

Workplace Conflict: Who, Where, When and Why?

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades there has been a radical shift in the regulatory framework dealing with formal manifestations of workplace conflict in the UK. Legal structures that supported collective industrial action have been weakened and replaced with a system that allows individuals to pursue enforcement of employment rights through litigation, via Employment Tribunals (ETs). Current debate often focuses on the costs of the ET system for the workers involved, in particular its implications for business performance and public expenditure (De Dreu, 2008; OPP, 2008; CIPD, 2011; Gallie et al., 2013; Mangan, 2013). Policymakers and academics consistently ask how we can best manage workplace conflict in order to prevent escalation to the ET process, and this area has accordingly seen various policy changes to rectify perceived problems following the publication of the Gibbons Report in 2007.

To move this debate forward, a large gap in the evidence base needs to be filled. Concentration on formal manifestations of conflict at the point of entry into the ET system means that, in any one year, we are considering the issues of only approximately 1 per cent of those in employment¹. Within each UK workplace there is a continual process of conflict ‘bubbling up’ – some of which arises as part of the natural process of problem solving and decision-making – and this is either resolved informally or not. A minority of these conflicts escalate to more formal workplace-based resolution structures, and it is only when both these informal and formal workplace processes fail, that we potentially observe an ET case.

Whilst there is a reasonable understanding in the academic and policy literatures of the extent of formal mechanisms for handling workplace conflict and also the pattern of visible employment disputes (for instance, Knight and Latreille, 2000; Saridakis et al., 2008; Saundry and Antcliff, 2009; Wood et al., 2014), we know relatively little about the extent and nature of less formal manifestations of workplace conflict (but see Wood et al., 2014). This is particularly the case in smaller organisations and the majority of British workplaces in which there are no established mechanisms of employee representation, notwithstanding their prevalence at ETs (Saridakis et al., 2008).

It is too early to gauge the impact of recent policy developments, such as the introduction of fees and changes to the role of Acas in ETs, but Mike Emmott in a CIPD blog suggests, “there is some indication that early conciliation is opening up more

¹ Figures from *Understanding Society*, in Buscha, F., Latreille, P. and Urwin, P. (2013), *Charging Fees in Employment Tribunals*, Commissioned by the Trades Union Congress.

opportunities for Acas to support employers in developing better employee relations”². Organisations can benefit from development of effective conflict resolution practices and robust cultures in which it is easier to challenge and hold people to account without undue risk that it escalates into conflict and ultimately a formal dispute – the notion of ‘conflict competence’ (see Runde and Flanagan, 2007). Existing research suggests that the two can be interrelated, with signs that the introduction of workplace mediation can contribute to a healthier organisational culture (Saundry and Wibberley 2012). Nonetheless, to achieve these aims, there is a need to understand the dynamics of workplace conflict more fully, including when it is low-level and not formalised.

Research into mediation has shed light on the workings of workplace conflict that does not reach employment tribunals. However, it is argued that mediation often enters the frame ‘too late’ (Latreille, 2011; Wood et al., 2014; Saundry and Wibberley, 2014), as it is seen as most effective when deployed at an earlier stage in the development of a dispute [before parties become entrenched in their positions]. It is often used to mitigate the fallout from a dispute (for example, by ending the employment relationship in a relatively peaceful way or avoiding an ET), rather than to repair or maintain relationships at an earlier stage (Lewis, 2015). Thus, a fuller understanding of workplace conflict needs to look beyond that which is referred to mediation.

Lower-level problems at work are included in research conducted by Fevre et al (2012), but this too differs from the current analysis in that it focuses squarely on problematic behaviour; in other words, how employees have been affected by perceived unfair treatment, such as unreasonable management, rather than on conflict and disputes. The main focus of this paper relates to ‘individual’ conflict in one-to-one relationships, although in some cases conflict between two colleagues may spread to, or even be inseparable from, conflict within a wider team. The key difference is that we are not concerned with ‘collective’ or ‘industrial’ disputes focused on the interests of wider groups of employees. Instead, we focus on problems located in specific relationships and the impact of these on individual employees.

The concept of relationship conflict describes interpersonal friction borne of annoyance or frustration (Jehn and Mannix, 2001). This often relates to, but can be distinguished from, task or process conflict, the overlapping concepts rooted respectively in a clash of views on what should be done or in how it should be achieved (Behfar et al 2011). Further, we distinguish between, on the one hand, *isolated disputes and incidents of conflict* and, on the other hand, *ongoing difficult relationships* that may include simmering tensions and less overt behaviour that is nonetheless felt to be disrespectful,

² http://www.cipd.co.uk/blogs/cipdbloggers/b/policy_at_work/archive/2014/11/13/dispute-resolution-employment-tribunals-and-early-conciliation-a-brave-new-world-for-conflict-management.aspx

threatening or otherwise unfair. We also include an analysis of the nature of the relationships in conflict, in particular the power dynamics due to whether they are management or colleague relationships.

The chapter contributes to this area of individual, relationship-based conflict through empirical analysis of data from a representative survey of 2,195 UK employees. The self-completion questionnaire covered a range of questions on the nature of workplace conflict experienced in the previous 12 months, the impacts it had, how individuals responded and how well it had been resolved to date.

Following this introduction, we give a short overview of the extent of conflict uncovered by the survey. We then present the results of multivariate analyses to look in turn at: in which types of organisation and groups of employees conflict is most common; organisational and relationship factors related to how well conflict is resolved; the association between different approaches to resolving conflict and how fully it is resolved; and factors relating to the seriousness of the impact of conflict.

2. How commonplace is workplace conflict?

The survey found that 38 per cent of UK employees reported some form of interpersonal conflict at work in the last year. This includes 29 per cent reporting at least one case of an *isolated dispute or incident of conflict* and a similar proportion, 28 per cent reporting at least one *ongoing difficult relationship*. Relatively small numbers reported more than one case of either type (7 per cent and 5 per cent respectively).

The survey also asked employees about their perceptions of how common conflict is in their organisations. We find a general tendency to think it is not commonplace (48 per cent) but it is nonetheless significant that one in four employees (26 per cent) considers conflict *a common occurrence* in their organisation. This should also be seen in the context of recent data, that identifies a rise in both workplace conflict (CIPD 2011) and fear of discrimination or victimisation (Gallie et. al., 2013; Saundry et. al., 2014).

Some descriptive findings based on these data have already appeared in a CIPD Report³ and in this chapter we present findings from a number of descriptive multivariate regression models, to identify the characteristics of firms and individuals that are most closely associated with conflict, its level of seriousness and its resolution, having controlled for a number of other potential differences/drivers.

³ CIPD (2015), “Getting under the skin of workplace conflict: Tracing the experiences of employees”, Survey Report, April. London: CIPD

3. Experiencing Conflict and Dispute

Table 1 sets out the results of a binomial logit regression equation, modelling those factors that are associated with the reporting of an ‘isolated dispute or incident of conflict’ in the previous 12 months (31 per cent of the estimation sample). We wish to attempt some form of multivariate analysis, as it provides clarity on the relative importance of key workplace and individual characteristics. For instance, in the CIPD (2015) *Survey Report* there is some suggestion that employees are more likely to report conflict if they work in public sector organisations, and also if they work in larger organisations. It is possible that a large component of the public/private difference is driven by the ‘overlapping’ issue of large firm/small firm difference – public sector employees are invariably working in ‘large’ firms. The use of a multivariate regression approach allows us some insight into whether these findings are driven by the public/private differential, or the large/small firm split, or possibly both.

Considering the findings from Table 1, relating to an ‘isolated dispute or incidence of conflict’, there is no statistically significant difference between the likelihood that this will be reported in firms of different sizes; none of the coefficient estimates are significantly different from zero⁴. There is no correlation between firm size and the extent to which individuals report an isolated dispute, but we do find that this form of conflict is more likely to be reported in voluntary organisations, when compared to private sector organisations (the reference category). In contrast, there is no significant public-private sector difference in reporting of this type of conflict.

There is similarly no apparent gender split that is significant, and the region of an individuals’ place of work does not seem to exert a separate impact on whether we observe isolated incidences of conflict being reported, although it is worth noting that being from the ‘South’ has an almost significant (at the 10 per cent level) negative impact, compared to being from the North. This may reflect recent economic history, where firms in the south have generally faced more favourable market conditions and we might expect such environments to be associated with lower levels of isolated conflict.

It is interesting that, relative to our youngest age group [of those aged 24 or less], those aged between 35 and 44 are significantly more likely to report an isolated dispute, whilst older age groups [aged 45+] are no more or less likely to report conflict, than their

⁴ This chapter is for a non-specialist audience, so we attempt to avoid technical language. When we speak of a ‘statistically insignificant’ impact, we refer to the situation where we are unable to reject the null hypothesis of parameter insignificance. When we suggest a ‘statistically significant’ impact, we refer to the situation where we are able to reject the null hypothesis of parameter insignificance – in both cases we use language that is more accessible to non-technical readers.

youngest colleagues. This suggests that the relationship between age and reporting of isolated conflict is ‘non-linear’, as it seems most likely amongst those in the middle of the age distribution. *Skilled/Semi-skilled/Unskilled manual workers and Casual workers* (C2DE) are more likely to report isolated conflict, than those from *Higher/Intermediate/Junior managerial, administrative, professional or supervisory occupations* (ABC1), although this is a finding that is only weakly significant (at the 10 per cent level). There is no additional significance of earnings above and beyond the impact of social class. However, those with longer tenure (over 2 years with their current employer) are more likely to have experienced an isolated instance of conflict during the preceding 12 months.

Table 2 sets out the results of a standard binomial logit regression equation, modelling those factors that are associated with the reporting of an ‘ongoing difficult relationship’. Some 30 per cent of the estimation sample report such a relationship. We have some findings that are similar to those identified in Table 1, when we considered the factors associated with isolated disputes, but also some quite interesting differences. For instance, in Table 2 there is once again no significant impact of gender or pre-tax pay and most of our regional dummies are again insignificant. However, in contrast to our consideration of isolated disputes where the private/public split had no impact, we find that ongoing difficult relationships are significantly more likely (at the 5 per cent level) to be reported in public, as opposed to private, workplaces. A significant impact of the voluntary sector also remains, with reporting of ongoing difficult relationships much more likely in these sorts of workplaces. Part of the explanation for this finding, and particularly in the public sector, may be the impact of ongoing intensification of work arising from austerity measures by the Coalition government; such pressure is likely to bring employees into conflict and exacerbate existing inter-personal strains and tensions (Latreille and Saundry, 2015; CIPD, 2012).

In contrast to Table 1, we also now find that those in medium sized firms are significantly more likely to report ongoing difficult relationships when compared with those in micro-businesses. When considering the existence of ongoing difficult relationships, it would therefore seem that we have both a public-private split and a firm size effect. Also, while most of the regional dummies remain insignificant, it is interesting that those working in Wales are more likely than workers in the North to report an ongoing difficult relationship – a difference that is not apparent in any other region of the country.

Table 1: Binomial logit, modelling characteristics associated with reporting of 'Isolated dispute or incident of conflict' [=1]

	Coef.	Std. Err	t	P>t
<i>Reference: Micro business (2 to 9 employees)</i>				
Small (10 to 49 employees)	0.184	0.246	0.75	0.454
Medium (50 to 249)	0.184	0.234	0.78	0.433
Large (250+)	0.206	0.201	1.03	0.305
<i>Ref: Private sector</i>				
Public	0.181	0.146	1.24	0.215
Voluntary	0.854	0.259	3.29	0.001
<i>Reference: Male</i>				
Female	-0.158	0.126	-1.25	0.210
<i>Reference: North</i>				
Midlands	-0.201	0.200	-1.01	0.313
East	-0.010	0.224	-0.04	0.965
London	-0.053	0.217	-0.25	0.805
South	-0.248	0.169	-1.47	0.142
Wales	0.282	0.292	0.97	0.334
Scotland	0.006	0.216	0.03	0.978
Northern Ireland	-0.098	0.568	-0.17	0.863
<i>Reference: Aged <= 24</i>				
25-34	0.544	0.455	1.20	0.231
35-44	0.641	0.453	1.42	0.157
45-54	0.381	0.451	0.84	0.398
55+	0.174	0.453	0.38	0.701
<i>Reference: Social Class</i>				
<i>ABCI</i>				
C2DE	0.250	0.135	1.85	0.064
<i>Reference: Before tax pay is <£15,000</i>				
£15000 to £24999	-0.023	0.171	-0.14	0.892
£25000 to £34999	0.020	0.192	0.10	0.917
£35000 to £44999	0.001	0.226	0.00	0.998
£45000 to £59999	-0.151	0.268	-0.56	0.572
£60000 or more	0.219	0.248	0.88	0.376

<i>Reference: Length of time with current employer is <= 2 years</i>				
> 2 years	0.493	0.178	2.78	0.005
Constant	-1.788	0.500	-3.58	0.000

Finally, in contrast to the findings of Table 1, Table 2 suggests no significant difference in the probability that an individual will report a difficult relationship amongst different age groups or when we consider those from different social backgrounds. In the CIPD Survey Report there is a suggestion that these two types of conflict are quite ‘distinct’ in people’s minds, as there is relatively little overlap between the two, with most employees identifying either one or the other for specific people. For instance, focusing on conflict with colleagues in one’s team, fewer than one in three respondents (28 per cent) report both an incident of conflict and an ongoing difficult relationship, with the clear majority reporting just the former (31 per cent) or the latter (41 per cent). The suggestion from Tables 1 and 2 is that there are different factors associated with the two types of conflict, and this lends some support to this suggestion.

Table 2: Binomial logit, modelling characteristics associated with reporting of 'ongoing difficult relationship' [=1]

	Coef.	Std. Err	t	P>t
<i>Reference: Micro business (2 to 9 employees)</i>				
Small (10 to 49 employees)	0.345	0.250	1.38	0.168
Medium (50 to 249)	0.430	0.238	1.81	0.070
Large (250+)	0.198	0.208	0.95	0.342
<i>Ref: Private sector</i>				
Public	0.308	0.147	2.10	0.036
Voluntary	0.703	0.261	2.69	0.007
<i>Reference: Male</i>				
Female	0.159	0.127	1.25	0.211
<i>Reference: North</i>				
Midlands	0.046	0.201	0.23	0.818
East	0.150	0.225	0.67	0.506
London	-0.008	0.219	-0.04	0.970
South	-0.129	0.172	-0.75	0.453
Wales	0.562	0.292	1.93	0.054
Scotland	-0.169	0.227	-0.74	0.457
Northern Ireland	0.400	0.548	0.73	0.466

Reference: Aged <= 24

25-34	0.144	0.408	0.35	0.724
35-44	0.125	0.407	0.31	0.759
45-54	0.011	0.405	0.03	0.979
55+	-0.245	0.408	-0.60	0.547

Reference: Social Class ABC1

C2DE	0.149	0.138	1.08	0.280
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Reference: Before tax pay is <£15,000

£15000 to £24999	0.052	0.174	0.30	0.764
£25000 to £34999	0.167	0.195	0.86	0.392
£35000 to £44999	0.221	0.228	0.97	0.332
£45000 to £59999	0.158	0.267	0.59	0.555
£60000 or more	0.264	0.255	1.03	0.301

Reference: Length of time with current employer is <= 2 years

> 2 years	0.426	0.177	2.41	0.016
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Constant	-1.773	0.465	-3.82	0.000
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4. Resolving Conflict and Disputes

Of the total respondents to the survey, 750 reported one or other of the two forms of conflict considered separately in the previous section. Table 3 focuses only on these respondents (n=683 due to missing data on items used in the estimated model) and identifies the factors that are most closely associated with reporting that the issue has been ‘fully’ or ‘largely’ resolved.⁵ Interestingly, fewer than four in ten (38 per cent) reported the conflict had generally been resolved, suggesting that significant numbers of workers are coping with unsatisfactory workplace relationships or unresolved incidents.⁶

As we can see from Table 3, whilst the previous analysis suggested that the reporting of conflict has a significant association with firm/workplace size, there is no difference in the reporting of *resolution* across firms of different sizes. Similarly, there are no

⁵ The question of resolution necessitates a focus on a specific case of conflict. Thus, for the minority who reported more than one case of conflict in the previous year, each respondent was asked to identify ‘the most serious problem (e.g. with the greatest consequences for those affected or the organisation)’ and to focus on this case for these questions.

⁶ Specific figures are: 17% of employees indicated that the conflict was ‘fully resolved’, 21% ‘largely but not fully resolved’, 19% ‘partly resolved’, 22% ‘mainly not resolved’ and 20% ‘not at all resolved’ (n=750).

significant differences in perceived resolution rates across firms in the public, private or voluntary sectors.

Table 3: Binomial logit, modelling characteristics associated with reporting of whether [most serious] dispute ['Fully' or 'Largely'] resolved [=1]

	Coef.	Std. Err	t	P>t
<i>Reference: Micro business (2 to 9 employees)</i>				
Small (10 to 49 employees)	-0.373	0.375	-1.00	0.320
Medium (50 to 249)	-0.073	0.353	-0.21	0.837
Large (250+)	-0.317	0.311	-1.02	0.309
<i>Ref: Private sector</i>				
Public	-0.207	0.218	-0.95	0.342
Voluntary	-0.274	0.361	-0.76	0.448
<i>Reference: Line management relationship, 'Someone I report to'</i>				
They report to me (directly or indirectly)	0.551	0.303	1.82	0.069
Colleague	0.311	0.216	1.44	0.150
Somebody external to organisation	0.879	0.263	3.35	0.001
<i>Reference: Length of time with current employer is <= 2 years</i>				
> 2 years	-0.074	0.256	-0.29	0.774
<i>Reference: Reporting of ongoing difficult relationship</i>				
Reporting of isolated dispute	1.380	0.252	5.48	0.000
Reporting of both	0.069	0.218	0.32	0.751
<i>Reference: Action taken to resolve is 'Do nothing'</i>				
Informal action taken to resolve [#]	0.759	0.219	3.47	0.001
Mediation to resolve dispute	2.069	0.663	3.12	0.002
Formal approach to resolution ^{##}	1.645	0.381	4.32	0.000
Left the enterprise	-0.356	0.350	-1.02	0.309
Constant	-1.361	0.425	-3.20	0.001

Notes: # Informal action includes (i) informal discussion with the other person; (ii) discussion with my manager and/or HR; (iii) discussion with an employee representative or union official; (iv) discussion with someone outside of work (e.g. family, friend). ## Formal approach to resolution includes (i) formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedure; (ii) filed an Employment Tribunal claim; (iii) mediation.

However, having controlled for these factors, it is clear from Table 3 that those reporting conflict with their boss are the least likely to suggest that it has been fully or largely

resolved; when compared to conflict that arises between colleagues of a similar grade or somebody outside the organisation. The fact that those who are managers (i.e. ‘they report to me’) are significantly more likely to say that the dispute has been resolved, identifies an asymmetry in the perceptions of managers and their subordinates. Some form of conflict with a manager is less likely to be resolved satisfactorily in a reporting employee’s eyes, but the manager is more likely to feel that it has been resolved.

An important feature of the data is that the type of dispute matters. As might be expected *a priori*, isolated incidents generally appear more amenable to resolution than those which involve ongoing difficult relationships. The latter are more long-standing and clearly represent problems that are more deep-seated and difficult to resolve. Crucially, there is also a clear indication from the data that doing so requires action to be taken in response to the situation.

One response is simply to leave the organisation (an option exercised by around one in seven of those experiencing conflict - 14 per cent of the estimation sample in Table 4). Statistically this is no different in terms of resolution outturns than taking no action (around a quarter of the estimation sample), and essentially constitutes an avoidance approach. Conversely, disputes were more likely to be reported by participants as fully, or at least partly, resolved following informal responses such as discussion with the other party; or with other organisational agents such as their manager, HR, an employee representative or union official; or indeed with someone outside of work (e.g. family, friend). Strikingly, around half of respondents experiencing conflict selected this as their most serious response to the issue (52 per cent of the estimation sample in Table 4).

Disputes were also more likely to be resolved for those pursuing mediation, as well as for more formal approaches to resolution including instigation of a grievance, discipline or complaints procedure or an ET claim. However, it should be noted that mediation was a very infrequent response (fewer than two per cent of those experiencing conflict) - in contrast to popular discourses around the willingness of workers to pursue formal processes – and so too were formal procedures (pursued by fewer than seven per cent of those experiencing problems).

Table 4 next looks at the extent to which individuals who reported some form of conflict suffered the ‘most serious’ of impacts from the dispute. Here we are a little constrained by considerations of method, in the way we approach the issue. Of the 750 who report some form of dispute and/or on-going difficult relationship, 65% suggest one or more of the following as the most significant impact arising from the dispute:

- The experience has been (a) stressful and their motivation or commitment has fallen; (b) it has resulted in unworkable relationships; or (c) sickness absence.

However, we then have 14% of the 750 reporting that one or more of the following is the most serious consequence of the dispute:

- It (d) necessitated a change in job role; (e) meant that the individual resigned from the job; (f) resulted in formal disciplinary procedures; (g) dismissal or (h) a legal dispute.

Unfortunately, if we estimate a model with *(a) through to (h)* recorded as ‘serious’, then we will have only just over 20% in our group who report none of the ‘serious’ impacts - in contrast, only considering *(d) to (h)* as ‘most serious’, leaves us with 14% in this category. Either approach is not particularly desirable, because we have such an imbalance between the size of our two dependent categories. Therefore, we adopt a [slightly more desirable] compromise, with *(b) through to (h)* constituting our ‘most serious’ category of impact, and those reporting stress and/or a drop in motivation or commitment, counted in the less serious category – leaving us with a category of ‘most serious’ that is 30% of the total.

Once again, we find little impact for either firm size or our public/private/voluntary split. However, it is worth noting that individuals in our largest category of enterprise (250+) are almost statistically significantly more likely to report the most serious consequences, when compared to those in micro-businesses. Also, we find that those with longer tenure are significantly less likely to suffer serious impacts and the same is also true for those who report a dispute with somebody external to the organisation. It is perhaps encouraging to note that line managers of those who are the subject of dispute are no less likely to report serious consequences of the dispute, compared to those who are line managed by the individual who was the subject of dispute. However, as we have already seen, there seems to be a difference in the perceived extent to which such disputes (serious or otherwise) have been satisfactorily resolved.

Table 4 also includes variables reflecting the nature of the dispute (ongoing problematic relationships; or one-off incidents; or both). Those who report both an ongoing difficult relationship and an isolated dispute are significantly more likely to report that this resulted in the most serious of consequences.

Finally, Table 5 reports on those factors associated with whether the route chosen to dispute resolution is either ‘formal’ or ‘informal’ (22 per cent and 78 per cent respectively). Formal approaches to resolution include ‘formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedure’ (reported in 9% of cases; n=750 in the whole sample); ‘filed an Employment Tribunal claim’ (<1% of cases); and ‘mediation’ (2% of cases). Informal responses include ‘informal discussion with the other person’ (26% of cases); ‘discussion with my manager and/or HR’ (37% of cases); ‘discussion with an employee representative or union official’ (8% of cases); and ‘discussion with someone outside of

work such as a member of family or friend' (23% of cases). While generally regarded as an informal method of dispute resolution, mediation is included in the former category given the highly structured (or even choreographed) approach as practised in the UK (Latreille, 2011) - at least relative to more general, unscheduled and unstructured discussions with other actors.

Most of the standard demographics (organisational size, sector, region, age group, gender, social class and income) appear uncorrelated with the choice. Three exceptions are (i) the length of time an individual has worked for the organisation, with those of longer tenure being less likely to pursue formal processes; (ii) those with before tax pay between £15,000 and £24,999, who are slightly more likely to pursue formal processes than those in the lowest pay band; and (iii) individuals in Wales, who are less likely to pursue formal action than those in the North of England.

Most of the key drivers of this choice appear to revolve around the dispute itself. Thus, whilst there is no difference in the choice of formal versus informal processes according to whether the problem relates to ongoing relationship problems or a specific incident/dispute, more formal approaches are significantly more likely where both are involved. Perhaps unsurprisingly, more formal measures are also more likely where the dispute is regarded as 'most serious' in its impact.

Table 4: Binomial logit, modelling characteristics associated with reporting of whether a dispute is associated with our 'Most Serious'[#] category of impacts [=1]

	Coef.	Std. Err	t	P>t
<i>Reference: Micro business (2 to 9 employees)</i>				
Small (10 to 49 employees)	0.455	0.435	1.05	0.296
Medium (50 to 249)	0.517	0.419	1.24	0.217
Large (250+)	0.621	0.378	1.64	0.101
<i>Ref: Private sector</i>				
Public	0.025	0.221	0.11	0.911
Voluntary	-0.271	0.383	-0.71	0.479
<i>Reference: line management relationship, 'Someone I report to'</i>				
They report to me (directly or indirectly)	0.131	0.301	0.43	0.664
Colleague	-0.019	0.218	-0.09	0.930
Somebody external to organisation	-1.131	0.346	-3.27	0.001

Reference: Length of time with current employer is <= 2 years

> 2 years	-0.669	0.257	-2.6	0.009
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Reference: Reporting of ongoing difficult relationship

Reporting of isolated dispute	-0.310	0.297	-1.04	0.296
Reporting of both	0.664	0.224	2.96	0.003

Constant	-1.652	0.484	-3.41	0.001
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Notes: # Dispute has resulted in one or more of the following, as the most serious impact: (b) unworkable relationships; (c) sickness absence; (d) necessitated a change in job role; (e) meant that the individual resigned from the job; (f) resulted in formal disciplinary procedures; (g) dismissal or (h) a legal dispute.

Table 5: Binomial logit, modelling characteristics associated with whether take 'Formal' [=1] or 'Informal' [=0] action to resolve#

	Coef.	Std. Err	t	P>t
<i>Reference: Micro business (2 to 9 employees)</i>				
Small (10 to 49 employees)	-0.005	0.550	-0.01	0.993
Medium (50 to 249)	0.166	0.497	0.33	0.738
Large (250+)	0.230	0.448	0.51	0.607
<i>Ref: Private sector</i>				
Public	0.410	0.294	1.4	0.162
Voluntary	0.479	0.488	0.98	0.326
<i>Reference: Male</i>				
Female	-0.344	0.251	-1.37	0.171
<i>Reference: North</i>				
Midlands	0.180	0.406	0.44	0.657
East	0.040	0.446	0.09	0.928
London	-0.256	0.450	-0.57	0.569
South	0.231	0.348	0.66	0.506
Wales	-2.504	1.077	-2.32	0.020
Scotland	0.091	0.433	0.21	0.834
Northern Ireland	0.347	0.972	0.36	0.721
<i>Reference: Aged <= 24</i>				
25-34	1.015	0.907	1.12	0.263
35-44	0.854	0.904	0.94	0.345
45-54	1.113	0.909	1.22	0.221
55+	0.582	0.915	0.64	0.524

Reference: Social Class ABC1

C2DE	0.107	0.285	0.38	0.707
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*Reference: Before tax pay is
<£15,000*

£15000 to £24999	0.647	0.361	1.79	0.073
£25000 to £34999	-0.071	0.407	-0.17	0.861
£35000 to £44999	0.082	0.472	0.17	0.862
£45000 to £59999	-0.097	0.588	-0.17	0.869
£60000 or more	0.286	0.501	0.57	0.568

Reference: Length of time with current employer is <= 2 years

> 2 years	-0.899	0.344	-2.61	0.009
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Reference: Reporting of ongoing difficult relationship

Reporting of isolated dispute	0.229	0.364	0.63	0.529
Reporting of both	0.655	0.313	2.09	0.037

Reference: Dispute Less Serious

Most Serious category of dispute	1.090	0.249	4.38	0.000
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Constant	-2.571	1.043	-2.46	0.014
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Notes: # 'Formal' and 'informal' defined as in Figure 3, with mediation included in the former.

5. Emerging Conclusions

In the wake of the Gibbons Review of the UK system of dispute resolution (Gibbons, 2007), public policy has emphasised the need for early and informal interventions to resolve disputes. This was particularly evident among small employers for whom the emphasis on formality and written communication was seen as ‘counter-cultural’ (Gibbons, 2007). Consequently, the Employment Act 2008 abolished the statutory requirement to use statutory disputes procedures and provided for a shorter and less prescriptive Acas Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures.

Despite this, evidence suggests a continued formalisation of workplace procedures (Wood et al., 2014) alongside inflated perceptions by employers of the regulatory burden and consequent threat of employment litigation (Jordan et al., 2013). In order to avoid legal action, employers are often reluctant to adopt common sense, informal approaches, as this is seen as risky and leaves them less well-protected in the event of a claim (Jones and Saundry, 2012). As a result, many employers adopt risk-averse strategies, arguing that the costs regime encourages weak, speculative claims that they are forced to settle to

minimise expenditure on legal advice, representation and the cost of management time (British Chambers of Commerce, 2011; CBI, 2011). Similarly, they argue that the complexity of the legislative framework and fear of litigation discourages them from taking on new employees. This is partly what lies behind the drive to introduce fees in the face of ‘frivolous’ claims (see Mangan, 2013).

This chapter goes some way to illuminate a starting point for the consideration of dispute and its resolution, whether or not it is formalised. One thing we need to keep in mind when considering a broader definition of conflict, is that it is quite possible that what constitutes a dispute is different in different settings. For instance, we need to remember that what constitutes conflict in the public sector, may be different to that in the private sector; and some of our results could be driven by a greater willingness, for instance amongst public sector employees, to report (what they consider to be) conflict. When considering only those types of conflict that are formalised, there tends to be less potential for this, as we are only picking up those disputes that ‘fit’ within certain jurisdictions. Also, we must remember that the multivariate analysis undertaken here does not isolate the causes of conflict, but rather those factors which are associated with higher or lower levels of conflict, and its resolution (i.e. they are correlates).

With these caveats in mind, we uncover some interesting differences in the correlates of conflict. Firstly, there seems to be some confirmation of a more general finding in the literature, which considers more formal manifestations of conflict in firms of different sizes. There is a raft of evidence that smaller firms have less formal procedures for managing conflict, and this reflects an approach to employment relations that (necessarily) tends to be less formal (see for instance, Urwin et. al. 2011; 2012), when compared to larger firms. However, there is also evidence (for instance, Forth, Bewley and Bryson, 2006) that employment relations in small firms are less conflictual. For instance, 67 per cent of employees in the SME sector ‘strongly agree’ that managers treat them fairly, compared to just 53 per cent of those in large firms (ibid.).

This may suggest that smaller workplaces or organisations provide more conducive environments in which managers can respond to employee concerns. Smaller businesses are less likely to levy serious sanctions such as dismissal than larger organisations (Forth et al., 2006). This may point to a greater willingness to resolve issues informally, something that is perhaps supported by the personal, sometimes familial and less formal nature of employment relations in small organisations in general (Edwards et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2008). We find that there is no firm-size effect when considering isolated disputes, but we do find that employees in medium-sized firms are more likely (though only at the 10 per cent level of significance) to report an on-going difficult relationship. Similarly, whilst there seems no difference in the reporting of isolated disputes in public

and private sector organisations, those in the public sector are significantly more likely to report a difficult relationship, when compared to those in the private sector. Overall we have some support for the suggestion that it is not just in the formal manifestations of conflict that we see a small-firm / large firm difference, but this is also evident when we consider the wider issue of on-going difficult relationships (whether or not they are formalised). The extent to which these are subsequently resolved does not seem significantly different in larger and smaller organisations.

It is possible that the reporting of isolated disputes is picking up a greater proportion of incidents that arise as a result of the financial situation of the firm, or wider economic environment (when compared to the reporting of on-going difficult relationships). However, one of the few significant patterns we have in this study when considering isolated disputes, is the greater likelihood that these will be reported by employees who are often referred to as ‘prime aged’ (some are a little young to be referred to as, ‘middle aged’). It would be unusual if this pattern were driven by issues of, for instance, downsizing, as it is still the case that younger workers tend to bear the brunt of labour force reductions (though they are also subsequently more likely to regain employment, when compared to older workers).

We also find that the likelihood of experiencing conflict decreases with tenure (specifically, as employment passes the two-year mark). Whilst the 2008 Survey of Employment Tribunal Applications found that employment tribunals are more prevalent among longer-serving employees, with a median length of service of 3 years (Lucy and Broughton, 2011) our finding is in line with the 2008 Fair Treatment at Work Survey (FTW), which found that problems in the workplace were more likely among newer employees with up to one year’s length of service (Fevre et al., 2009). The key difference here relates to the seriousness of the conflict, with both the current survey and FTW focusing on a wider range of conflict, including lower-level disputes and few cases that reach the point of a tribunal application. One likely explanation for this negative effect of tenure on experiences of workplace conflict is that, as employees get to know their organisations and colleagues better, they are better placed to navigate the dominant social structures; in particular, they know who to talk to and how to get issues resolved informally. It may also be that, as the employment relationship becomes more established, cases of conflict are more likely to be seen ‘in the grand scheme of things’ as relatively less important.

Our data also point strongly to the necessity of responding to conflict if it is to be resolved. One response – albeit essentially avoidance – is for an individual to leave the organisation. This involves significant (transaction) costs for both the individual and employer, the latter especially in relation to recruitment and selection, but also where

idiosyncratic skills/knowledge mean new recruits are less productive than experienced staff as they learn their role.

Finally, as we suggest in the analysis undertaken towards the end of this chapter, there is some indication that those who line-manage individuals are more likely to feel that a particular dispute has been satisfactorily resolved – but those who are subordinate in this relationship are less likely to feel that this is the case. This provides a clear lesson for some line-managers, who perhaps need to be aware that their perceptions are not necessarily aligned with those of their subordinates. Thankfully, the extent to which any such disputes result in serious impacts seems not to differ significantly between line managers and those who are managed.

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