversations...for me it's all about that partnership working... an employee wouldn't speak to me as openly as they would their rep because I am HR. (Interview 18—HR advisor, on-site, business partner structure)

Working together deepened trust and strengthened social ties, further entrenching informal approaches to conflict. However, high social and institutional proximity was not an automatic consequence of high geographical proximity. Instead, it could be built through the micro-social processes through which conflict was managed and particularly where positive outcomes were secured. Resolving a problem through collaboration created a sense of mutuality and reciprocity between HRP and manager. Furthermore, the reliance of many managers on HR advice and support could be a conduit for developing high-trust relations rather than a sign of dependence and weakness. An off-site HRP explained that requests for help encouraged informal resolution and helped to build managerial confidence:

there will be a seeking of guidance and then some dialogue to say "well, would you like support, are you happy to go ahead and do that?" So therefore, it causes conversation...and we're quickly then able to encourage that nipping in the bud approach...and that seems to have manifested itself in some really strong relationships. (Interview 16—HR director, off-site, generalist structure)

This required off-site HRPs to build relationships over distance. In part, geography was still important—HRPs in regionally concentrated organisations and in smaller businesses with lower HR–staff ratios were able to spend more time with managers. However, the extent of social and institutional proximity also seemed to be related to HR structure. In particular, HRPs working in generalist functions, both off- and on-site, seemed better able to build high-trust relationships with other stakeholders.

3.3 | HR structures and cognitive proximity

Our findings also pointed to the importance of high cognitive proximity—shared values, knowledge and norms—in helping actors collaborate in conflict resolution. This was partly a function of social and institutional proximity. In large organisations with good management–union relations, representatives and HRPs worked on a mutual understanding that early informal resolution was normally preferable to formal process. Within smaller, non-unionised settings, close social relationships helped to develop common values and goals, creating an environment which encouraged early resolution of emerging conflict. According to the head of HR in a hospitality business:

We like to make sure everyone knows everyone, that we stick to our roots of being that kind of family, close knit organisation...If there are any issues it can be resolved informally first. There is no difficult conversation. (Interview 16—HR director, off-site, generalist structure)

However, cognitive proximity was also a function of geography. Idiosyncratic skills and shared knowledge were more difficult to develop where key actors did not occupy the same 'space'. One union representative in the education sector explained that rather than negotiating with one large organisation and a specific HRP, they now dealt with several small, separate employers, often using different HR providers:

...advice from HR is coming from a wide variety of different sources...ten years ago, you would be able to know how the HR advisory service in one particular Local Authority would respond. Now, in the individual institutions...they may be buying in their HR advisor through a firm of solicitors or from another source. And often you find that those HR advisors are not used to that sort of context.... (Trade union representative, Focus Group 22)

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to focus solely on the proximity between HRP's and other actors. A key finding of this research was the erosion of cognitive proximity within the HR function itself. In larger organisations, the centralisation of advice tended to restrict organisational learning and silo know-how and expertise. In one large retail organisation, the employment relations team operated from headquarters:

the expertise was firmly within one location, but consequently the rest of the HR community weren't developing that expertise...HR haven't got the technical expertise in Employee Relations...my view was, was that increasingly Employee Relations was cleaning up HR's crap. (Interview 14—HR manager, off-site, business partner structure)

Employment relations knowledge was not transmitted to HRP's 'in the field', who had little incentive to develop conflict management skills as they could simply refer cases to the 'experts' at headquarters. Consequently, practitioners had neither the skills nor the inclination to seek early conflict resolution.

Across the sample, the development of business partner models appeared to erode the cognitive proximity between HRP's (mostly HR advisors), who provided guidance to managers faced with conflict, and business partners, who saw themselves as having a more strategic role:

...[HR advisors] do all the day-to-day operational work...HRBP's were picking up quite a lot of the operational work...we're going to try to move away from that, so they're solely just dealing with the strategic elements, and the HR advisors are dealing with all the day to day operational work and advising the managers on how to deal with any difficulties within their teams.... (Interview 10—HR advisor, on-site, business partner structure)

This reflected a view of conflict management as a transactional, relatively low value and largely administrative activity outside the strategic remit of most business partners. The management of conflict was seen as a second-order consideration which flowed out of rather than being a part of strategic decision-making. Consequently, early intervention and successful resolution was more difficult.

3.4 | Formal procedure, organisational proximity and control

Within our sample, almost all HRP's supported the idea of informal resolution. Furthermore, there was a determination to devolve responsibility for managing conflict to line managers. Nonetheless, it was also evident that the rhetoric of informality was not being translated into workplace reality.

While devolution implies a reduction in organisational proximity and therefore increased managerial autonomy and agency, we found this was dependent on high social and cognitive proximity. In short, where HRP's and line managers enjoyed high-trust relationships and were able to develop shared values and knowledge, the former were able to step away and give managers greater freedom to handle conflict. In one smaller organisation, HR felt confident to give managers discretion because they had provided training in having 'difficult conversations' but were also on-site when they needed support. This gave 'them permission to have those conversations and actually if it does go pear-shaped we can probably help them recover it' (Interview 20—HR director, on-site, generalist structure).

However, there was a widespread view among HRPs that many managers did not possess the skills to identify and address difficult issues. Consequently, they were sceptical about their ability to tackle issues fairly, consistently and in line with procedure. Therefore, despite devolution, HRPs felt unable to release the 'reins' controlling managerial behaviour. Numerous respondents complained of having to 'hold the hands' of managers through disciplinary and grievance processes:

there are an awful lot of line managers within the organisation who are not used to line managing. Some of them won't see it as their role...quite a lot of the line managers will need quite a lot of hand-holding. (Interview 2—HR director, on-site, generalist structure)

Overall, HRPs sought to increase organisational proximity by introducing arms-length controls. Informal processes were formalised and management tools such as checklists, flowcharts, templates and scripts were used. Union respondents felt that managers had little discretion and that HR involvement had become more rather than less evident in recent years. They reported that it was common for senior managers to read from pre-prepared scripts during disciplinary and grievance hearings:

It's about HR taking the decision, not the manager anymore. The manager is frightened to say anything unless HR tells them what to say. They come in with sheets and they read off sheets. (Trade union representative, Focus Group 22)

HRPs and especially Human Resource Business Partners (HRBPs) rejected their role in 'handholding', and what one respondent even referred to as 'arse-wiping'. Nonetheless, while responsibility for decisions was left with line managers, the surrounding framework of decision-making was constructed by HR. Consequently, much employment relations advice and intervention remained focussed primarily on procedural and legal issues with little room for nuance and context specificity.

4 | DISCUSSION

Existing research has suggested that on-site HR advice helps to build the high-trust relationships that underpin informal resolution (Jones & Saundry, 2012). While our findings reinforce this, they also imply that trust is not a simple function of geographical location but rests on the development of strong social ties (social proximity) and shared values and norms (cognitive proximity) (Howells, 2002; Noteboom et al., 2007). 'Connected' HRPs are not simply those who are on-site but those who have the tacit and idiosyncratic skills needed to provide context-specific advice and develop a sense of mutuality and reciprocity with other actors (Truss & Gill, 2009). This facilitates the early identification of workplace problems and the informal discussions needed to resolve conflict before it escalates (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1998).

In relation to our second research question, changes to the nature of the HR function in larger organisations have eroded proximity. The clearest examples of this were found where employment relations advice had been centralised or outsourced. Here, greater physical distance between HRPs, operational managers and employee representatives undermined social and cognitive proximity. Outsourced HR advice lacked the tacit understanding of personal and organisational context (Amin & Wilkinson, 1999) while managers and employee representatives tended to view HRPs as remote, inaccessible and focussed on procedural compliance (Saundry et al., 2016).

However, this cognitive gap was not simply a function of location. Even where HR advice was on-site it appeared to a consequence of business partnering and the separation of employment relations advice (Ulrich, 1997). There was a clear cognitive barrier between generalist or specialist employment practitioners and higher status business partners for whom conflict was a second order and transactional issue, and not part of their

more strategic agenda. In contrast, conflict was a central consideration in those organisations (mainly smaller employers) which retained generalist HR structures.

These changes have significant implications for conflict management and, in answer to our final research question, threaten to embed what some have seen as a tendency within HR to resist innovation and fall back on conventional procedural approaches (Currie et al., 2017; Roche & Teague, 2014). This may be one explanation for a lack of progress in developing more strategic approaches to conflict management in the UK compared with the United States (Teague et al., 2020). At an operational level, the presence of a cognitive rift between business partner and advisory aspects of the HR function encourages a reactive approach to conflict and makes early intervention more difficult. By the time difficult issues reach HR advisors, they may have escalated to a point where the application of formal process is inevitable. Furthermore, as key dimensions of proximity are eroded, HRPs have little choice but to use formal process and procedure to retain some control over the actions of managers who still lack the skills to manage conflict effectively.

These findings also suggest that the evolution of conflict management in the UK reflects Marchington's (2015) concern that HRM is 'too busy looking up' (p. 176). The strategic aspirations of HR, implicit in the way that the business partner role was seen by respondents within our sample, also meant that considerations of conflict were marginalised and even suppressed (Godard, 2020). This not only undermines the ability of organisations to respond quickly and efficiently to conflict, but also reflects the gradual erasure of employee interests (Keegan & Francis, 2010) as disconnected employment relations advice foregrounds risk management over wider ethical concerns (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study has explored the relationship between organisational proximity and the management of workplace conflict. The extant research has suggested that changes in the nature of the HR function and, in particular, the centralisation and outsourcing of employment relations' advice, tends to undercut informal approaches to conflict resolution. However, these findings have largely emerged as a side issue from broader studies into conflict management. The research reported above represents the first attempt to focus specifically on this important issue.

While our analysis reaffirms the importance of the location of HR advice in shaping orientations to conflict, it also suggests that a distinction between on- and off-site HR is too simplistic and underplays the importance of cognitive distance between HRPs and the line as well as the disconnectedness of some business partner functions. Even where employment relations advice is in close geographical proximity to line managers and employee representatives, the erosion of cognitive and social proximity inevitably undermines the trust on which informal conflict resolution depends. This is likely to undercut any attempt to develop more innovative approaches to conflict management which prioritise early and informal intervention.

Of course, we must be careful about generalising from a relatively small sample. More work is needed to interrogate the role played by HRPs in addressing and resolving conflict. Nonetheless, these findings potentially have far-reaching implications for policy and practice. If organisations are to manage conflict effectively, consideration must be given to finding ways of increasing geographical, social and cognitive proximity both between HRPs and key stakeholders but also within the HR function itself. This means not only reassessing the viability of retaining on-site HR but also the potential for more generalist models in which employment relations is seen as an integral part of people management strategy.

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