



HRACUITY[®]

2024 Guide to Employee Relations and Workplace Investigations

This is the year that ER *must prioritize* the right actions.

The last few years have been tumultuous to say the least. The challenges our society encountered both during and after the pandemic have forever changed employee priorities and expectations for the world of work. **Employees fully expect our support when moments that matter go wrong.** Whether it's creating fair policies or thoroughly investigating misconduct, **employees pay more attention to our actions than our words.** What employees see either builds or breaks trust. Are we cultivating a transparent, inclusive culture or do we selectively tolerate harassment and misconduct? Are our investigations and outcomes consistently fair? Could we prove that in court?



In 2023, HR and employee relations professionals faced a sharp rise in mental health related issues, with two-thirds of organizations citing an increase in mental health cases.

It's critical that HR and employee relations professionals take action with a thoughtful response to this growing trend. Why? Because just as the best employees are flocking to organizations that value transparency, fairness and inclusion, they're also moving to organizations that value their emotional and psychological well-being. According to the 2023 APA [Work in America Survey](#), 92 percent of workers said it's important to work for an organization that values their emotional and psychological well-being, and that

same percentage said it's important to them to work for an organization that provides support for employee mental health. What that support actually looks like will shape the largest trends in HR and employee relations in 2024. **The coming year will be pivotal.** As in recent election years, we can expect an increase in political activism, affecting employee emotional and psychological well-being. The following guide curates our top insights with recommendations for what we believe will be the most impactful action ER teams can take.



In 2023, HR Acuity spoke to thousands of employees and ER professionals and published our key findings in both our [Seventh Annual ER Benchmark Study](#) and [Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Study](#). We uncovered the trends facing our industry and we empowered our community with the information they need to adapt and innovate as they strive to improve employee satisfaction, engagement and retention.

In this guide, we'll focus on the answers to several *important* questions:

1

Why should HR teams prioritize employee trust?

2

How can HR prepare for the rise of mental health case volumes?

3

Why should aftercare never be ignored?

4

Which investments in ER tech will deliver the greatest impact?

1 Why should HR teams *prioritize* employee trust in 2024?

Workplace culture and the safety of the work environment plays a large role in an employee's emotional and psychological well-being. **When employees are satisfied, engaged and feel safe, they are productive ambassadors of your brand.** [31% of employees said](#) they are likely to recommend their organization as an employer to their peer networks. However, when bad behavior such as gender discrimination, bullying and other forms of harassment go unreported, workplace culture becomes toxic. When that happens, great

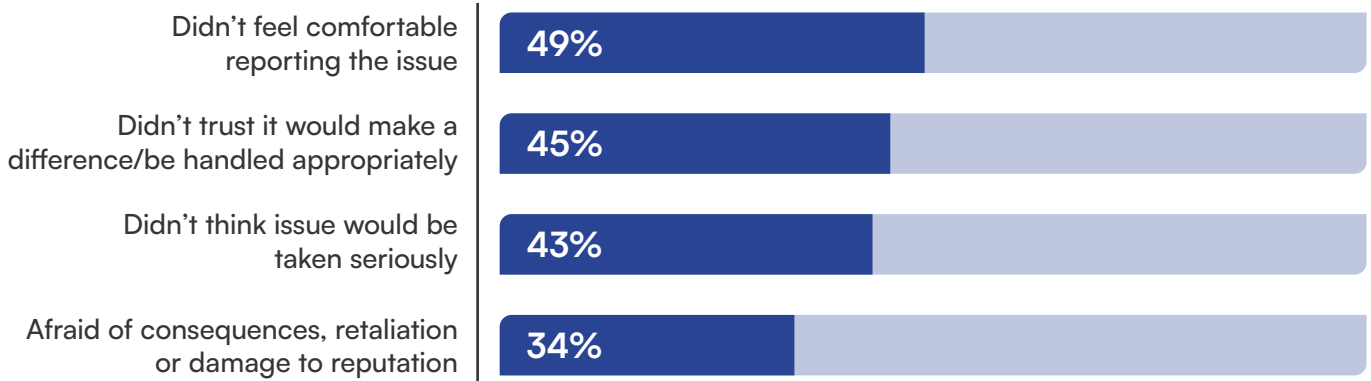
employees leave, referrals stop and your brand reputation is at risk. One of the biggest insights from our Workplace Harassment and Misconduct research is just how much building employee trust in ER/HR's reporting and investigation processes impacts everything. Not only does an employee's level of trust with your team and your processes directly impact how likely they are to report issues, but it also affects whether they stay with the organization and refer people to work there.

It's *overwhelmingly* clear: How ER/HR responds to harassment and misconduct issues influences the employee trust signals that we're calling the three R's: reporting, retention and referrals.

Reporting: Unreported issues are unresolved issues, and that's not good

Forty-two percent (42%) of employees who experienced an incident of workplace harassment or misconduct did not report it. When asked why, most indicated a general lack of trust and confidence in their employer's culture and processes; 49% felt uncomfortable reporting, 45% didn't trust it would make a difference or be handled appropriately, 43% didn't think the issue would be taken seriously and 34% feared retaliation and reputational damage. Our research showed when employees don't report an incident, the problem festers. Of those who did not report their concern, only 1 in 10 employees said the issue was resolved. Unresolved, their issues either persisted (24%) or drove them to leave (25%).

WHY DIDN'T EMPLOYEES REPORT HARASSMENT AND MISCONDUCT?



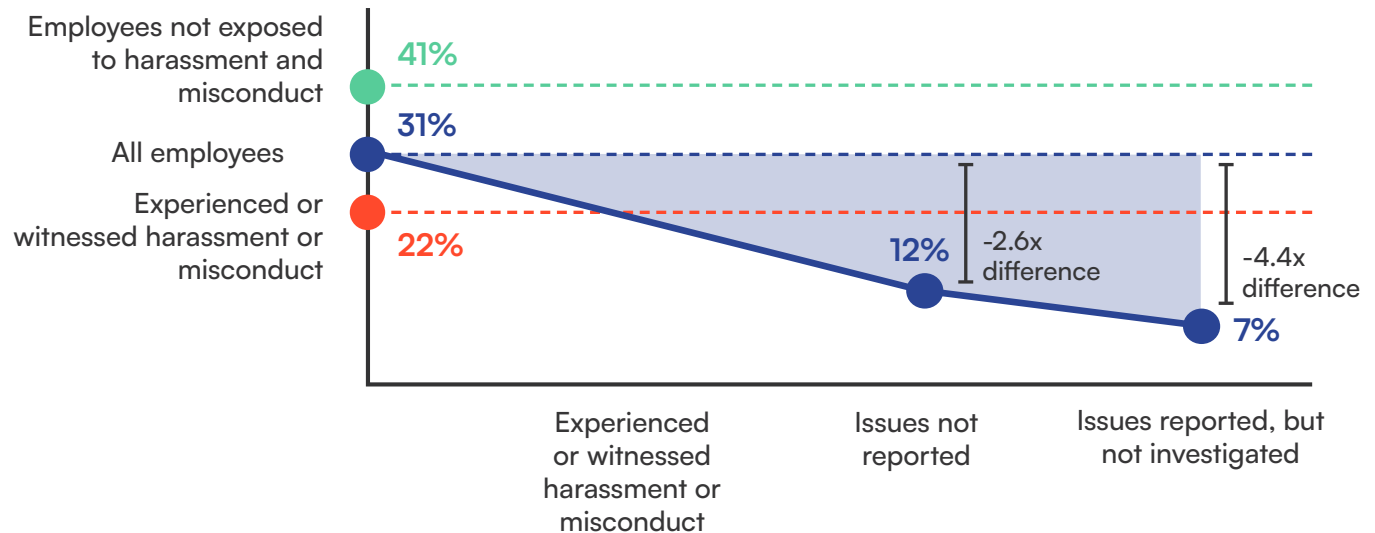
Retention: When issues are not dealt with properly, good employees leave

Organizations that tolerate harassment and misconduct lose valuable employees. In fact, a full 30% of employees who experienced or witnessed inappropriate, unethical or illegal behaviors left their organization following the incident, with 57% actually citing the harassment or misconduct as the reason they left.



Referral: When issues are not reported or investigated, referrals plummet

Unsurprisingly, when exposed to harassment and misconduct, employee referral rates dropped from an average of 31% to 22%. When issues go unreported, referrals drop even further to just 12%. Finally, if issues are reported but not investigated, referrals bottom out to 7%.





Action items for Employee Relations that build trust

1. Get to the root of the reporting issue by going deeper

Our research shows that employees who belong to certain overlapping demographics were impacted by and reported harassment and misconduct at varying rates compared to overall employees. Take the time to analyze your own unique harassment and misconduct data along with your internal demographics to better understand the true employee experience within your culture. Examining the full picture, including intersecting demographics, will help you uncover important nuances of the employee experience and enable you to appropriately address groups who feel unsafe reporting issues.

3. Embrace transparency

Forty-one percent (41%) of employees said knowledge of how similar situations were handled would convince them to report an issue. Additionally, 36% of employees indicated they need to believe that senior leadership won't tolerate workplace misconduct and harassment. When employees don't know the outcome of an investigation, they draw their own conclusions. Sharing aggregated outcomes is critical to drive accountability and ensure employees that issues are taken seriously. At a minimum, make sure you share outcomes with all stakeholders. Consider taking your transparency a step further and commit to sharing aggregated anonymous outcomes data with the workforce - it's something just 17% of organizations are willing to do today.

2. Offer truly anonymous reporting

When we asked what would convince employees to report an issue or concern, guaranteed anonymity (64%) topped the list. You can build trust and confidence in employee reporting by offering an engaging and non-threatening anonymous reporting experience. Remember, there is a stark difference between a whistleblower hotline, a web form and an engaging, safe experience. In our research, we found that making such an anonymous tool available moves the needle on overall reporting. Reporting rates jump 21% (from 49% to 70%) when you offer anonymous reporting, set clear expectations about the reporting process and share aggregated, anonymous investigations data.

4. Set people leaders up for success

Even when anonymous reporting methods are available, most employees (61%) still report issues directly to their manager, with just 48% taking it to HR. Empower your people leaders to address employee issues effectively and consistently. Managers are most often the ones having the tough conversations, so prepare them with sufficient training and resources that enable them to carefully respond to reports of misconduct and harassment. To do this, consider dedicated ER case management tech that builds in consistent processes, enables managers to easily and thoroughly document issues and get help from HR when needed.

2 How can Employee Relations prepare to address the *surge* of mental health case volumes in 2024?

Mental health issues are trending up. In fact, according to our [Seventh Annual ER Benchmark Study](#), mental health issues were the most significant driver of employee issues in 2022 and 79% of organizations attributed case volume increases to mental health-related challenges. When we factor in that an additional 15% of organizations don't even know the extent of mental health issues employees experienced, we can assume this is a pervasive blindspot. So what's causing all the mental health issues?

Even with the pandemic behind us, the collateral damage lingers. Whether it's returning to the office, layoffs or reductions in force (RIFs), or just broader economic challenges, employee mental health has taken a hit. Responding to the complex mental health crisis experienced by employees will deepen our commitment to non-negotiable values including empathy, fairness and transparency. **It will require employee relations teams to upskill team members, tighten investigative processes, improve anonymous reporting options and invest in better aftercare resources.**



Action items to help handle mental health cases

1. Confirm ER's scope and know where to seek *allies*

Most HR and employee relations professionals are not mental health professionals. While there may be some overlap in our education, it's important to realize that an effective response to complex mental health issues will require skill sets your team may not have. **Clearly defining where your scope begins and ends - and then identify allies within the mental health ecosystem to create a process for clear hand-offs, documentation and follow up.** For example, consider partnering with your EAP or a third-party provider to empower employees with mental health training programs that help them become allies for their coworkers; employees

often see things arise earlier than a manager or HR. Another idea is to provide managers and ER professionals easy access to procedures and resources (what to do, who to call, etc.) in case a crisis or emergency arises.



2. Tighten your investigative practices

Mental health differences can be subtle or obvious and they can be considered a challenge or a strength at work. For example, neurodivergence can show up as incredibly powerful problem-solving and creativity, something all teams can benefit from. However, neurodivergence may also present challenges with a variety of things including social interactions, sensory sensitivities, executive

functioning, attention and focus, emotional regulation and so forth. **Either way, employee relations teams must review and adapt their investigation processes to ensure they take into employee mental health into account and that investigations are fair and compliant for all employees.** We dove into detailed tips from our interview with industry experts on this topic [here](#).

3. Audit your accommodation request process

A common theme we heard this year at our annual Employee Relations Roundtable event was that mental health issues are increasingly showing up through the accommodations process vs conduct concerns. **Take the time to audit your accommodation request and approval process.** What kinds of questions are you asking during the process? How long does the process take? How many people are involved in an approval? Are you noticing an uptick in the types of requests? Knowing these answers will not only help your process run smoothly, but it will also help you flag potential mental health issues you may have otherwise missed.

Common accommodation requests that can be a sign of a deeper mental health issue

Flexible Work Schedules

Employees may be looking for adjusted working hours to accommodate therapy sessions or medical appointments. They also want remote work options to provide a comfortable, less stressful environment.

Quiet / Designated Spaces

Employees may request access to quiet areas or designated spaces where they can take a break or simply decompress from their work day.

Reduced Workload or Adjusted Responsibilities

Employees may request a temporary reduction in workload during particularly challenging times or they may request a restructuring of tasks to better align with their strengths.

Ergonomic Workspace Adjustments

Employees may request lighting changes or noise canceling technologies to create a more comfortable work environment.

Extended Leave or Breaks

Employees may use FMLA for mental health reasons beyond standard vacation or sick leave. If leave isn't available, they may request short breaks throughout the day to manage stress and anxiety.

Access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

Employees may request richer EAPs for confidential counseling, mental health resources, employee support services and more.

3 Why should aftercare *never* be ignored by HR?

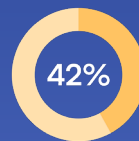
Aftercare is an important aspect of the investigation process, yet too often it's overlooked. We all can agree a clear, consistent aftercare routine can help employees move past workplace issues and investigations. On the other hand, **a lack of aftercare can cause unresolved issues to fester and negatively impact employee engagement, productivity, morale and retention.**

After an investigation, employees can have difficulty putting the issue behind them. If outcomes aren't shared, they are left to their own imagination and often fear what comes next. From a business case perspective, it's important to connect the dots between how aftercare impacts re-engagement, productivity, culture and retention.

Our [2023 Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Insights](#) report reveals that while most organizations offer some sort of aftercare, the approach varies widely. [Very few organizations \(5%\)](#) have a well-defined process to proactively manage aftercare, and it is most often left to front line managers. Not a great strategy given [60% of employee relations leaders reported](#) that their people leaders fall short in handling employee issues and concerns effectively. Without clear and consistent aftercare processes, people leaders may not be equipped to adequately support impacted employees or truly gain their trust.



39% of employees cited a lack of communication during the investigation



42% of employees didn't know what to expect during the investigation

Organizations need to establish clear, consistent aftercare processes to support and provide closure to all employees involved in an investigation. **Aftercare instills trust in the investigative process, prevent retaliation and ensure more successful remediation of issues.** It can also go a long way to help re-engage and retain employees who find themselves suffering in the aftermath of emotional trauma.



Action items for ER that improve aftercare

1. Audit the *consistency* of your investigations and documentation

The best way to ensure everyone involved in an investigation feels like it was fair is to apply consistency to the process and include documentation. Thorough and consistent documentation will go a long way to simplify other steps of the aftercare process including communicating outcomes and following through with recommendations.

2. *Prioritize* communications

Whether a claim is substantiated or not, make sure that investigation outcomes are communicated appropriately to all parties involved so everyone shares the same version of the truth.

3. Provide the *right support* for every employee in your organization

After experiencing (or inflicting) emotional distress or trauma, employees may need additional resources to move forward. Having the appropriate resources identified and accessible to employees will make the aftercare process much more effective. For example, employees suffering with a mental health issue related to the investigation may need a therapist. Conversely, the employee responsible for the issue may need access to behavioral resources such as anger management classes or a substance abuse support group.



4. Take *swift* action

If too much time goes by after an investigation is closed, it's easy for employees to assume their complaint has not been taken seriously. When claims are substantiated, your team will have to recommend what actions HR needs to take. Recommendations should be timely and the handoff to HR should include any relevant documents and resources.

5. Deliver *proactive* culture training

In the aftermath of an investigation, relationships may be damaged and rumors can spread like wildfire. Make sure that you have proactive training that sets the tone for a resilient culture. Train people leaders on effective strategies to welcome employees back and refocus teams on the work at hand. Help employees understand what is acceptable to share and what isn't.



of organizations are currently using ER tech to track issues and investigations.

6. Follow up

According to our [2023 Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Insights](#) report, managers handle post investigation follow up 44% of the time. That's not acceptable. Not only are they not responsible for communicating outcomes, but they aren't experts at spotting and avoiding retaliation. Make sure your team has a dedicated check-in process to ensure there is no retaliation. Further, your follow up should be a means for seeking continuous improvement. Ask employees about the investigation process. Do they think the outcome was fair? Were they treated with respect? Would they refer other employees to report a similar issue now that they know what happens next?

Which investments in employee relations technology will deliver the *greatest* impact in 2024?

2024 will intensify the importance of access to reliable data to mitigate risk, proactively manage employee issues, improve employee experiences and build trust with employees. Yet, according to the [Seventh Annual ER Benchmark Study](#), only 42% of organizations are currently using employee relations technology to track employee issues and investigations. Surprisingly, Fortune 100 respondents seem slower to adopt solutions specifically designed for employee

relations, as 26% primarily use ticketing systems to track ER issues and investigations. **This may be due to a long-standing misconception that all HR needs can be met with a single technology platform.** The nuances of managing employee relations issues and investigations effectively calls for an investment in technology specifically designed to meet employee relations' needs, and to protect both organizations and their employees.



1. Anonymous Reporting

Offering an anonymous reporting method leads to higher overall reporting rates and that's a good thing; remember, **unreported equals unresolved issues**. Investing in anonymous reporting tools demonstrates your commitment to encourage employee reporting and fosters employee trust in the process. This is even more important when you consider the added sensitivity involved in mental health related cases.

Although only a small fraction of employees (11%) reported issues using anonymous tools, overall reporting rates were 21% higher when employees were aware of the option to report anonymously. In fact, nearly 3 out of 4 employees (70%) reported harassment and misconduct when they knew they could do so anonymously.

2. Manager Competency

According to our [2023 Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Insights](#) report, when employees reported workplace issues, they mostly turned to managers (61%). It makes sense - managers are often the closest relationship employees have with work. That's a good thing when everything is going great, but that can be bad when things go wrong. Even if a manager is supportive, if they don't know how to handle an issue effectively, things can go wrong. If the manager is at the root of an issue and an employee feels trapped, things get worse.



70% of employees reported harassment and misconduct when they knew they could do so anonymously.

Organizations must empower people leaders with sufficient training and resources that enable them to attentively and carefully respond to reports of misconduct and harassment. To do this most effectively, many organizations rely on dedicated employee relations technology built to ensure consistent processes and enable managers to easily and thoroughly document employee issues. The best solutions will provide workflows, conversation templates and on-hand resources managers can use to handle conversations and conflict most effectively.

3. Investigation & Case Documentation

Successfully prioritizing employee trust, preparing for surges in mental health cases and creating a clear, consistent aftercare process all require airtight investigations and case documentation. Why? Because you're going to need access to data every step of the way. **Make sure your investigation process and case documentation are consistent, centralized and reportable.**

4. Employee Relations Data & Analytics

Nearly one in five organizations collects but does not use employee relations data and metrics. It's a missed opportunity to both demonstrate the value of employee relations to leadership and unlock additional resources. According to our [Seventh Annual Employee Relations Benchmark Study](#), a core set of metrics that consistently tops the tracking list has emerged and includes reporting by issue type, issues by location, issues by department/function and issue disposition. But these are just the core metrics, and ER can and should do more. **Using data-driven insights and telling data stories illustrates the impact on bottom line results and demonstrates the value of ER to the business.**

- Can you view cases by type?
- Can you quickly see substantiation rates?
- Can you examine substantiation rates by diversity demographics to address bias?
- Can you use trending data to predict hotspots?
- Can you report on a case health score or QA process that ensures consistency and best practices are followed?

Top Reporting Metrics:

- + Issue Type
- + Issues by Location
- + Issues by Department
- + Issues by Function
- + Issue Disposition



ER data that needs to be collected and analyzed in 2024

Substantiation Rates by Case Type +

This helps ER communicate investigation outcomes and design appropriate recommendations, aftercare and follow up.

Employee History +

This helps create a more complete picture of an employee, especially those that have mental health related claims.

Cases Across Diversity +

This can help an organization keep potential unconscious bias in check.

Anonymity Rate +

This can help measure overall employee confidence levels in employee relations.

Issue to Allegation Rates +

This is a crucial component of case complexity, which can be used when assigning cases based on various factors.

Case Complexity Score +

This is used in case assignment, including when a more skilled investigator is needed, developing an ER team and more.

NPS for Investigations +

This helps employee relations continually improve, but also report on value.

Cost Savings / Cost Avoidance +

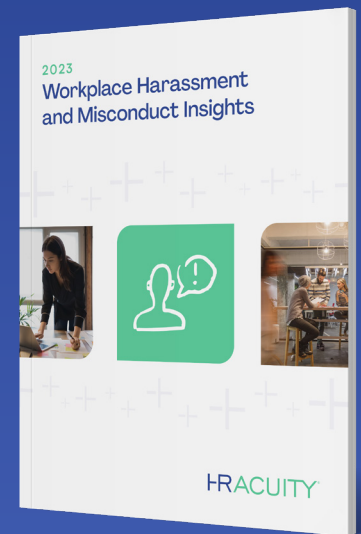
This helps continuously build the business case for employee relations.

Methodology

2023

Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Insights

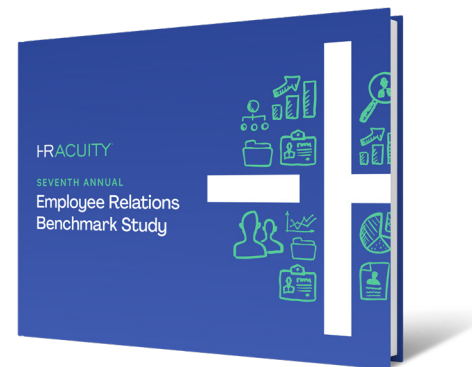
HR Acuity conducted an online survey to capture the opinions of employees in the United States. With nearly 2,000 respondents, the data represents a cross-section of the workforce across industries, organizations of various sizes and employee demographics. The research was conducted March 3-4, 2023 and has a confidence level of +/- 2.2 percentage points (95% confidence interval) to easily and thoroughly document employee issues. The best solutions will provide workflows, conversation templates and on-hand resources managers can use to handle conversations and conflict most effectively.



SEVENTH ANNUAL

Employee Relations Benchmark Study

HR Acuity, in partnership with Isurus Market Research, fielded an online survey via email and social media targeted at employee relations professionals at enterprise organizations based in the U.S. with at least 1,000 employees. Participants included employee relations leaders from 190 organizations, representing 6.3 million employees globally. The data collected was from the calendar year 2022 with one submission per organization. The research was conducted between January 11 and February 27, 2023, and has a confidence level of +/- 7.1 percentage points. Only year-over-year changes that are statistically relevant in the results are highlighted in the report.



HR Acuity is the only technology platform specifically built for employee relations and investigations management, helping organizations protect their reputations and build better workplaces. We empower customers with built-in intelligence, templates and reporting so they can equitably and appropriately manage employee relations issues; uncover trends and patterns through forward-looking data and analytics; and provide trusted, consistent experiences for their people.



“The *best* Employee Relations case management tool I have found.”

— Kelly B. — Head of Employee Relations & HR Compliance, **Sanofi** —

“HR Acuity is *head and shoulders* above the rest!”

— Stephanie A.M. — Head of Employee Relations, **Akamai Technologies** —



RANKED 4.6 / 5 ON G2



Welcome to the *next generation* of employee relations.

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