

HRACUITY®

TENTH ANNUAL

Employee Relations Benchmark Study

A decade of insight:
Shaping the *future* of
employee relations.



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A Message From the CEO

Ten years of Employee Relations Benchmark data have documented something bigger than a trend line.

The Benchmark Study has helped build the evidence base behind the evolution of employee relations from an undefined practice into a discipline with measurable impact on trust, risk and workplace health.

The work began in 2008 with a small set of questions and a network of practitioners willing to share what they were doing. Over time, the questions got sharper, moving from how confident people felt about their practices to measuring the practices they actually had in place. That shift gave employee relations leaders the data to compare, improve and make the case for their work.

What we built together is the documented evolution of a profession moving from largely undefined to increasingly strategic. This tenth Study represents nearly 9 million employees, more than ten times the population represented in the first Study. That growth reflects the commitment of practitioners who do the work, share their data and help build benchmarks grounded in reality.

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The next decade will demand more. Case volume is rising, issues are becoming more complex and AI is changing how teams work and how employees raise concerns. The good news is that employee relations leaders have better data than ever before. Used well, it can reduce risk, guide decisions and highlight where investment will have the greatest impact.

Wherever you are in your employee relations work, you are part of this progress. Use this year's findings to explore what your data reveals about trust, risk and workplace health, and then act with intention.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deb".

Deb Muller

CEO, HR Acuity®

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Methodology & Terminology

HR Acuity, in partnership with Isurus Market Research, surveyed employee relations professionals at enterprise organizations with at least 1,000 U.S. employees. The study includes 274 organizations representing 8.8 million employees globally, covering calendar year 2025 practices. Research was conducted January 23-March 24, 2026. Margin of error: ± 5.9 percentage points (95% confidence interval). Only statistically significant year-over-year differences are noted.

The Benchmark Study combines broad outreach to employee relations leaders, structured data collection from internal systems and rigorous quality control. Participating organizations are anonymized in published results. Ten consecutive years of data provide a market-wide view of how employee relations practices evolve, distinguishing short-term movement from lasting industry shifts.

Terms Used in the Study

Employee Relations Professionals

Individuals who are dedicated to managing or working on employee relations matters

HR Business Partners/Generalists

Provides strategic/operational human resources support to business or functional areas

Employee Relations Quotient

A maturity model for employee relations designed to help organizations measure and improve employee relations processes

Employee Relations Organizational Models

Centralized

Centralized team of Employee Relations Professionals or Center of Excellence (“COE”) responsible for managing employee relations issues and conducting investigations across the organization (Note: This group does not have to be geographically centralized)

Mixed

Centralized team for managing some or most of the employee relations cases and investigations but field resources (HRBPs/Generalists and/or managers) still manage some ER issues

Decentralized

Employee relations issues are managed within the specific lines of business by HR Business Partners/Generalists or Employee Relations Professionals; Employee Relations matters are not centralized

Acronyms Used in the Benchmark Study

CHRO

Chief Human Resources Officer

COE

Center of Excellence

EEOC

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

ER

Employee Relations

ERP

Employee Relations Professional

ER/Q

Employee Relations Quotient

FTE

Full-Time Equivalents

HR

Human Resources

HRBP/G

Human Resource Business Partner/Generalist

HRIS

Human Resource Information System

Respondent Profile

The Study captures a broad view of enterprise employee relations.

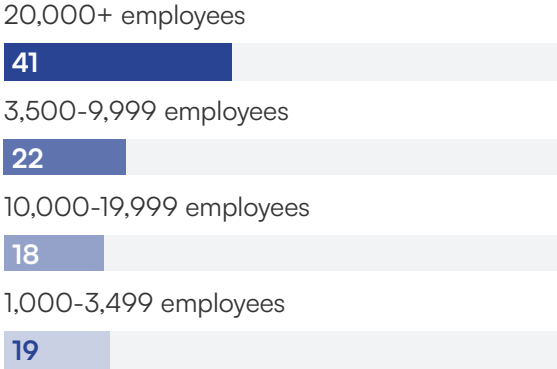
Findings reflect input from 274 organizations representing 8.8 million employees globally, including 195 Fortune 500 companies. Respondents span a wide range of industries, company sizes, revenue bands and positions. These include CHROs, global leads, heads of HR, vice presidents, directors, senior managers and HRBPs, with 70% of respondents in leadership roles.



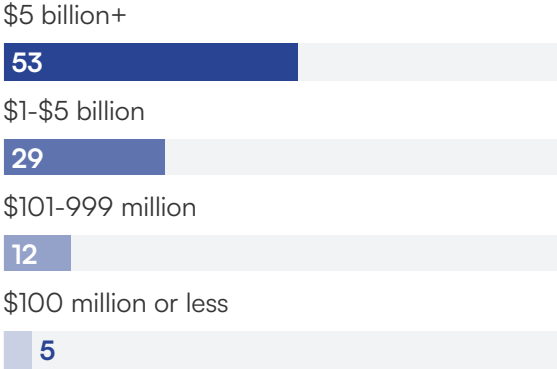
By Industry, % of organizations



By Size (Global Employees), % of organizations



By Revenue, % of organizations



By Fortune List, % of organizations



A Decade of Data: The Rise of Employee Relations as a *Critical Business Function*

HR Acuity launched the first Benchmark Study in 2016, using calendar year 2015 data, when employee relations was often defined by case response, policy interpretation and localized practices. Today, the function is more structured, more data-enabled and directly connected to decisions about workplace risk, trust and issue prevention.

The progress reflects the intentional work of employee relations leaders to raise the bar. Leaders now look to employee relations for consistent outcomes, meaningful data and insights to shape decisions that reduce risk, strengthen brand reputation and foster employee trust.

The reflections from this year's participants show six ways the function has evolved over the past decade.

Six Shifts that Defined the Decade



Centralization & Standardization

Dedicated functions, shared systems and consistent practices became more common.



Growth & Expansion

Employee relations emerged as a specialized function with broader scope, clearer ownership and greater organizational reach.



Increasing Case Complexity & Volume

Layered cases, external pressures and higher expectations made aggregate case counts less complete as a workload measure.



Technology & Data-Driven Practices

Tracking moved from basic tools to dedicated systems, analytics and AI-enabled work.



Shift from Reactive to Strategic

Employee relations expanded its focus to early action, leadership advising and data-informed decision-making.



Earning a Seat at the Table

Employee relations became more connected to decisions that impact employee experience, retention, reputation and trust.

Centralization & Standardization

Structure Built for Scale, Consistency and Efficiency

Centralized and mixed organizational models, already common in the first Benchmark Study, remain the dominant model. But the depth of standardization behind them has changed.

Dedicated teams, shared systems and consistent workplace investigation practices have replaced varied, local handling. That structural foundation helps employee relations leaders identify patterns across cases, support fairer responses to concerns and bring credible data to leadership decisions on risk, resources and workplace trust.



Gloria Gruber

Assistant Vice President for HR, People and Organizational Effectiveness, Carnegie Mellon University

“Our approach to ER has undergone a significant transformation, moving from a reactive, manual process to a proactive, specialized function. This evolution ensures greater consistency, transparency and protection for both our employees and the organization. The shift is defined by four key structural pillars:

Digital Transformation

We've transitioned from manual tracking, often reliant on spreadsheets and fragmented emails, to a centralized employee relations case management system that allows for real-time data analytics, secure documentation and better oversight of workplace trends.

Procedural Standardization

The Office of Human Resources has implemented a standardized investigation process to ensure that every inquiry is conducted with the same level of rigor, objectivity and fairness, regardless of the department or individuals involved.

Dedicated Expertise

Recognizing that workplace dynamics require focused attention, we established a dedicated employee relations position to provide a consistent point of contact and ensure ER matters are handled by a specialist rather than being an 'add-on' task for HR business partners.

Specialized Workstreams

To ensure sensitivity and compliance, we've separated investigative responsibilities. General ER matters are handled by HR, while allegations involving discrimination, bias and sexual misconduct are routed to the Office for Institutional Equity and Title IX.”



Takeaway: Standardization provides organizations the foundation to scale employee relations consistently and confidently.

Growth & Expansion

Employee Relations Became a Specialized Function

As employee concerns became more complex and expectations for fairness and transparency increased, the work required clearer ownership, specialized skills and more consistent support for leaders and employees.

Many organizations formalized employee relations teams, expanded regional or global support and clarified the scope of responsibilities across investigations, accommodations, performance management, policy support and manager guidance. Organizations increasingly recognized employee relations as a defined discipline with distinct skills, data needs and accountability for building trust.



Nathan Singer

Head of Global Employee Relations, Confluent

“A few short years ago, employee relations was non-existent, and now it’s a well-oiled machine. Increased manager training has enabled faster, more effective accountability for poor performers; managers have just enough training on the basics of ‘tough conversations’ that they don’t need an employee relations person to help them from the beginning. We’ve seen a cultural shift as well. We’ve enabled managers (and ourselves) to be driven by consistency and best practices vs. fear of ‘doing it wrong.’

We’ve also experimented with taking risks, i.e., terminating an employee who shouldn’t be here despite some perceived risk factors, which has paid off significantly in our culture evolving to ‘holding employees accountable for performance.’ Severance policy/guidelines have evolved significantly. We are now using ‘dual release’ agreements which include time on payroll and severance payment at the end, which virtually guarantees signature; and overall severance costs have decreased.”



Takeaway: A growing employee relations function requires specialized expertise and clearer ownership to scale with consistency.

Increasing Case Complexity & Volume

Workplace Pressures Are Reshaping Employee Relations

As employee relations became more structured, the work also evolved. Issue volume rose alongside social and political activism, growing awareness of perceived employee rights, mental health challenges and accommodation requests. Cases now routinely include multiple issues, broader context and higher expectations for documentation, fairness and follow-through. AI-assisted complaints are adding another layer. Case counts alone cannot capture the complexity. Without deeper insight into issue-level data, organizations cannot allocate the resources, time and judgment the work demands.



Laura Brooks

Human Resources Business Partner, Frontier Airlines

“Cases have gotten more complex and increased as employees have more awareness of what harassment is. There is more visibility. I think employees are coming forward more while in the past it was hidden or people moved on. More people are also seeking mental health assistance, and that requires accommodations and a different level of support than it did in the past.”



Takeaway: Case counts do not accurately capture the complexity of employee relations work. Organizations that rely on counting volume alone miss the opportunity to demonstrate impact.

Technology & Data-Driven Practices

The Move from Tracking Activity to Delivering Insight

Technology changed the foundation of employee relations work. Tracking moved from spreadsheets and informal systems toward dedicated employee relations case management systems, resulting in stronger practices for documentation, reporting and trend analysis.

AI now extends technology benefits, but the same principle applies: Technology improves employee relations only when the data is consistent, the guardrails are clear and human judgment remains central to the work.

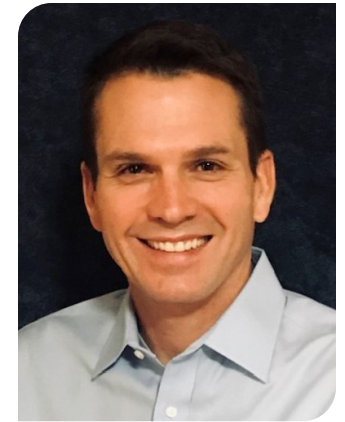


Takeaway: Purpose-built technology gives employee relations teams the ability to document issues consistently, along with the visibility to identify patterns and respond sooner.

Rob Peterson

Employee Relations Director, Curaleaf

“The evolution of employee relations has been shaped by several key factors, including emerging technologies such as AI and employee relations technology platforms. These tools have supported a shift from a reactive case-management model to a more data-driven, preventative, and predictive approach.



Using real issue and case data, we’ve developed a risk model that prioritizes sites and leaders by exposure level. From there, we move fast — deploying cross-functional action plans directly where the risk is highest. At the same time, a rise in employee activism, fueled by the political climate of the past decade, has created new challenges. These pressures have exposed leadership gaps among frontline managers and highlighted the need for more proactive training and development. As a result, our employee relations function has rapidly evolved from a primarily investigative function within HR to a strategic partner focused on engagement, coaching and business advisory support.”

A LOOK BACK: Employee Relations Tracking, % of organizations

Using spreadsheets/generic databases

2015 34

2025 11

Using no case management system

2015 14

2025 3

Shift from Reactive to Strategic

Insights Are Driving Earlier Action and Stronger Business Decisions

The role of employee relations has expanded from case resolution into prevention, leadership advising and data-informed decision-making. Respondents describe teams using case data to identify patterns, coach managers, assess policy effectiveness and raise issues before they escalate.

Connecting those signals to proactive initiatives, staffing decisions and leadership action delivers stronger value to the business.



Takeaway: Strategic employee relations uses case data to identify patterns earlier, advise leaders more effectively and guide action before issues escalate.



Abira Balendran

Global Employee Relations Leader

“Employee relations has evolved from a reactive and case-focused function to a strategic, standardized and data-enabled discipline. We’ve increased consistency through global frameworks and operating guidelines, strengthened investigator capability and governance and focused more on procedural fairness and defensibility.”



Alison Gardyne

Head of Global Employee Relations, Cisco

“At Cisco, our employee relations team is evolving from a reactive, compliance-focused function to a more proactive data-informed partner to the business. We are fostering deeper strategic partnerships, reinforcing trust and psychological safety and utilizing data-driven insights to gain a clearer view of emerging trends. This approach allows us to provide more targeted support to our leaders and ensures our work remains closely aligned with the broader employee experience.”

Earning a Seat at the Table

Employee Relations is Turning Data into Business Influence

The decade reflections show that employee relations now has greater influence on decisions affecting employee experience, retention, reputation and trust. Employee relations data can identify where concerns are escalating, managers need support, policies require attention and targeted intervention can reduce future issues. Turning employee relations data into leadership insight strengthens the function's influence on business decisions. Translating patterns into language that resonates with leaders and helping them act on the data strengthens business decisions that create trusted workplaces.



Andrea Raty

Senior Director of Employee Relations, Visa

“The role has progressed beyond policy and compliance into a more strategic partnership. Global insights inform decision-making and enable effective outcomes for complex, multilayered issues that require judgment and comfort with ambiguity.

Overall, the function delivers less reactive support and greater strategic business value and insight.”



Maricela Sanchez

Vice President of Employee and Labor Relations, VF Corporation

“Employees understand that the role of ER is a specialized function evolving from the traditional HR capabilities. They

look to ER to address workplace concerns with fairness, confidentiality, integrity and empathy.”

The Decade Arc is *Clear.*

Employee relations has stronger structures, clearer ownership, better systems and greater business relevance than a decade ago, when HR Acuity published the first Benchmark Study. This foundation positions the function to shape the next decade of work with greater consistency, visibility and influence.

Key Findings: Employee relations *risk is accelerating* faster than organizations can respond.

2025 data reveals a function under mounting strain. Case volumes, misconduct allegations and case complexity are rising in tandem, while resources and processes struggle to keep pace.



Case volumes rebounded sharply in 2025, and misconduct hit an all-time high.

Discrimination, harassment and retaliation claims surged to 15.5 per 1,000 employees, the highest level in Benchmark history. After a brief dip, ER case volumes reached 145.5 per 1,000 employees, approaching the decade-high set in 2022. Performance issues jumped 27% and behavioral issues climbed 30%, signaling that workplace conflicts are intensifying across the board.

Performance Issues Rose

+27%

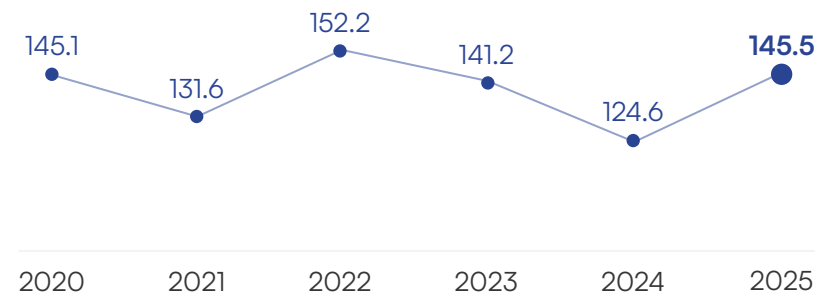
50.1 per 1,000 employees in 2025 vs. 39.4 in 2024

Behavioral Issues Rose

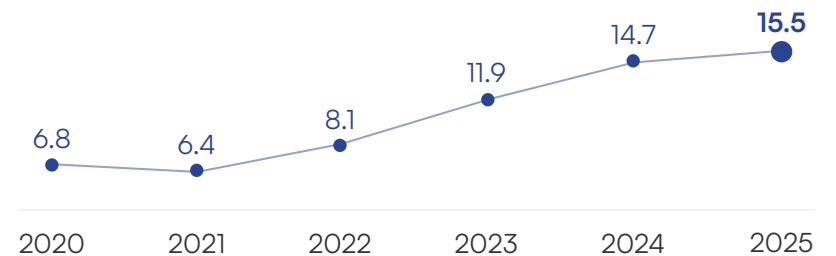
+30%

29.2 per 1,000 employees in 2025 vs. 22.4 in 2024

Total Number of Employee Relations Cases in the U.S., average per 1,000 employees



Total Number of Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation Allegations in the U.S., average per 1,000 employees



KEY FINDINGS



Social, political and generational tensions are a growing source of employee relations caseloads.

ER teams no longer just manage traditional issues; they absorb the weight of what's happening in the world. Political tensions drove case increase for 60% of organizations, even in a non-election year. Mental health challenges (59%) and societal crises and movements (55%) were cited as top contributors to increased case volume. Organizations also attributed rising caseloads to social media conduct (39%), nearly double over 2024 and generational friction (37%), adding new layers of complexity and blurring the line between digital behavior and workplace accountability.



Staffing ratios have not kept pace with case volumes.

Most organizations expect employee relations headcounts to remain unchanged in 2026, despite surging case volumes. Just one in four teams reported plans to hire in 2026. The employee relations staffing ratio edged up only slightly from 0.6 to 0.68 per 1,000 employees; while discrimination, harassment and retaliation cases have more than doubled since 2021. And only 27% of organizations use employee relations metrics to identify staffing needs, leaving most without evidence to justify additional resources. Understaffed teams may be tempted to rely on AI output without disciplined review, increasing organizational risk.



Strengthen employee relations infrastructure. Invest in people, processes and technology needed to handle rising pressure, build capacity and improve outcomes with consistency and confidence.

Volume Driver: Political Tensions*

60%

of organizations cited higher volume,

+6 points vs. 2024

*In a non-election year

Volume Driver: Social Media Issues

39%

of organizations cited higher volume,

+17 points vs. 2024

2026 Projected Employee Relations Resources

1 in 4

teams expect to hire in 2026

KEY FINDINGS

Data *blind spots* are obscuring the true scale of employee relations risk.

Organizations can't manage what they don't measure. Critical gaps in how employee relations data is collected and tracked are limiting the ability to assess risk, demonstrate defensibility and build a culture of trust.



Case complexity is undercounted.

Most organizations (62%) do not track the number of issues per case. Among those that do, the average is 1.3 distinct issues per case, signifying that actual investigative demand is higher than case counts suggest. Employees are increasingly using AI to draft more detailed, legally framed complaints with extensive evidence packages, requiring greater investigative effort to separate fact from AI-generated framing before reaching defensible conclusions.



Anonymous reporting data is incomplete.

While 83% of organizations tracked whether issues were reported anonymously, only half of those (51%) knew the breakdown between anonymous and named reports, which is a critical sign of whether employees feel safe coming forward and whether reporting channels are working.

Issue-Level Tracking

62%

of organizations do not track the number of issues per case

Anonymous Issue Tracking

83%

of organizations tracked whether issues were reported anonymously

Reporting Method Tracking

51%

of organizations knew the volume of issues reported anonymously vs. by name

KEY FINDINGS



Substantiation tracking by issue type is not common.

Overall, substantiation tracking rose to 62% (up from 51% in 2024), but only one in three organizations track outcomes by issue type. This granularity is essential to surface patterns in discrimination, harassment and retaliation, and it provides defensibility when cases escalate to regulatory agencies.



Investigation processes are improving, but gaps still create significant exposure to risk.

Use of a required investigation process hit an all-time high (62%), up 5 points from 2024, but 38% of organizations still have no required approach. Consistent investigation processes protect defensibility and help surface patterns before they escalate and signal to employees that concerns will be handled fairly.



Measure what matters. Expand issue-level visibility and outcome metrics to drive evidence-based decisions and minimize risk.

Substantiation Rate Tracking

62%

of organizations track,
+11 points vs. 2024



Substantiation by Issue Type

Only 1 in 3

teams tracks substantiation
rates by issue type

KEY FINDINGS

AI is reshaping ER work, but *human judgment* remains irreplaceable.

Organizations are adopting AI to improve efficiency, consistency and rigor while preserving the expertise, empathy and accountability that defensible decisions require.



Adoption is now mainstream.

Nearly three of four organizations (70%) experimented with or deployed AI for employee relations work. This sharp shift from 2024 reflects growing pressure from rising volume and increasing complexity.



Use cases are strengthening rigor.

About one in five organizations (22%) reported using AI for quality assurance, data analysis and referencing applicable laws. This positions AI as a cognitive partner that helps teams strengthen findings and navigate compliance complexity.



AI is driving real efficiency gains.

Top uses included drafting investigation reports (46%) and summarizing interview transcripts (45%). Participants saw improved productivity, consistency and output quality, freeing time for the strategic work that defines effective ER.



Adopt AI responsibly. Use it to support better work, not replace the expertise required to make fair, defensible decisions. Pilot and scale with intention; ensure governance, transparency and human oversight guide every step.

AI Adoption

70%

of organizations are experimenting or in limited deployment, **+22 points vs. 2024**

Using AI in Investigations

46%

of organizations use AI to draft investigation reports and findings, with human review

Case Management & Organizational Resources

Strong foundations for employee relations have been established, but capacity remains a constraint.

Centralization has been a defining feature of employee relations over the past decade and has become even more widespread as the function has matured. Case assignment strategies show that routing decisions now require more judgment, balancing business context, geography, case type, complexity and current workload. Yet resource allocation has not matured at the same pace, despite longer times to resolution for several high-scrutiny case types.

As case volume, serious allegations and issue complexity continue to rise, employee relations leaders need to evaluate how well their model, resourcing and routing discipline are aligned with the demands placed on the function. Connecting these components helps leaders support capacity recommendations and ensure teams can address complex issues consistently and effectively.



Takeaway: Making the case for additional resources requires connecting staffing levels to case complexity, routing practices and resolution demands.

Employee Relations Organizational Model

95%

of organizations use a centralized or mixed model to manage workplace issues and investigations

Case Assignment

26%

of organizations assign cases by line of business

ER Staffing Ratio

0.68

ER professionals per 1,000 employees

>> Notable Movement: Average days to close increased by 5-6 days for EEOC, federal, state or local agency-response cases

Organizational Models

Centralized and mixed models remain the standard approach for organizations.

The ten-year trend shows a consistent move toward use of some sort of centralization for the employee relations function. The challenge is for organizations to determine how to create enough visibility, specialization and workload flexibility to support the work at scale.

“ We understood the importance of sophisticated employee relations support, but struggled to scale our expertise and enforce strong investigation documentation. Today, we’ve centralized all employee relations activity and personnel into one team and we’re finally capturing all HR investigations.”

—Assistant Vice President, Global Employee Relations

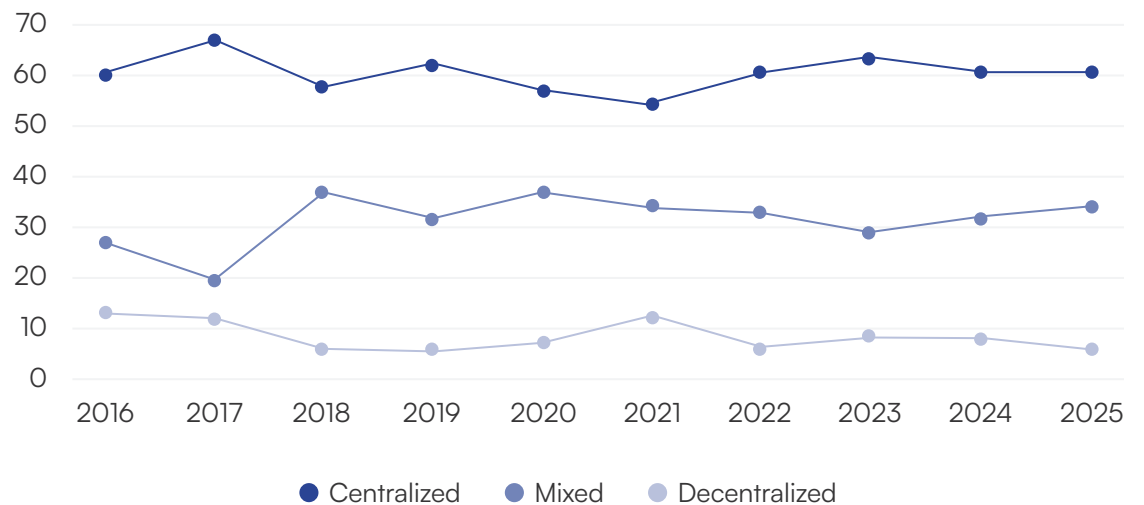
Organizational Models, % of organizations



A LOOK BACK: Use of a Centralized/Mixed Model

95% 2025
87% 2015

Ten-year Trend: Employee Relations Organizational Models, % of organizations



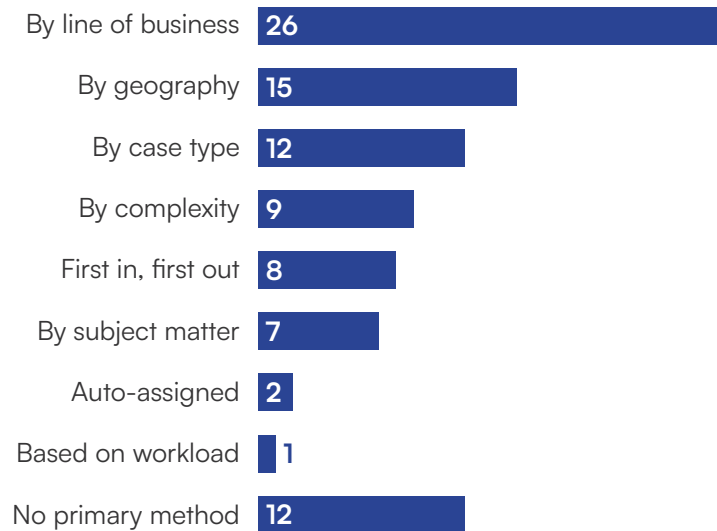
Takeaway: A centralized/mixed model creates the structure for consistency, but staffing capacity determines how well it scales.

Case Assignment

Case assignment is becoming a balancing act.

No single method of case assignment dominates. Teams balance business knowledge, neutrality, investigator expertise, case type, complexity and bandwidth as they route work to employee relations professionals. This is more pronounced in large organizations, where a larger portion of organizations assign cases using multiple factors.

Primary Method for Assigning Cases, % of organizations



How Case Assignment Strategy Shapes Outcomes



Case Context

Line of business, geography, case type, complexity and bandwidth



Routing Decision

Match work to the right capacity, expertise and business context



Operating Result

More consistent handling, clearer ownership, better workload balance



Takeaway: Case assignment is more than an administrative step. It requires routing practices that account for issue type, business context, neutrality, availability and the judgment needed.

Staffing Resources

Staffing hasn't kept pace with employee relations workloads.

For the first time since 2022, the staffing norm was reassessed. Human resources generalist/business partner resources fell while employee relations staffing essentially remained unchanged. Differences by structure and organizational size provide practical benchmarks for leaders to assess resource needs. Larger organizations report fewer resources than smaller organizations, indicating economies of scale.

Employee Relations Staffing Ratio

0.68

employee relations professionals per 1,000 employees

2026 Employee Relations Hiring Forecast

69%

of organizations expect headcount to stay the same

Only 27%

of organizations expect headcount to increase

“While our team size has grown modestly, its impact and workload have expanded significantly.”

—Vice President, Employee Relations

Staffing Ratios by Organizational Model,

FTE per 1,000 U.S. employees - median

Organizational Model	ER Professionals	HRBPs/Generalists	In-House Lawyers
Centralized	0.78	2.03	0.21
Mixed	0.51	2.68	0.21
Decentralized	0.60	1.32	0.16
All	0.68	2.11	0.21

Staffing Ratios by Number of Employees,

FTE per 1,000 U.S. employees - median

# of Global Employees	ER Professionals	HRBPs/Generalists	In-House Lawyers
1,000-3,499	1.12	3.25	0.63
3,500-9,999	0.86	1.90	0.26
10,000-19,999	0.54	1.94	0.21
20,000+	0.53	1.71	0.15
All	0.68	2.11	0.21



Takeaway: Resource planning needs to be anchored in workload, complexity and service expectations, not just headcount history.

Time-to-Close

Long resolution times point to more demanding work.

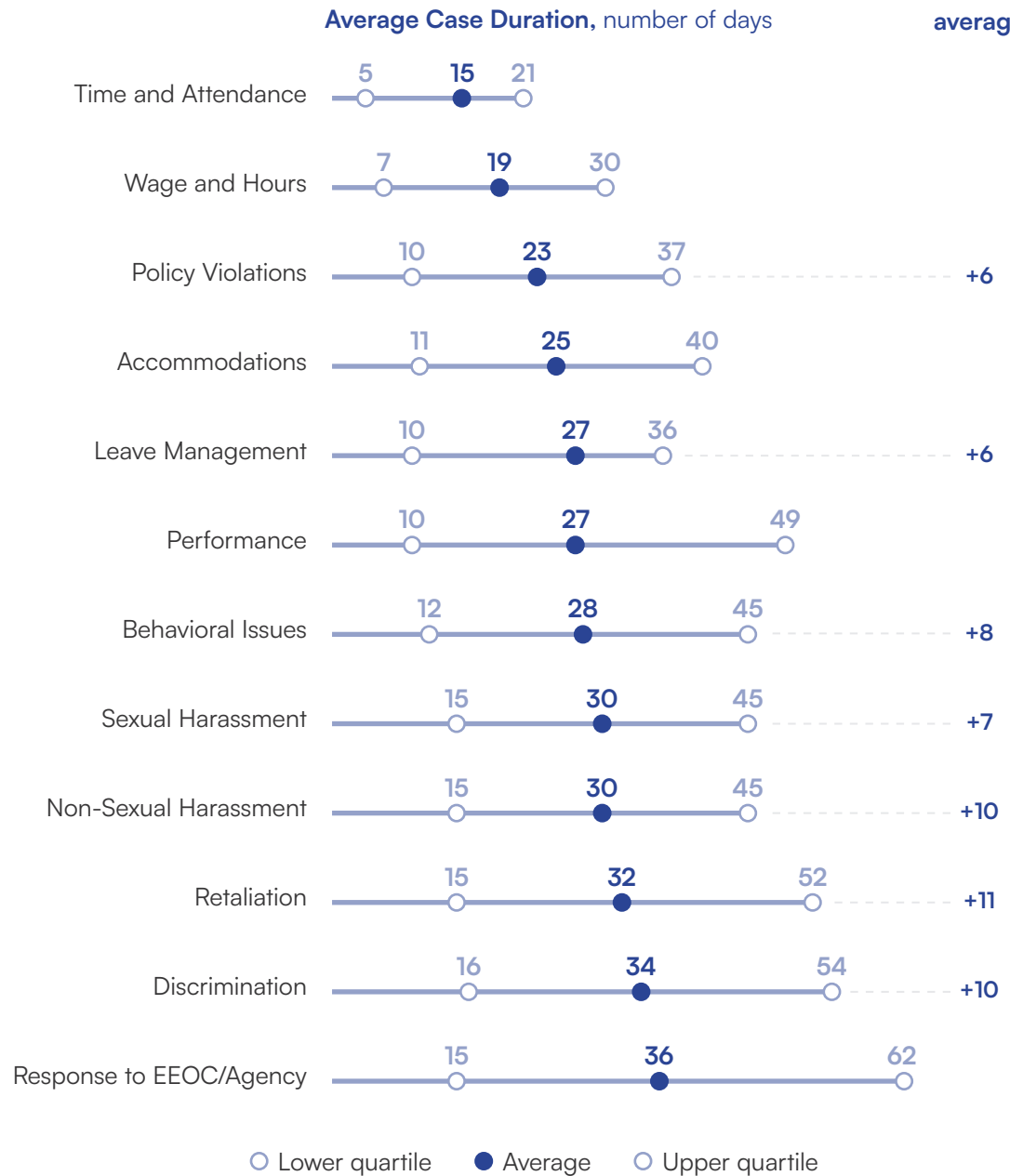
Time-to-close is more than an efficiency measure. Outliers in either direction can signal unusual complexity or resolution timelines that warrant more in-depth case review. More granular time-to-close data can help leaders identify which cases require specialized expertise and support.

>> Notable Movement: Average days to close increased by 4 to 11 days across eight issue categories, signaling greater case complexity and stretched employee relations resources.



Takeaway: Time-to-close helps connect case complexity to the resources required.

vs. 2024 average



Required investigation processes support team efficiency and rigor.

Time-to-close varies by issue type and by the investigation process used. A required investigation process can help teams close some high-volume issue categories faster, while more complex or serious matters may take longer to ensure complete, impartial and compliant investigations.

How Required Processes Shape Issue Resolution



Issue Context

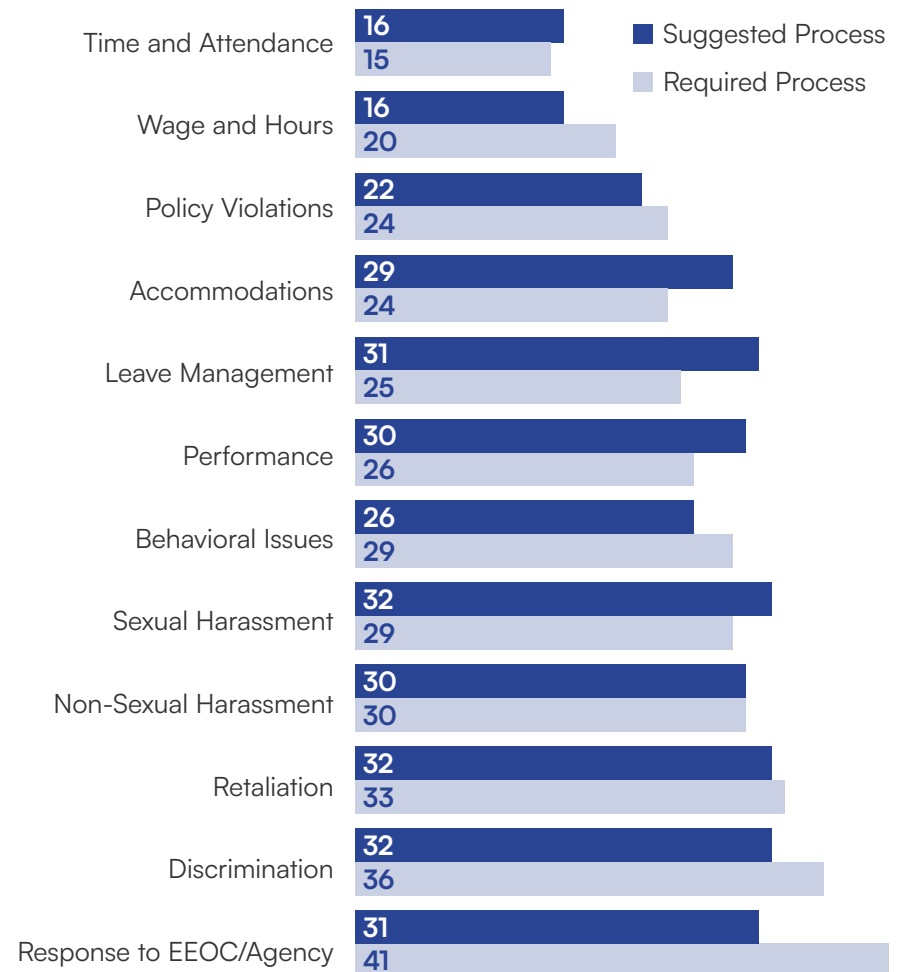
High-volume issues need consistency and efficiency. High-scrutiny matters need structure and thorough review.



Process Discipline

Required steps help teams know when to move forward and when to go deeper.

Average Case Duration by Investigation Process, number of days



Structure *Supports* Scale.

Case management models and staffing levels can only scale when structured processes and technology help strengthen documentation, improve visibility and support more consistent outcomes.

Processes, Practices & Technology

Broader adoption of required processes and technology is strengthening employee relations practices.

As employee relations work has become more complex, organizations are formalizing how concerns are reported, investigated, documented and managed. Nearly all organizations provide anonymous reporting tools, use of required investigation processes reached an all-time high in 2025 and purpose-built technology remains the standard approach to manage issues and investigations.

The value of structured processes and employee relations technology extends beyond documenting and tracking. When used consistently, they capture the detail employee relations teams need to identify patterns for targeted initiatives and connect case activity to broader business decisions.

Anonymous Reporting Tools

95%

of organizations offer a way to report issues anonymously

Required Investigation Process

62%

of organizations follow a consistent investigation process, **an all-time Benchmark high**

Employee Relations Technology

61%

of organizations use solutions designed for employee relations and investigation case management



Takeaway: Strong practices and meaningful data can help improve employee experience, demonstrate employee relations influence and reduce organizational risk.



Issue Reporting

Anonymous reporting tools are widespread, but visibility into reporting behavior is limited.

Nearly all organizations provide a tool for employees to report concerns anonymously. But deeper insight comes from understanding how employees use those channels.

Knowing the volume of anonymous versus named reports helps assess employee trust, psychological safety and confidence in the process. Unusual reporting patterns can signal the need to examine channel awareness, access or fear of retaliation.

83%

of organizations track whether reports are anonymous

53%

of organizations know the volume of named vs. anonymous reports

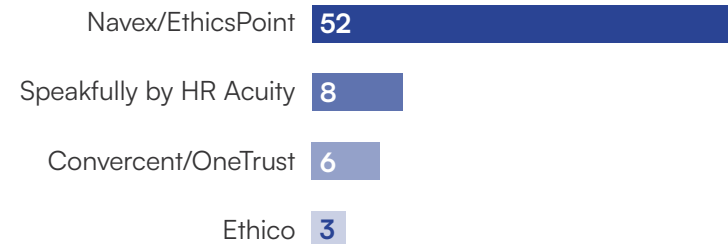
75%

of reports with a known method were submitted by name

“Employee relations has given a voice to the voiceless in the company through anonymous reporting tools, building of trusted partnerships at all levels, centralization models and visibility across the organization.”

—Employee Relations Leader

Platforms Used for Employee Issue Reporting, % of organizations*



*2% of respondents reported using Case IQ, Compliance 360, SpeakUp, or Syntrio. 1% or fewer respondents reported using AllVoices, multiple vendors or other tools.



Takeaway: Reporting method data helps leaders see whether employees trust the process, feel safe raising concerns and have confidence in available channels.

Investigation Processes

Investigation discipline is improving, but many organizations still lack a required process.

The trend is moving in the right direction as use of a required investigation process reached the highest level measured over the past decade. Even with this progress, the remaining gap creates an opportunity to strengthen how concerns are investigated, documented and resolved.

Required Investigation Process, % of organizations



- Use a required process
- Do not use a required process

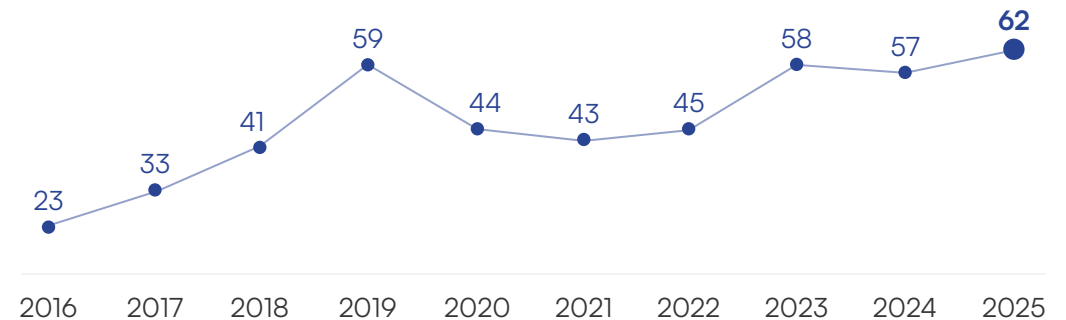


Takeaway: Required processes support more thorough, impartial and defensible investigations that reduce organizational risk and build trust with employees.

“ We have strengthened investigation processes, standardized performance management practices and implemented structured documentation tools to improve consistency and accountability.”

—Coordinator, Employee Relations

Ten-year Trend: Use of a Required Investigation Process, % of organizations



A LOOK BACK: Use of a Required Process

62% vs. **23%**
2025 vs. 2015

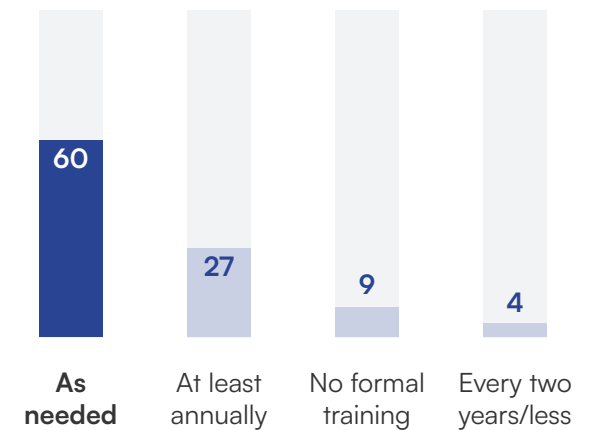
Investigation Training

Formal investigation training has shifted from routine practice to as-needed support.

Since 2019, the share of organizations providing frequent or annual formal training on proper investigation techniques has declined sharply. As the workforce changes, employee issues become more complex and misconduct allegations rise, regular investigation training helps reinforce consistency and impartiality while strengthening the sound judgment needed to navigate nuanced workplace dynamics.



2025 Investigation Training Frequency, % of organizations



Pattern to Watch: Organizations with required investigation processes, employee relations platforms and anonymous reporting tools train more frequently, but as-needed training remains the majority practice.



Takeaway: Frequent investigator training helps keep skills current and supports thorough, consistent and compliant investigations that minimize legal exposure.

Training is More Common at Scale

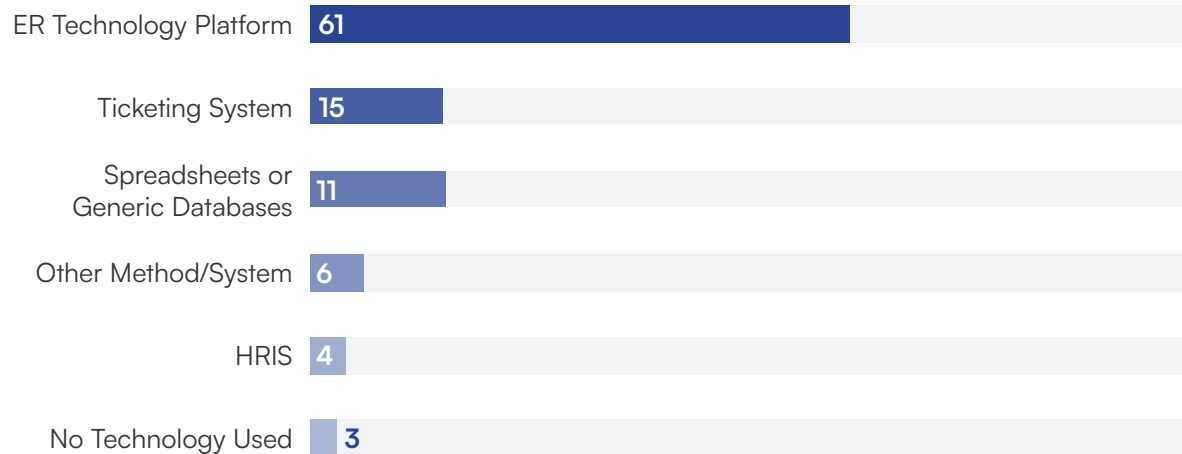
32% of companies with 20,000+ employees train at least annually

Employee Relations Technology

Employee relations technology adoption continues to rise.

Use of employee relations technology has continued to increase, while spreadsheets and generic databases continue to decline as an approach to managing issues and investigations. The trend reflects a broader shift toward more structured case management for work that requires consistent documentation, confidentiality and reporting visibility.

Approach to Managing Issues and Investigations, % of organizations



“Employee relations technology and anonymous reporting systems have enhanced our transparency and trend analysis.”

—Coordinator, Employee Relations

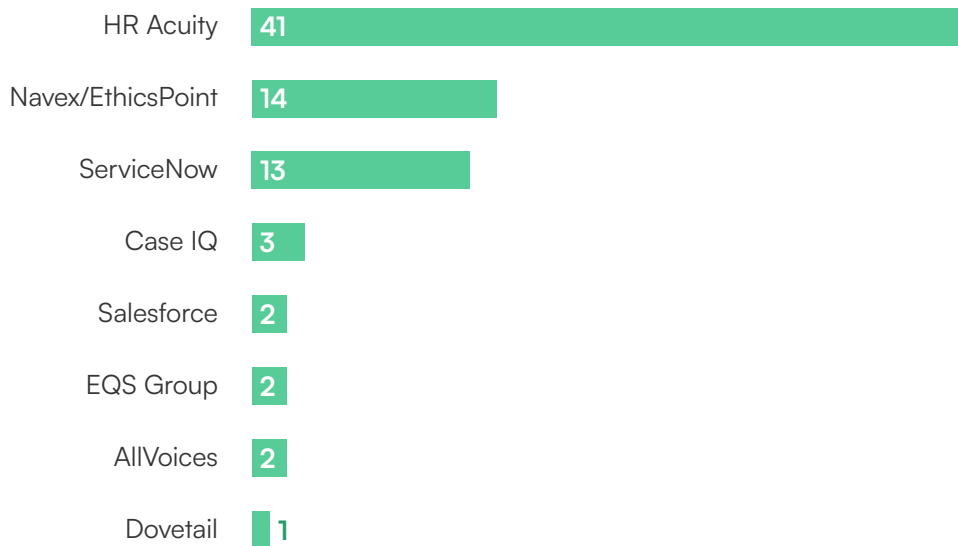


Takeaway: Employee relations technology gives teams the structure to document cases consistently, identify patterns of risk and connect case activity to business decisions.

Purpose-built technology leads employee relations case management.

Employee relations work requires technology that can support the nuances of issue intake and case documentation, workplace investigations, reporting, analytics and aftercare. Solutions that are configurable to the organization’s needs can help teams manage issues more consistently, identify patterns earlier and connect case activity to risk, employee experience and business impact.

Technology Platforms Used to Manage Employee Relations & Investigations, % of organizations*



Benchmark Study Respondent Mix

41%
HR Acuity
customers

59%
Other platforms or
approaches

*Data doesn't include systems not intended for case management such as spreadsheets/generic databases, HRIS, etc.



Takeaway: Organizations benefit most from platforms that embed recommended practices, can be configured to the function’s needs and make it easier to manage, analyze and act on case activity.

Technology Benefits & Challenges

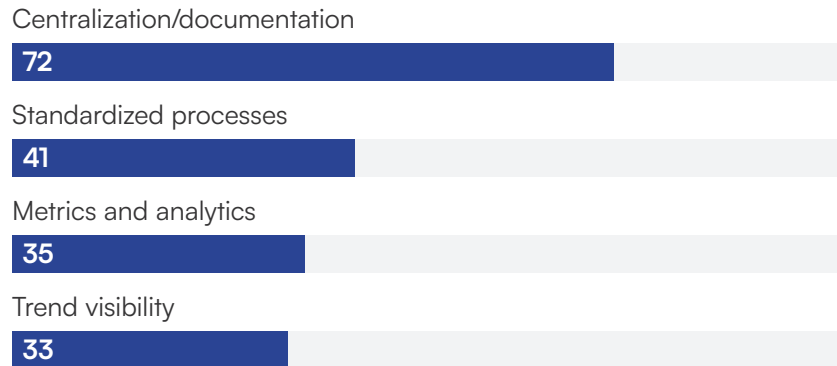
Technology value depends on usability.

Organizations find value in platforms that support the daily demands of managing employee relations cases through standardized, efficient processes. They are looking for solutions that provide easy access to data and insights that can drive initiatives and business decisions.

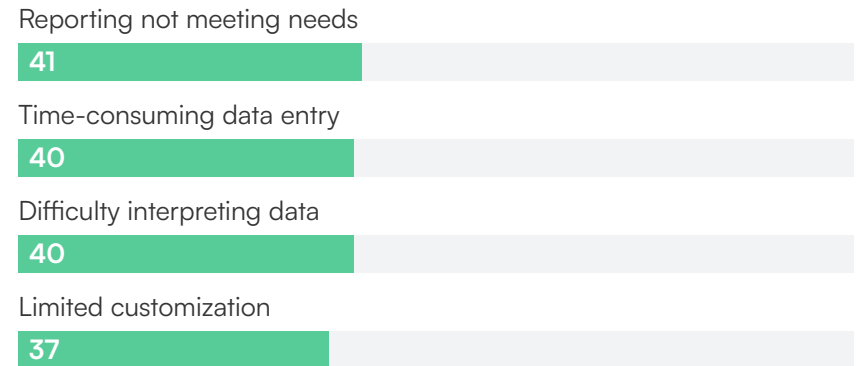
“Analyzing individual employee relations cases by department, issue type and individual tags, alongside broader case trends, allows us to identify recurring issues early, address root causes and proactively mitigate organizational risk.”

—Head of Global Employee Relations

Top Benefits of Employee Relations Platform, % of organizations



Top Challenges of Employee Relations Platform, % of organizations



Visibility Reveals Pressure.

Stronger practices and technology specifically designed for managing employee relations issues and investigations are critical to help teams respond to rising issue volume, surging misconduct allegations and external workplace pressures.

Issue Trends & Volume

Demands on employee relations are growing as volume, misconduct allegations and case complexity rise.

Overall case volume returned to near-record levels in 2025, serious allegations continued to climb and growth across performance, behavioral and workplace conduct concerns shows how widely employee relations work is expanding. External influences such as political tension, societal events, generational dynamics and digital behavior are also increasingly part of the case mix.

Insights into case volume relative to issue volume reveals that cases are becoming more complex, often containing multiple issues. Understanding where volume is rising, what is driving the growth and how complexity shows up in cases gives leaders stronger evidence to guide resources, responses and prevention.

“There are no more ‘simple’ employee relations issues. Most have some level of complexity and interwoven issues.”

—Head of Employee Relations



Takeaway: Meaningful issue data helps leaders identify patterns, surface hot spots and prioritize where action is needed.

Total Number of Employee Relations Cases in the U.S., avg. per 1,000 employees

145.5 cases

Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation Allegations in the U.S., avg. per 1,000 employees

15.5  **All-time Benchmark high**

Issues Per Case, avg. per 1,000 employees
(among organizations tracking issue-level data)

1.3 issues

Issue Volume

Discrimination, harassment and retaliation allegations reached an all-time high.

Issue volume rose across four of five major allegation categories in 2025, continuing the broad upward trend seen in 2024. The findings suggest that employee relations teams are managing not only more issues, but more layered matters that may require greater investigation rigor, expertise and visibility to spot patterns.

Total Number of Employee Relations Cases in the U.S.,
average per 1,000 employees



Takeaway: Rising serious allegations heighten the need for consistency, rigor and early visibility.

Issue Volume by Category, average number per 1,000 employees

Issue Category	2022	2023	2024	2025
Performance issues (performance counseling, coaching with manager or documentation, performance plan, performance rebuttal, etc.)	40.1	43.6	39.4	50.1
Policy violations (potential or actual violations or infractions of company policies, including code of conduct, conflict of interest, social media use, theft, fraud, substance abuse, etc.)	35.9	48.3	38.2	35.2
Behavioral issues (issues or allegations related to unprofessional conduct, inappropriate behavior, bullying, insubordination, worker conflict, etc.)	22.4	30.7	22.4	29.2
Discrimination, harassment or retaliation allegations	8.1	11.9	14.7	15.5
EEOC/federal/state/local agency charges	1.8	5.5	1.7	1.7

Issue Volume by Organizational Size

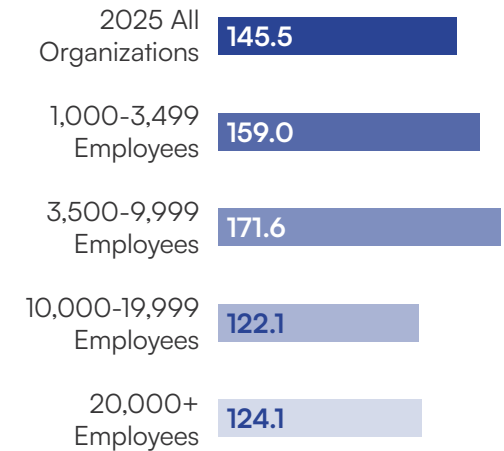
Issue volume varies meaningfully by organization size.

The highest overall issue volume was seen in mid-sized organizations including multiple higher-risk categories. This pattern highlights the value of comparing results against similarly situated organizations rather than relying on a single overall benchmark.

Issue Volume by Size of Organization, average number per 1,000 employees

Issue Category	2025 Overall	1,000-3,499 U.S. EEs	3,500-9,999 U.S. EEs	10,000-19,999 U.S. EEs	20,000+ U.S. EEs
Performance issues	50.1	56.6	71.7	33.5	33.9
Policy violations	35.2	39.1	38.3	27.7	35.0
Behavioral issues	29.2	24.7	28.1	30.3	33.5
Discrimination, harassment or retaliation allegations	15.5	15.2	20.5	13.8	12.2
EEOC/federal/state/local agency charges	1.7	2.0	2.1	0.9	1.1

Total Number of Employee Relations Cases in the U.S. by Organization Size, average per 1,000 employees



Takeaway: Benchmark comparisons with similarly situated organizations help leaders assess whether issue volume, staffing, processes and training align with the demands placed on employee relations.

Issue Volume by Category

Issue volume is concentrated across core workplace categories.

Performance issues remained the highest-volume category, while behavioral issues increased notably, reinforcing the need to examine where manager support, prevention, documentation and investigation resources may be most needed. And while more serious, high-risk issues are less common overall, these investigations require more rigor and can be time-consuming.

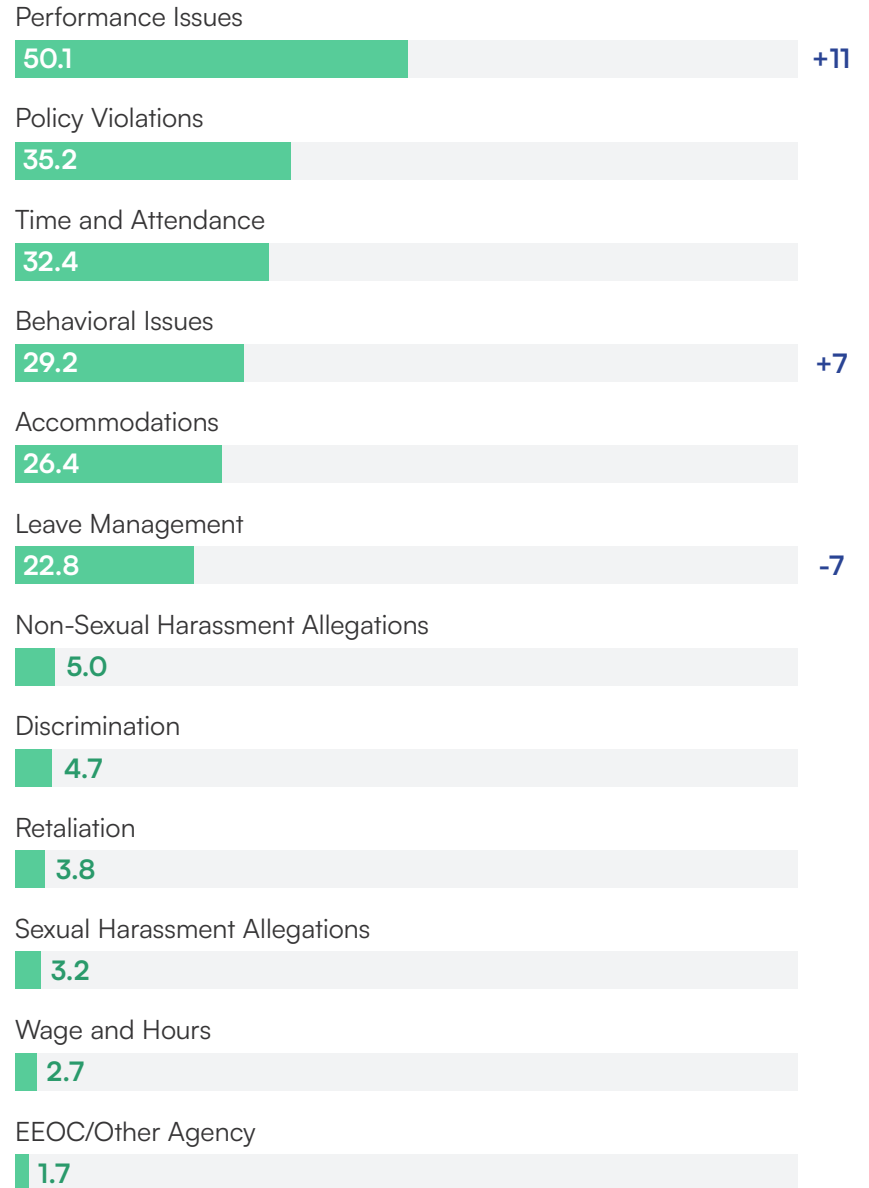
Pattern to Watch: Six categories carry much of the day-to-day work. Performance, policy, time and attendance and leave management account for the highest sustained volume. These patterns point to where manager support, training documentation and prevention may have the greatest impact.



Takeaway: Understanding issue mix helps leaders identify where employee relations work is concentrated and where targeted training, prevention initiatives or process improvements may be needed.

Change vs. 2024

Issue Volume by Category, % of organizations



Issue-to-Case Ratio & Case Complexity

Issue-level data reveals what case counts miss.

Issue-to-case ratio was added to the Benchmark Study in 2024 in response to employee relations leaders reporting greater case complexity. The metric provides a clearer view of true workload by showing the number of distinct issues within a single case. Tracking improved in 2025, but only one-third of organizations currently capture this data. Those that do reported an average of 1.3 issues per case.

Issue-to-Case Tracking Remains Limited

38%

of organizations track issues per case, **+6 points vs. 2024**

62%

of organizations do not track issues per case

Average Number of Issues Per Case

1.3 issues

(among organizations tracking issue-level data)



Directional Metric:

Most organizations do not yet track issue-to-case ratio, so the data likely understates case complexity.

“ We have seen an increase in escalated issues year over year, as well as increased complexity of matters, often involving multiple issues and multiple parties.”

—Global Head of Employee Relations

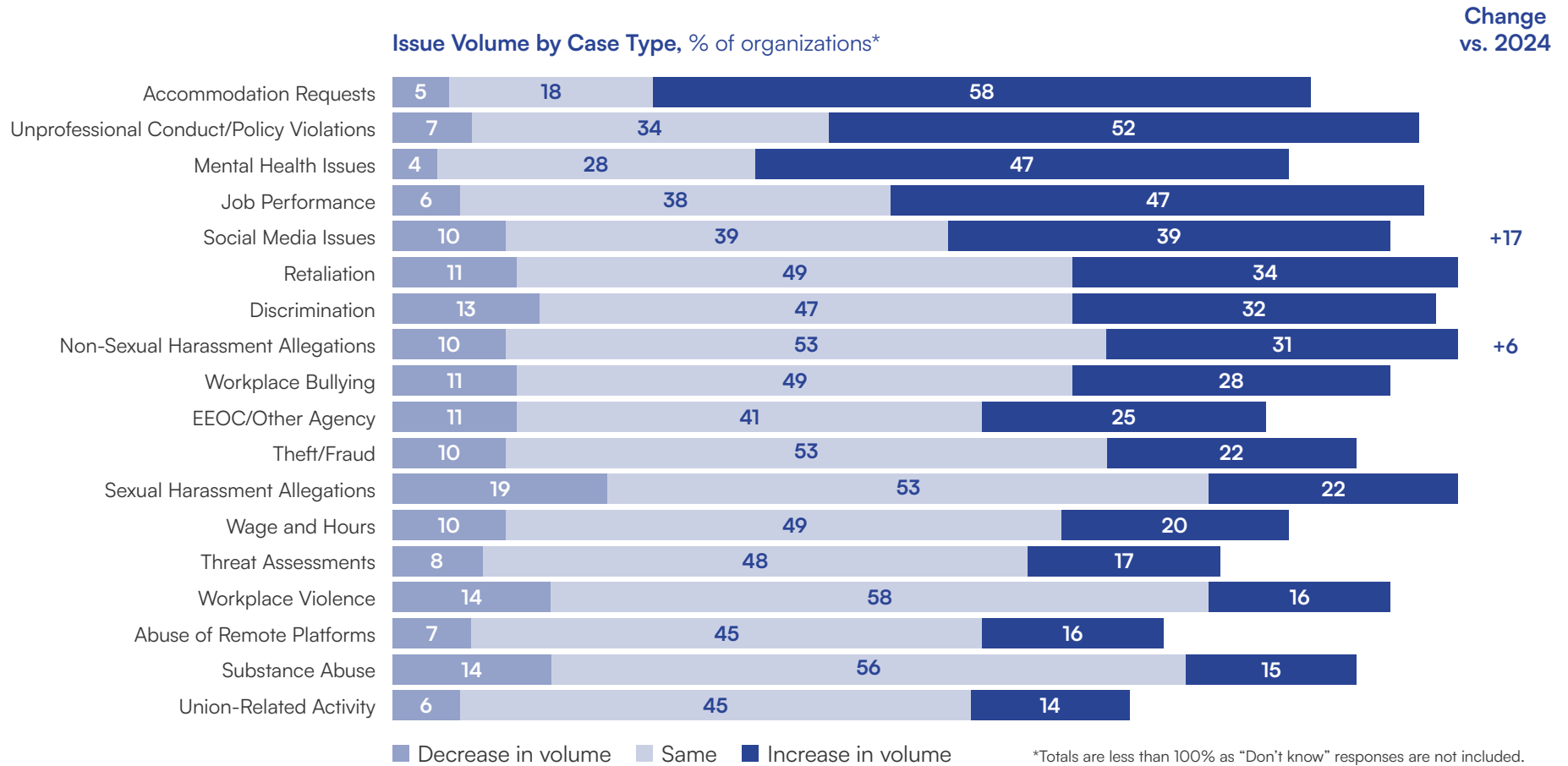


Takeaway: Issue-to-case ratio gives leaders a more strategic measure of workload, helping justify resources, set expectations and explain why some cases require more time, expertise and support.

Issue Volume Trends

Issue volume is trending upward.

More organizations reported increases than decreases across many issue areas in 2025. This view highlights where issue volume shifted most over the course of the year.



Takeaway: Trend data helps employee relations leaders spot and monitor emerging pressure points before they become larger operational challenges.



Issue Volume Attribution

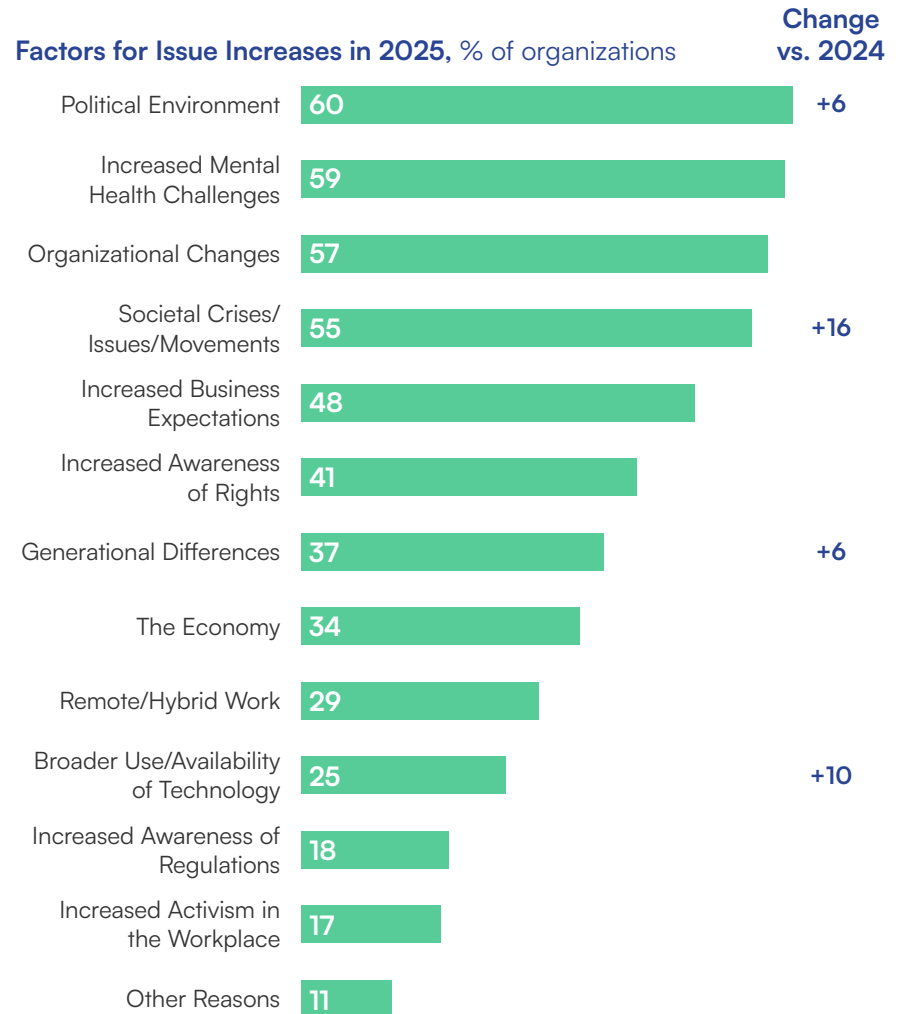
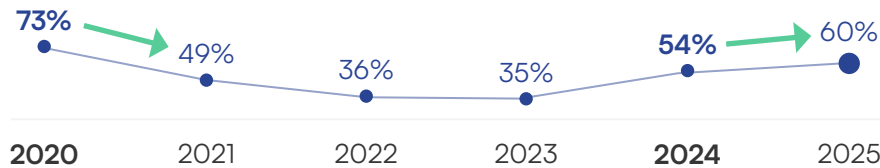
Broader workplace pressures are driving issue volume.

Organizations attributed increased issue volume to external forces and workforce dynamics. Societal crises and broader use of technology were most often cited as volume drivers. Generational differences and the political environment also became more visible drivers in 2025.

“We have also seen an increase in mental health issues and greater impact from the political environment and social media.”

—Global Head of Employee Relations

Political Environment Remains Elevated



Issue Volume Needs *Context.*

Issue trends show higher volume, surging allegations, layered cases and broader workplace pressures. Connecting these trends to issue-level data, attribution and outcomes helps leaders identify root causes, guide action and reduce risk.

Metrics & Analytics

More meaningful data is needed to increase employee relations' influence on the business.

Employee relations leaders are under growing pressure to showcase the work their teams manage and what the work reveals about the organization.

Meaningful metrics help teams evaluate operational efficiency, assess employee trust and experience and measure compliance and risk signals that can shape business decisions.

As allegations, case volume and complexity continue to rise, organizations need data that goes beyond activity tracking to show where problems are emerging, where processes are working and where targeted action can have the greatest impact.

Applying Metrics

89%

of organizations use some employee relations data

Predictive Data

51%

of organization use employee relations data to predict future issues

Issue-level Substantiation Tracking

32%

of organizations track substantiation by issue type

How Metrics Build Employee Relations Influence



Activity Tracking

Volume, issue mix, time to close



Outcome + Risk Visibility

Reporting and resolution rates, substantiation, retaliation



Pattern Detection

Trends, hot spots, early-warning signals



Issue Prevention

Targeted action, risk reduction



Takeaway: Meaningful data gives employee relations leaders the evidence to guide business decisions, focus action and demonstrate the function's impact on risk, trust and employee experience.



Metrics Reporting

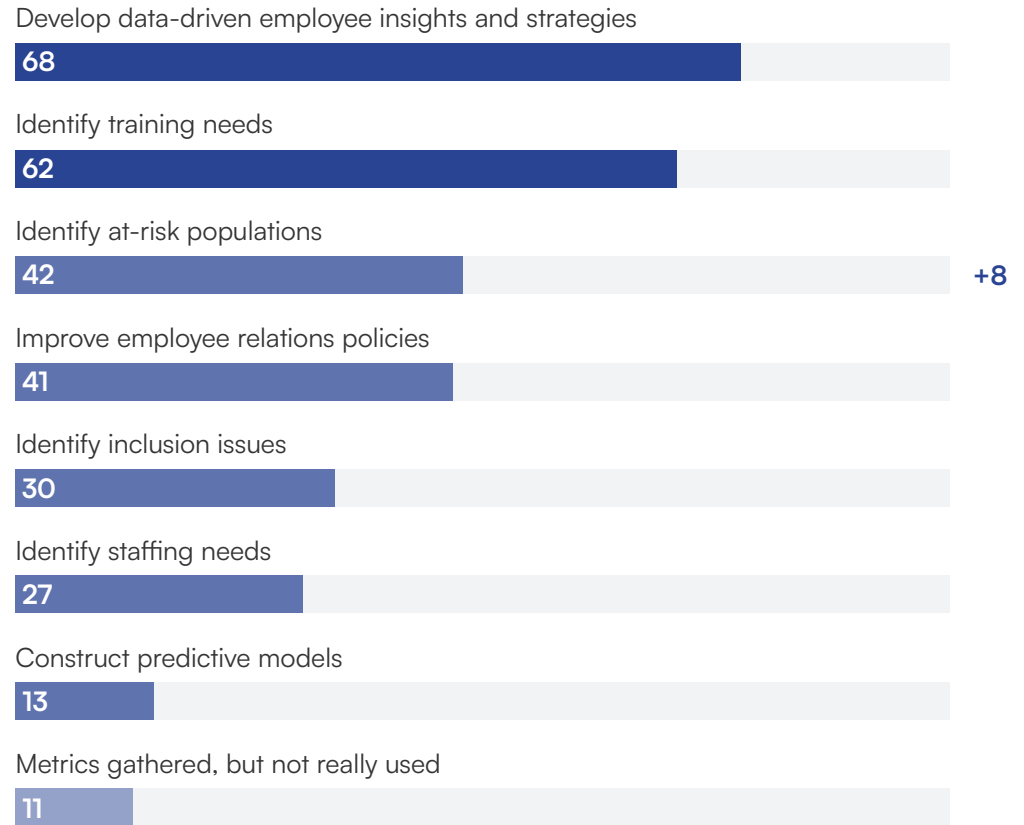
Metrics are widely used, but strategic application lags.

Most organizations use employee relations metrics to develop data-driven insights and identify training needs. Broader strategic applications remain less common, underscoring the need to use metrics more intentionally to guide decisions about people, process and risk.

>> Notable Movement: Use of metrics to identify at-risk populations increased in 2025, signaling greater attention to changing workforce, compliance and risk expectations.

Current Use of Metrics and Data Gathered, % of organizations

Change vs. 2024



Takeaway: Metrics create greater value when leaders use them to identify emerging risk, prioritize support and guide decisions that improve business outcomes.

Integration with Advanced Analytics

Blending workforce data strengthens employee relations insights.

Many organizations are pairing investigation data with broader workforce data to better understand patterns across demographics, performance ratings, turnover and engagement scores. Viewed together, these data points help leaders see whether issues are isolated or part of broader patterns affecting trust, culture and business outcomes.



Data Connection: Combining investigation data with workforce context helps leaders see patterns that case data alone may not reveal.



Takeaway: Connected data gives leaders a more complete view of workplace risk, targeted action and employee relations' impact on the business.



Workforce Data Integrated With Investigation Data, % of organizations

Change vs. 2024



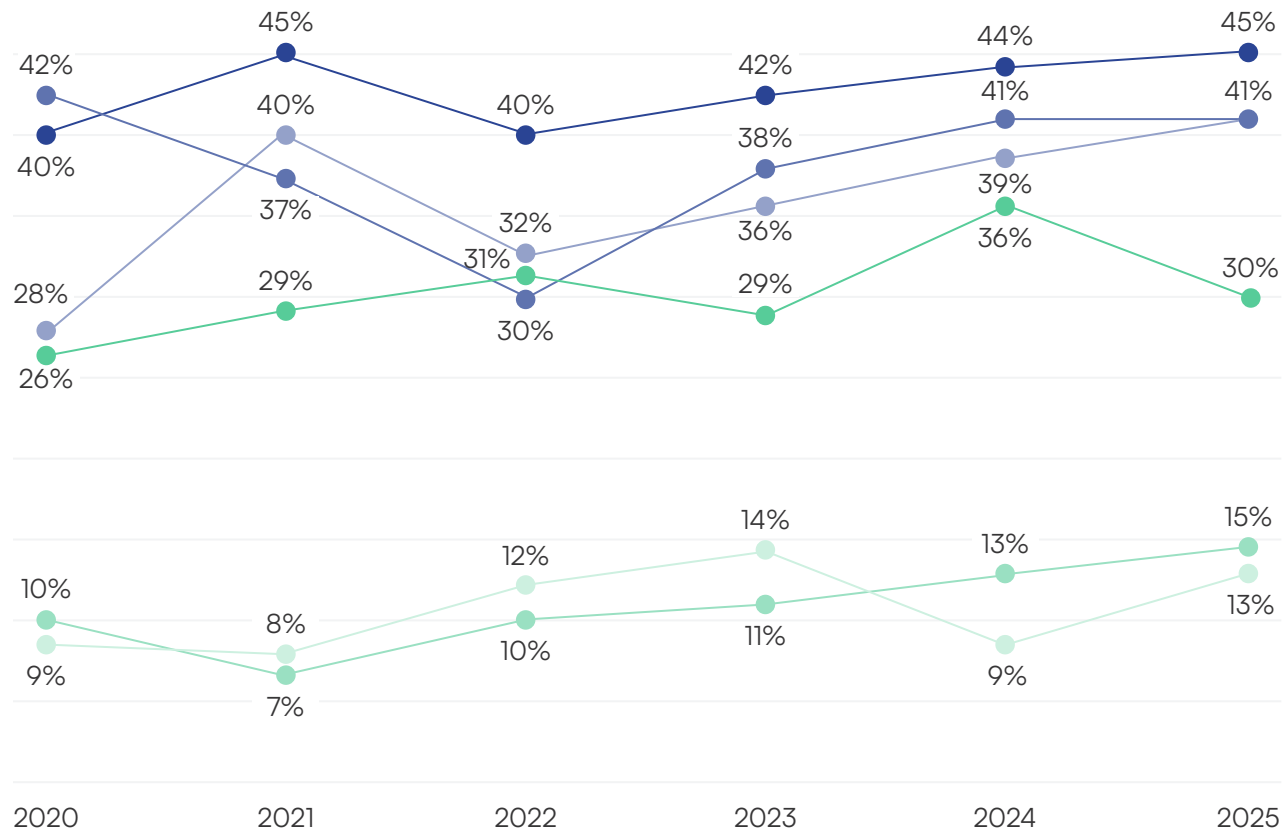
“ We look at location, leader, department and other data points to understand whether issues are isolated or part of a broader pattern.”

Trends in Advanced Analytics

Connected data turns insight into action.

Use of advanced workforce data sources has largely remained steady over time, underscoring the opportunity to turn integrated data into more targeted action, stronger engagement and healthier workplace culture.

Workforce Data Integrated With Investigation Data, % of organizations



- Employee demographics
- Performance ratings
- Turnover
- Engagement scores
- Business performance
- Compensation

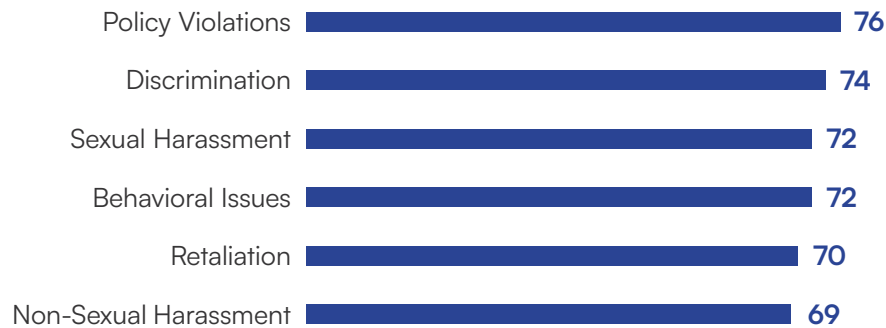
! Pattern to Watch: Maintaining integration practices may not be enough as issue volume and complexity continue rising.

Substantiation Rates

Substantiation tracking is improving, but issue-level visibility remains limited.

More organizations tracked overall substantiation rates in 2025, yet the percentage of issues substantiated remained flat year over year. Tracking case disposition by issue type also remained flat, with only one in three organizations measuring rates by issue category. Among those that do, access to category-level data improved across all issue categories.

Availability of Substantiation Data, % of organizations



Takeaway: Greater substantiation visibility helps leaders identify outcome patterns, surface hot spots and determine where follow-up actions may be needed to strengthen trust, improve employee experience and reduce risk.

Substantiation Rate Tracking

62%

of organizations track overall substantiation rates, **+11 points vs. 2024**

Overall Substantiation Rate

41%

of cases substantiated (among organizations tracking this metric)

Issue-Level Substantiation Tracking

32%

of organizations track substantiation rates by issue type

Higher Tracking of Substantiation by Issue Type

50%
FORTUNE 100

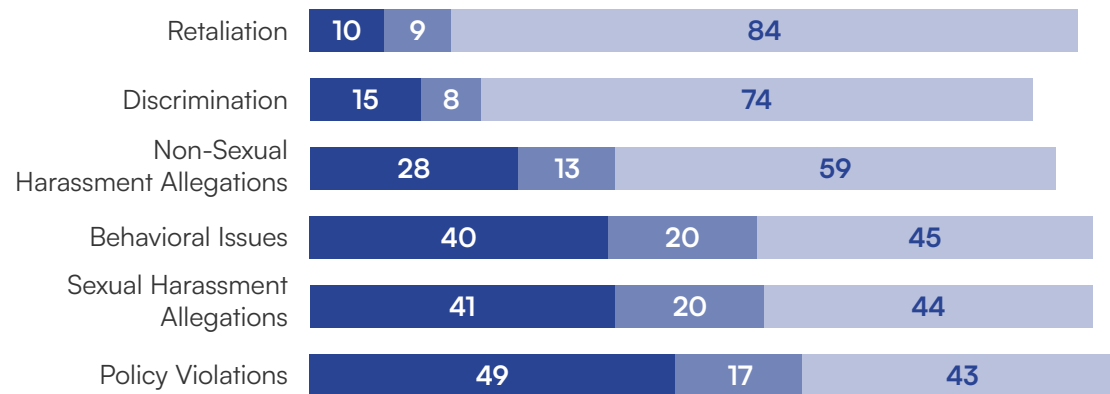
50%
GLOBAL 500

Substantiation by Issue Type

Issue-level substantiation data helps clarify risk.

Case disposition rates by issue type continue to show a large share of unsubstantiated outcomes across categories. Even when an issue is not substantiated, investigations may still identify concerns that warrant recommended follow-up actions such as training, coaching, communication or other steps to prevent recurrence.

Substantiation Rates by Issue Type, % of organizations*



*Totals may exceed 100% as issues can be substantiated with multiple findings.

- Substantiated based on legal definitions and/or organization's policies
- Substantiated with another finding*
- Unsubstantiated

How Case Data Guides Follow-Up

Retaliation Carries Distinct Risk

Retaliation claims often follow discrimination claims and require thorough evaluation whenever raised to avoid agency charges.

Action Beyond Findings

Even when an issue is unsubstantiated, coaching, training or other corrective steps may be appropriate.

Follow-Up Action

Training, coaching and communication help address concerns and reduce recurrence.



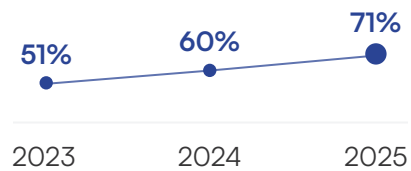
Takeaway: Looking beyond the finding helps leaders identify follow-up actions, address ongoing concerns and reduce the risk of issues recurring or escalating.

Predictive Analytics

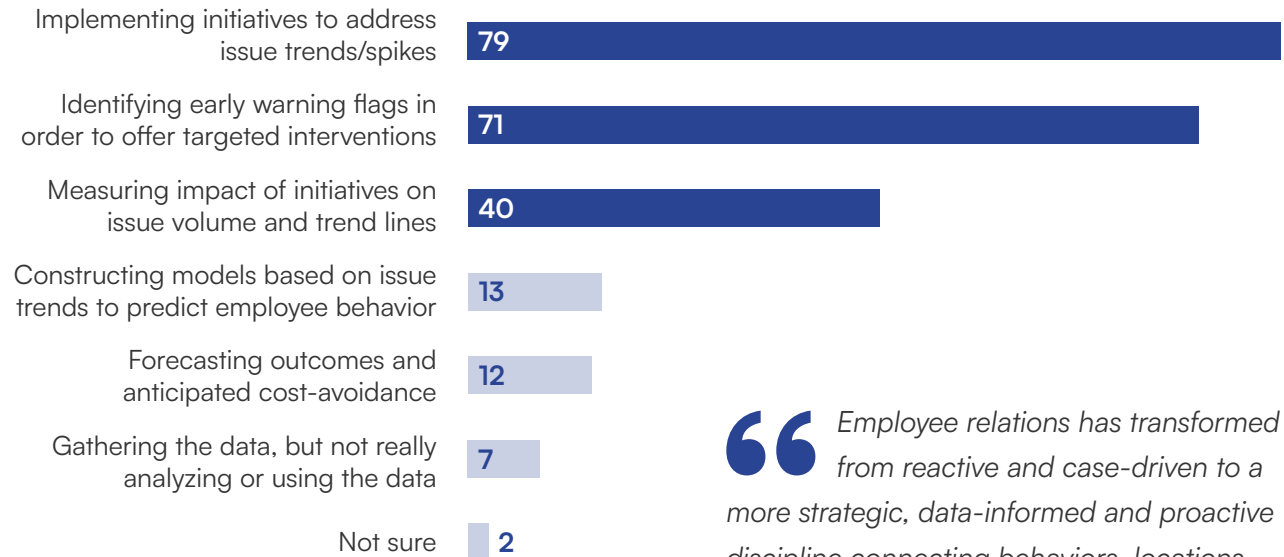
Early signals help teams act before issues escalate.

More organizations are using data to identify early-warning signs and proactively manage issue spikes and trends to protect workplace culture and course correct before issues escalate into legal risk.

Identifying Early Warning Flags



How Organizations Analyze Information to Minimize and Prevent Risk, % of organizations



Higher Use of Predictive Employee Relations Data

83%
FORTUNE 100

“Employee relations has transformed from reactive and case-driven to a more strategic, data-informed and proactive discipline connecting behaviors, locations, leadership practices and policy themes to anticipate issues and enable earlier intervention, more targeted leader coaching and preventative actions.”

—Employee Relations & Compliance Manager

Trusted Data *Strengthens* AI.

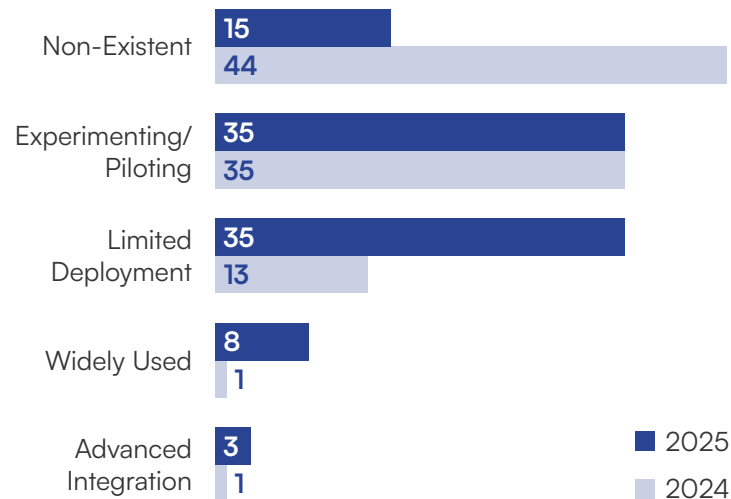
Better data gives employee relations leaders the evidence to identify patterns, guide action and demonstrate impact. As AI becomes part of the workflow, its value will depend on data quality, process discipline and human judgment.

AI in Employee Relations

AI adoption is accelerating across employee relations.

AI moved quickly into employee relations workflows in 2025, with most organizations experimenting with, piloting or using it for specific employee relations and investigation tasks. The shift is significant but still early. The Benchmark does not yet show a relationship between AI adoption and operational outcomes such as time-to-close. As employee relations teams evaluate where AI can support the work, its value will depend on disciplined use, clear governance, reliable data and the continued role of human judgment.

Approach to AI in Employee Relations, % of organizations



AI Adoption Outpaces AI Maturity

70%

of organizations are experimenting or in limited deployment with AI

11%

of organizations widely use or have integrated AI into employee relations processes



Takeaway: AI adoption is moving quickly, but its impact depends on how responsibly organizations manage the risk, governance and judgment required in sensitive employee relations work.

“We’re using AI to analyze data sets for trends buried in the narratives, not just the standard fields or issue categories.”

—Assistant Vice President, Global Employee Relations

The Impact of AI on Workflows & Efficiency

AI is reducing administrative burden and improving employee relations workflows.

Respondents often described AI as a practical tool for routine work such as summaries, note editing and drafting communications that reduce time spent on manual case documentation. The strongest examples show AI improving efficiency and access to information while organizations continue to limit use cases and maintain human review.



Takeaway: AI can reduce manual casework and improve workflow efficiency when organizations pair disciplined process with clear boundaries and reliable review.

“AI helps draft clearer communications and research complex compliance issues instantly.”

—Head of Global Employee Relations

“We are still in the early stages of adoption and optimization and are intentionally limiting use cases and maintaining human review to ensure accuracy, confidentiality, fairness and compliance with internal IT protocols.”

—Associate Relations

“AI has shifted investigators from manual processing to higher-value analysis and decision support.”

—Global Employee Relations Leader

The Impact of AI on Work Quality & Analysis

AI is helping employee relations teams produce stronger insights.

Some respondents said AI is helping their teams strengthen analysis, identify patterns earlier and translate complex data into more actionable insights. These examples show its potential to help employee relations teams see themes more clearly and act sooner.

“AI has enhanced our ability to recognize early indicators of emerging concerns, enabling proactive intervention rather than reactive response.”

—Employee Relations & Compliance Manager



Takeaway: AI is changing employee relations work and how employees raise concerns, but fair process, trusted data, thoughtful judgment and accountability for decisions remain essential.

AI-Assisted Issue Reporting

AI is changing how employees raise concerns. Employee use of AI is adding detail, volume and legal framing to complaints, increasing the investigative effort required to resolve issues defensibly.

“AI is being used by employees as well. As a result, we are seeing longer and more detailed complaints.”

—Senior Director, Global Employee Relations

“AI has allowed complaints to proliferate in a way we have not seen before.”

“Employees often create massive packets of evidence via AI generation.”

Adoption & Current Uses

AI use is concentrated in documentation and review tasks.

Employee relations and investigation teams most often use AI to draft investigation reports and summarize interview transcripts. These use cases can reduce administrative burden but also require careful human review, as AI-generated summaries can miss case evidence, credibility considerations, policy context and judgment that shape defensible investigations.

Top AI Uses in Employee Relations

46%

of organizations draft reports, findings or documentation, with human review

45%

of organizations summarize interview transcripts for case summaries

22%

of organizations identify gaps, recommend follow-up questions or additional witnesses



Pattern to Watch: Specialized AI uses are beginning to emerge. Beyond documentation and summaries, 21% or fewer use AI for trend analysis, transcription, translation, legal reference, case search, policy recommendations, automated coaching for managers or workflow support.



Takeaway: AI can support documentation and review, but employee relations teams need the time, judgment and safeguards to verify the details behind AI-generated outputs.

“ We only use AI to summarize interview notes, but that alone has saved a lot of time.”

—Employee Relations Director

AI Permissions & Governance

Confidential case data requires strong AI guardrails.

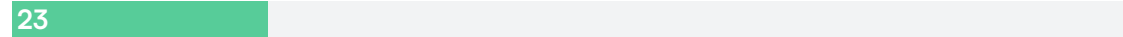
Most organizations limit employee relations or investigation information to approved internal tools or fully anonymized content. These boundaries reflect the sensitivity of case information and the need to protect confidentiality, fairness and compliance. Without clear guardrails, AI can introduce new risks into work that require discretion, neutrality and careful documentation, especially when AI-generated content becomes part of the case record.

Entering Employee Relations/Investigation Information into AI Tools, % of organizations

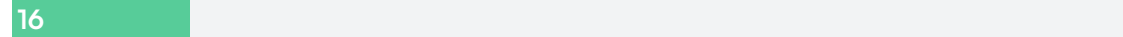
Only approved, secured tools for confidential case content



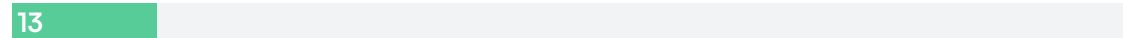
Only fully anonymized/redacted content



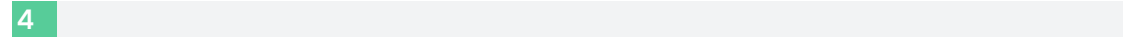
Not permitted at all for employee relations/investigation work



Not sure



Permitted in external AI tools under defined guidelines/controls



“ We are developing use case scenarios with built-in guardrails to ensure the team understands the appropriate ways to use AI and other in-house tools.”

—Employee Relations Senior Manager

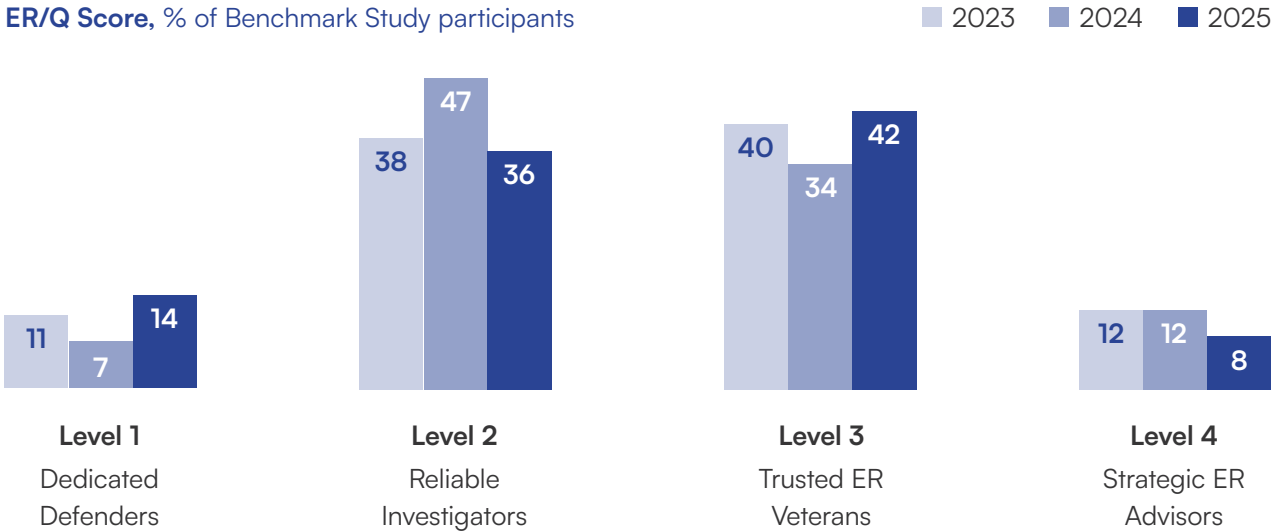
Effective AI Used Depends on Employee Relations' *Maturity.*

AI will only strengthen employee relations with clear governance, reliable data and disciplined review. Evaluating functional maturity helps leaders assess readiness to use new tools responsibly and improve outcomes.

ER/Q Maturity Model

Most organizations remain in the middle stages of employee relations maturity.

The ER/Q model helps organizations assess the current maturity of their employee relations function across its purpose, processes and organizational influence and provide insights to enhance impact. ER/Q scores for organizations that participated in the Benchmark Study show a consistent pattern year over year, with most organizations concentrated at Level 2 or Level 3.



What is ER/Q?

The employee relations maturity model provides a baseline and serves as a guide to help organizations uplevel their employee relations. The model offers simple, practical, actionable steps to improve employee experience, build transparency across the organization and further elevate the function.

To learn more about ER/Q or take the assessment, visit www.hracity.com/erq

Takeaway: Understanding ER/Q helps leaders identify where practices, processes, data and influence can be strengthened to support more consistent and strategic outcomes.



Correlation of ER/Q to Practices & Processes

Higher ER/Q correlates with more strategic use of employee relations data and analytics.

Organizations with a Level 3-4 ER/Q are more likely to use employee relations data across a broader set of actions and initiatives, including policy creation, identifying predictors of ER issues and developing initiatives to minimize risk and prevent future issues.

Employee relations data-related metrics	Level 1 or 2 ER/Q	Level 3 or 4 ER/Q
Use an employee relations tech platform to track issues and investigations	74%	70%
Use data to...		
Develop data-driven employee insights	56%	77%
Create better employee relations policies	33%	47%
Identify at-risk populations	33%	53%
Identify potential issues related to inclusion and equity	23%	37%
Implement initiatives to address trends, issue spikes	68%	82%
Identify early-warning flags, offer targeted early interventions	63%	86%
Measure the impact of initiatives on issue volume, trend	26%	55%

Maturity Turns Employee Relations Data Into *Impact.*

As volume, complexity and AI reshape the function, higher ER/Q maturity helps organizations turn employee relations data, processes and influence into earlier risk visibility, stronger decisions and more trusted workplaces.



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, defensible AI, 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.

Welcome to the *next generation* of employee relations.

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The Benchmark Study shows what's possible. HR Acuity helps you get there.

Book a demo with us.

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