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## **Conflict Management as Line Management: HR Managers in Non-Union Firms**

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*Innovations in Conflict Management*

*Research Papers*

**Research Paper 6**

**Conflict Management as Line Management: HR  
Managers in Non-Union Firms**

**Paul Teague,  
Queen's University Belfast**

**William K. Roche,  
University College Dublin**

**Tom Gormley,  
University College Dublin**

**Denise Currie,  
Queen's University Belfast**

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## Introduction

This paper examines the views and experiences of HR managers working in non-union firms. HR managers in these organizations are widely seen as facing a different set of conflict management challenges to those experienced by their counterparts in unionized firms. First, many non-union firms, particularly large multinationals of US origin, appear reluctant to deal with workplace conflict on a collective or group basis, preferring instead to address conflict as individual grievances. Secondly, non-union firms are free from the institutional trappings of collective bargaining processes, which allows them not only to develop distinctive formal and informal methods for resolving disputes, but also, if they so choose, to seek to reduce the incidence of workplace conflict through the promotion of employee engagement and commitment. Thirdly, the organizational environment in non-union firms seems to be more conducive to the introduction of innovative ADR mechanisms to address workplace problems, particularly in the domain of individual grievances, than that in unionized firms. For these reasons, it was considered important to explore the views and experiences of HR managers from non-union firms in a separate focus group.

The HR managers who participated in this focus group discussed workplace conflict management innovations and how they applied to their respective organizations. It became evident very quickly that there was little appetite to move away from conventional grievance procedures, certainly not in any radical manner. Instead, the HR managers had a strong preference to adapt established procedures to facilitate the resolution of conflict, in the main, through the line management process.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section provides an outline of the focus group participants and describes the conduct of the focus group. The next section examines the extent of innovative practices in non-union firms as evidenced from the role and experience of the participating HR managers. Then, the matter of why line management is seen to be such an important aspect of conflict management is discussed. The outcomes associated with the role of line management in conflict management are explored in the following section. After this assessment, the challenges faced by line managers when trying to deal effectively with conflict are examined. The penultimate section explores what organizations are doing to facilitate

and enhance the role of line managers in the management of workplace conflict. The final section brings together the main findings of the paper.

### **Conduct of the Focus Group**

The focus group was made up of 10 participants, each with direct responsibility for HR, with one having specific responsibility for employee relations matters. Those invited to participate were identified using a lengthy list of HR professionals collated by the research team's contacts and prior research. The participants were from large foreign-owned multinationals where innovative practices seemed particularly likely to be in evidence. Focus group discussions strongly suggested that the participating HR managers provided a sufficiently broad range of views about the distinctiveness of managing conflict in non-union organizations and about the extent to which these organizations are the site for innovative conflict management activity as suggested in the literature.

Focus group participants were also from different business sectors. Four were from high-tech manufacturing companies while the others were from service-based companies, including the areas of software development, consulting, retail and food. The focus group was conducted in a similar way to the focus groups discussed in other papers: all focus group participants received briefing documentation on the nature and scope of the research study, instructions on the manner in which the focus groups would be conducted and details of the use that would be made of the data collected at the event. As outlined in other papers, the briefing material included information on what the team meant by workplace conflict management innovations, possible factors that might influence the diffusion of such practices and some of the possible outcomes that might arise as a result of using a particular innovative practice. Some of the information presented to participants was customized for the circumstances of non-union firms. Thus, for example, the team omitted all references to conflict between employers and unions at the workplace. It was emphasized at the beginning of the focus group that the areas identified in the briefing material were neither intended to be prescriptive nor exhaustive and that participants were not viewed as representatives of their respective organizations and should feel free to talk about their own experiences of innovative workplace conflict management.

## **Innovation in Conflict Management in Non-Union firms**

Participants in the focus group were generally of the view that the incidence of innovative conflict management was limited in their respective companies. At the same time, they were also of the view that the situation might change as some form of innovation might be required to address challenging issues that were emerging in their organizations. All HR managers stated that their organizations used a relatively traditional three-step process to address workplace problems, which was triggered by an employee availing of an open door policy to raise a matter of concern with a line manager. If the problem is not resolved at this stage, then the matter is investigated by more senior managers. Normally an investigation would produce a decision on how the matter should be resolved. If the proposed resolution is not to the liking of the employee then normally there is an appeal procedure which can be used to challenge the outcome. All participants were quick to point out that most problems were satisfactorily addressed in their respective organizations before they reached the final stage of the process. The general view was that this relatively conventional approach to conflict management had worked reasonably well for their organizations over the years, which explains the relative absence of any concerted attempt to diffuse conflict management innovations. The strategy of all participants was to stay with tried-and-tested practices, only making incremental modifications occasionally to upgrade a particular practice or to address an identified shortcoming. On-going adjustment rather than radical innovation was how participants maintained conflict management systems in their organizations.

One participant gave an example of this incremental approach. His organization had created the role of employee relations specialists, independent from HR and line managers, to support and, when appropriate, act as advocate for, employees who had raised grievances. The motive was to ensure that due process was embedded in conflict management procedures. To counterbalance dedicated support for employees, line and other senior managers who were involved in a grievance received assistance from a HR business manager. The organization ensured that the roles performed by HR business managers and employee relations specialists remained quite separate within the HR department. The participant explained that, although this model initially operated successfully, fault lines started to appear after a time. One problem that emerged was of line managers 'abdicating their responsibility': instead of

attempting to resolve problems directly with the involved employee/s, line managers got into the routine of referring employees to an employee relations specialist more or less automatically. As a result, too many workplace problems were becoming too formalized too quickly and too few were being resolved informally close to their point of origin. To address this situation the organization decided against overhauling the entire model, opting instead to merge the roles performed by employee relations specialists and HR business managers by providing employees and management with generalized HR support. The hope was that these changes would allow problems to be addressed more quickly, efficiently and cheaply.

This example gives an insight into the two factors that appeared uppermost in the minds of the HR managers when operating workplace conflict management procedures. One was procedural justice and the other was cost-effectiveness. Procedural fairness is probably more about the processes used to address workplace problems than the actual final outcome. One HR manager gave an example of how the matter of procedural fairness became a concern in their organization and what was done about it. A fairly standard practice in non-union organizations is to allow an employee/s involved in a formal grievance/dispute to be accompanied by someone at meetings with HR or with a senior manager. The right to an advocate is seen as important because if an employee with a grievance is obliged to self-represent then the danger increases dramatically of their being dissatisfied with the way the grievance was handled and resolved. However, the role of employee advocates in the organization in question became a cause for concern because frequently employees involved in a conflict situation would elect to bring along a colleague with little or no knowledge of employment rights or with limited expertise to advise the employee appropriately. In effect the right to representation remained a paper right, which prompted the HR team to take remedial action, as the HR manager explained:

We're looking at the idea of training the colleague up as an employee advocate so that when they accompany the employee they're knowledgeable and they actually have the basics of employee employment law and whatever else but you know, because sometimes I feel sorry for the employee who comes along and they're with somebody who doesn't know any more than themselves and it's good to have a companion but we've thought

about that idea of training that person up so they can actually be more useful and act as a representative.

Other firms also took action to ensure that procedural fairness and cost effectiveness were built into conflict management practices. One participant spoke about how their organization had trained a group of managers in specialist skills that allowed them to intervene on behalf of HR to handle grievances that had escalated up the dispute resolution process. These managers also had the expertise to enter any part of the organization to conduct investigations into the nature of grievances. The participant said that having managers with dedicated skills to address workplace conflict yielded two benefits. On the one hand, it ensured that the organization had the competence internally to address problems properly. On the other hand, it freed up HR personnel to focus on other matters, which was no small advantage as the HR department had been reduced in size.

The participant felt that this arrangement had allowed the organization to solve problems in a fairer and more efficient matter. However, other participants were less sanguine about the effectiveness of this method of solving workplace problems. Another participant said that their organization had followed a similar path of developing a group of managers with specialist skills to handle disputes and grievances. But he suggested that the system worked far from smoothly. One problem that kept recurring was that business managers in charge of a particular department openly resisted the specialist problem-solving managers intervening in a grievance within their department: as the participant put it, 'they're very protective of their own, of what's in their domain.' In fact, the problem became so acute the organization was forced to cast aside the use of specialist managers. These contrasting experiences of a similar conflict management procedure were seen by focus group participants as evidence of there being no one model or formula to solve problems at the workplace.

### **The Absence of ADR Procedures**

It is widely recognized in the literature that the resolution of workplace conflict depends on a variety of factors such as the nature of the problem, the rights and interests of the parties involved and, probably most important of all, the calibre of the conflict management procedures. There is no accepted agreement of what constitutes high-quality workplace conflict management procedures but, in recent years, the

concept of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) has come to dominate the literature on conflict management, particularly in the USA. ADR has become synonymous in the view of some commentators with innovative, non-adversarial ways of solving problems at work. A popular argument in the literature is that non-union organizations are in the vanguard of diffusing ADR practices as they are not tied to collective bargaining processes but yet have an interest in developing conflict management policies that have the confidence of employees.

Little evidence emerged from the focus groups of non-union multinational subsidiaries leading the way in diffusing ADR practices in Ireland. Only one participant said that their organization had introduced the role of ombudsperson to help solve workplace problems. This role was described as being independent of HR and other senior managers, with the office normally being used by employees as an avenue to report a complaint or issue they felt had not been appropriately dealt with on site. Issues reported to the ombudsperson are mostly centred on the actions of HR, 'and whether HR had acted fairly in their decision-making'. The ombudsperson logs such complaints, assesses their seriousness and assigns an appropriate person to investigate further. Having an ombudsperson as an option in the organization's repertoire of conflict management policies was considered to have 'put a bit of manners' on all within the company including HR, and was 'something that keeps everybody honest'.

This example of the use of an ombudsperson was very much the exception. Most participants of the focus group were adamant that they had no interest in emulating the apparent experience of a lot of non-union organizations in the USA by introducing ADR-style conflict management practices. Overwhelmingly, the organizations represented at the focus group had not made, and were not intending to make, any major strategic moves to replace established procedures with innovative practices such as an ombudsperson, mediation, arbitration, or internal panels. At the same time, participants suggested that they were willing to use some of these practices on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, a number of HR managers spoke about occasionally using mediation. One participant said that a number of managers had been trained in mediation skills and would be asked to get involved in the resolution of a problem should the need arise. However, mediation was not deemed to be part of the



company's formal grievance handling procedures, only an informal practice to be used sparingly.

Nearly all participants seemed to have some experience of external mediation when an internal dispute had entered the State's statutory dispute resolution machinery. Most of these cases involved the Equality Tribunal, which is encouraged by statute to try to resolve problems with the use of mediation. Some participants did not report their experiences with external mediation in a positive light, particularly one who commented that 'going outside is just a nightmare... so much time, so much money, to go to an equality mediation, it was the worst event of my life'. Another participant was cynical about the possibility of resolving problems through the use of mediation in a statutory agency and only opportunistically agreed to participate in the process to gather as much information as possible about the arguments the employee would be making to justify their case: mediation was not seen as a means to resolve a dispute informally but as a way of getting better prepared for a formal Equality Tribunal hearing.

The dislike of external mediation was largely fuelled by a deep reluctance to engage with the statutory dispute resolution bodies rather than any antipathy towards mediation as a conflict management practice. Most of the participants were of the view that mediation might be a suitable process to help solve grievances of an interpersonal nature, or when employees become very negative, even resentful, about how the organization had been behaving: in situations where as one participant put it, 'the employee... is totally frustrated or feels that the system didn't deliver to them'. Another participant further commented on the need for mediation to:

... fix the broken hearts as I call them; the people that go through the process and come out at the back end of it damaged, either emotionally damaged themselves or just hurting with the organization.

Yet, participants were of the view that as mediation was used relatively infrequently it was not necessary to integrate the practice into formal grievance handling procedures. The option of developing a mediation procedure that involved the use of external people as part of the organization's formal conflict management practices was given short shrift by the HR managers: relying on any type of external intervention was seen

as something to be avoided at all costs. Overall, the participants of the focus group were firm in their view that they had introduced next to no innovation fashioned on the ADR model of conflict management. One participant captured the approach generally being followed by describing it as ‘an evolution’, which he suggested led to grievance procedures not changing significantly over the years. Although there was broad agreement about organizational approaches to solving problems changing little over time, some participants had niggling doubts about whether existing procedures, which were described as ‘going back to the seventies’ were now fully fit for purpose. In particular, questions were raised about whether the protracted time it could take to settle grievances using established procedures was in tune with growing demands by senior management to resolve problems speedily.

A number of participants used the example of employee grievances arising from performance management processes to make their point. In most organizations, participants suggested, HR and line managers were under intense pressure to ensure that performance management systems worked effectively in terms of delivering high-grade employee performance. In other words, employees were being set ever more challenging goals and targets in their performance appraisals. Creating high stakes performance management systems of this kind was seen as running the risk of increasing employee complaints and grievances as they sought to redress what they considered to be an unfavourable assessment. If grievances arising from appraisals were not addressed quickly then performance management systems could be made more difficult to operate as uncertainty lingered about the status of any goals and targets set for employees. Some participants expressed concern about whether the traditional three-stage conflict management model was sufficiently flexible to deliver a fast conflict management process. Participants spoke of how the traditional model can require performance grievances to go through a lengthy appeal procedure even though the final outcome was in all likelihood going to be the same as the first decision. Participants considered this process as unsatisfactory, not only because it impaired organizational decision-making, but it also subjected employees to a fairly time-consuming process, which was seen as far from desirable given the anxieties they could experience.

Thus, there was a fair amount of agreement that conventional conflict management practices did not fit neatly with modern forms of performance-led management. Many

participants expressed a preference for changing conflict management practices so that complaints and grievances could be addressed decisively within a short period of time: as one contended, ‘it’s about trying to deal with the issues effectively but in a timely fashion so yes, I just wish it was faster’. Equally, there was wide recognition that implementing such reforms – or as one participant put it ‘flattening the process’ – would be very difficult. A major identified hurdle was that any attempt to compress grievance handling procedures so that final decisions could be made quickly would be viewed in a dim light by statutory dispute resolution agencies. If an employee who had gone through such truncated procedures decided to refer the case to a statutory body, the organization would probably lose, irrespective of its merit, because it would have been judged that the organization failed to provide the employee adequate opportunities to challenge the initial decision against them. In other words, the prospect of cases going to statutory dispute resolution agencies effectively constrained the organization from streamlining grievance handling. One participant put it like this:

The external environment does drive... our thinking about how will this look externally. What will somebody in an EAT or Labour Court or Equality Tribunal say about this?

While another participant said:

Some of the policies that we all have... have originated from the statutory laws. Like for instance performance management, the way we do it, the verbal warning; it takes that long because we are allowed time between these required – statutorily required – stages. So I’m just wondering if it’s possible to condense [the grievance handling process] a little bit and still be, from the legal side, compliant.

Thus the influence of the external environment, particularly employment legislation and the existence of statutory dispute resolution agencies, seems to have scared off the HR managers from introducing concerted reforms of the three-step model dispute resolution process. Instead, they have sought alternative ways to improve the management of conflict. Most of this activity has focused on improving how line managers address conflict and problems. A number of issues were identified as

impinging on how they could deal with grievances effectively. These issues are explored further in the following sections.

### **Conflict Management as Line Management**

Participants agreed that line managers were the lynchpin to resolving conflict effectively in their organizations. If line managers were unable to address problems quickly at their source, most focus group participants were of the view that the organizational consequences would be significant and negative. For a start, the consensus was that the three-step model of grievance handling used by most of the organizations in the focus group would be placed under considerable stress. As one participant put it:

The whole thing is predicated on the engagement between the employee and their direct manager and I think that's probably the same for, certainly for all the companies, I would know.... So it's very similar to that in that we would put the onus on the employee to self-represent and to be able to raise their issue in the first instance to the direct manager and for that manager to be trained and capable of actually dealing with that fairly and equitably and closing it down at that level.

Some participants also thought that HR departments would be put under extreme pressure if line managers were ineffective. Their concern was that, as a result of far-reaching resource cuts introduced in the wake of the recession, HR departments had become increasingly reliant on line managers to deal with conflict. In some cases, HR has been stripped back considerably:

Our HR model has completely changed. So we have gone through this shared services model; so we had a big HR team, but just to give you an idea now, 1400 people... and I am the site HR person for 1400 people. We don't have the specialists, the fancy employee relationship specialists, that's all gone. So it's one person.

The worry was that streamlined HR departments would find it difficult to cope should line managers fail to be effective problem-solvers. There was wide agreement that such a scenario, if it did arise, would almost certainly thwart efforts by HR managers

to become more strategic. One participant said that if HR managers got consumed with solving problems, they risked neglecting important issues such as building engagement, trust, development, succession planning, etc.: as she put it, focusing on ‘the small 5 per cent with their conflict [thus forgetting] about the 95 per cent that you have to continue to build the trust with’. She said that it was imperative that line managers were effective in solving problems so that HR managers could concentrate their efforts ‘on the good people and all the nice stuff and we have to keep reminding ourselves that this is actually what we’re here for’.

A third negative organizational outcome participants envisaged arising if line managers did not resolve conflict properly was considerable time burdens being imposed on senior management. Dragging senior management into the resolution of conflict was considered a very costly yet avoidable outlay. As one participant explained:

The step model is great but the problem is as the more difficult issues go up along the steps and then something goes external, it may mean that senior managers have to go and sit in Court or sit in an Equality hearing or a Tribunal and that is like, I mean, [they] might as well just go and sit on the stove for a week you know.

Another participant raised a further concern about how other variable costs come into play when issues need to be further investigated:

This grievance is happening in [site] X, we’ve got a manager from Dublin who is nearly travelling up there every week interviewing witnesses, meeting with the person. Again it’s going to appeal stage you’ve another manager from Dublin doing that. We’re hiring hotel rooms, so there’s just a huge cost of just even managing a grievance. Then the people that are managing the grievance are line managers [from other parts of the business] so they’re having to come out of their day job to manage this. So there is the cost of that to our business then as well.

Finally, line management addressing grievances effectively and without delay was deemed to be important to avoid involvement by legal professionals. One participant

identified a trend where ‘lawyers are guiding people straight through the internal process’ which was seen as making the case more complex and thus more difficult to resolve quickly. He argued that, when lawyers become involved at an early stage, the chances of a fast resolution all but disappear as other issues invariably get generated as the case escalates. The HR manager provided an example of how a grievance relating to relatively simple issues around performance management could then be followed up by a Dignity at Work grievance involving the employee taking sick leave when a solicitor gets involved in the case. The current recession was seen as compounding the problem as employees were considered to be more prepared to ‘fight to the bitter end to keep their jobs’ – which in practical terms meant that employees were more prepared to engage a solicitor should they get involved in a dispute. Line managers solving problems quickly was seen as the most effective method of circumventing this problem.

Thus the focus group participants were unanimous in their view that, if line managers did not resolve workplace problems effectively, not only would the functioning of the HR department be impaired, but also overall organizational performance. Yet there was also widespread agreement – and concern – that a range of challenges stood in the way of line managers dealing with grievances in an effective and timely manner. The nature of these challenges is discussed below.

### **Challenges to Line Managers**

Participants in the focus group were fearful that they had created an acute organizational dilemma for themselves in that they had become increasingly reliant on line managers to address workplace problems yet multiple pressures were making it difficult for line managers to carry out this role effectively. Line managers were seen as facing a number of challenges in carrying out their conflict management role. First, all participants recognized that the unrelenting search for better competitive performance was making the line manager role extremely demanding. It was agreed that many line managers ‘were managing in very fast moving environments’ and were under a great deal of pressure to address the priorities of the business, whilst also having to devote time to people management issues. One participant explained how the nature of his organization’s business was changing considerably, and contended that, as new technologies and products continue to be rolled out at a faster rate, ‘the

pressure from upstairs is just unbelievable'. He further argued that although most line managers were equipped to deal with conflict effectively they were being hampered by the lack of time at their disposal:

Over the years we've become quite good at dealing with cases and fixing problems but it's not going to be good enough going forward for a couple of reasons, not least that the managers are so busy and there is so much pressure on them that they're just struggling big time to give the time to employees; they just cannot get the space, cannot get the time, cannot get out there so therefore it's getting sloppy if you like.

Another participant echoed this point but also suggested that the time problem was being compounded by line managers being obliged to performance manage employees under their responsibility. Devoting time to address performance management issues is viewed to be an important element of the line management role, particularly as the participants agreed that a majority of the grievances raised are related to such issues:

They are managing a lot of people, the workloads they have are huge, they don't have time to actually spend at the one-to-ones or dealing with employee issues... the problem that they have then is to performance manage and the performance bar is high and getting higher and they don't have the time.

Secondly, some participants argued that changing employee profiles were making the conflict management role of line managers more complex. Some of the participants spoke about recruiting more and more highly skilled employees as technological advances were causing the organization to shift from semi-skilled or manual manufacturing to the making of products of ever-increasing sophistication. One HR manager explained how his organization was now recruiting only people with a PhD qualification 'because the technology we're moving into now is such that that is the level of engagement we need'. It was believed that the recruitment of more highly skilled knowledge workers had made the nature of workplace conflict more complex compared to the more 'straightforward' problems that arise from a manual, production-based workforce. Much more than before, workplace problems were seen

as involving interpersonal relationships, mental health, stress and well-being. One participant argued that ‘if you’re hiring people with a higher level of education sometimes there can be more complex relationships between people’. Increasing business pressures were seen as adding to the problem as what were previously straightforward performance grievances were turning into more complex problems of workplace stress. It was further argued that, although more highly skilled employees were important for driving business growth, such employees may not be appropriately equipped to deal with people management issues of an interpersonal nature: ‘I think they are very bright, I think they have a very IQ, not so much on EQ.’ Other participants also mentioned that the increasing multicultural profile of employees was not helping matters as it could be the source of misunderstandings, which might bypass line managers.

Some of the participants spoke of their concern about whether line managers had the appropriate skills to address conflict properly. It was argued that, as most line managers were first recruited for their technical skills, it was open to doubt whether they possessed the soft skills necessary to solve problems. One participant raised concerns about the training offered to line managers to handle conflict: ‘often they don’t have the training, they don’t have what is called “internal aptitude” to do it because they are binary engineering, metrics-orientated.’ Another participant spoke about how she would try to instil in managers the need to be observant, to pre-empt situations, and to ‘keep the eyes peeled for that issue of mental health’. She further explained: ‘Even at the canteen, see who is sitting with the team, who is sitting on their own, simple things. Be observant to what’s happening in your team and with the individuals.’ However it was also argued that the ability of line managers to perform this ‘sense-making’ role was being undermined as they were coming under intense pressure to secure improvements in operational performance.

Finally, concerns were also raised in relation to the continuing uncertainty about the economic environment and the impact this was having on the role of the line manager in dealing with conflict. One participant mentioned how a ‘healthy attrition rate’ in the past went some way to alleviating conflict because those employees who had performance management grievances or who found the on-going pressures to perform too difficult to handle left voluntarily in search of another job: they chose the exit rather than the voice option. However, the recession was seen as closing off the exit



option, making employees more likely to stay, which resulted in line managers 'dealing with people who are here for the long-term, be it good or bad'.

There was considerable discussion amongst the HR managers of the organizational paradox between on the one hand requiring line managers to solve workplace problems and on the other hand the questionable ability of line managers to perform this role effectively. As one participant put it:

Irrespective of the pressures we have to figure out what it is that we can tweak internally to give something back to the managers, either to make the model more sleek or better suited to purpose.... The fact that it is a variation on the same model that's been there forever, is that ok now? Or do we need to go back to the drawing board given the new constraints that are there in the new environment?

It was evident from the focus group that none of the HR managers had worked out a way to address the organizational paradox all were experiencing. Beyond improving line management training, there seemed to be little innovative practice to relieve the pressures line managers were encountering when carrying out a problem-solving role. What is being done to support line managers in their endeavours to solve workplace conflict is explored in the following section.

### **Supporting Line Managers to Resolve Conflict**

In recognition that line management is an integral aspect of the conflict management model adopted by many non-union firms, the HR managers in the focus group identified a number of training programmes initiated in their respective organizations to equip line managers with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the various types of conflict they are likely to encounter. One organization introduced a 'back to basics' training initiative that aimed to equip line managers with the necessary people management skills to deal with conflict that could arise from efforts to improve organizational performance. Another company introduced training sessions on resilience. Training in this area was introduced because of feedback received from line managers about the difficulties they were facing in addressing issues of workplace stress within themselves and amongst members of their team. However,

one participant complained about the difficulty in getting line managers to attend training sessions, reporting that in her organization approximately 25 per cent of line managers had signed up for training, but only a handful actually showed up. The poor attendance by line managers was seen as a symptom of the multiple time pressures being experienced by them: they had calculated other matters were more pressing than attending a training programme to improve their conflict management skills.

At the same time, none of the HR managers spoke about their organization having any rules that might encourage line managers to give conflict management training more priority. No participant spoke of their organization having a formal incentive structure to encourage line managers to pay greater attention to the resolution of workplace conflict. Furthermore, there was little evidence of formal monitoring practices used to evaluate specifically the aptitude of line managers to deal with problems. One participant explained that, while performance appraisals of line managers covered numerous people management issues, they did not take into account grievance handling. Other participants explained that employee surveys were used to allow employees record their assessment of line manager performance. It was argued that these surveys could potentially identify poor conflict handling skills of line managers, but it was conceded that surveys did not deal explicitly with conflict management. As an exception that was to prove the rule, one participant discussed how their organization was beginning to collate data on grievance handling across business areas in order to drive conversations about how conflict and other risks can be managed. This particular HR department hoped to use this data to make appropriate interventions:

We want to use that data actually to have the conversation and say look, this is how much time your managers are actually spending at this and part of it is because of their lack of capability which we want to build and we want to get the leadership bought into those training activities.

This particular HR department clearly sees the benefits of collecting and presenting data relevant to the grievance-handling process. But it was very much the exception.

## Conclusions

This paper has reported the views and experiences of HR managers from non-union multinational firms with regard to how they manage workplace conflict and whether this is an area of much organizational innovation. The HR managers reported little innovation in conflict management procedures and processes, with most reluctant to move radically away from their traditional and well-established 'three-step model' of grievance handling. Most of the discussion about innovation, as far as it went, was limited to the introduction of internal mediation, with the consensus view being that this practice would only be used as an *ad hoc* and informal option, complementing established procedures. There was considerable reluctance to introduce mediation as a formal procedural stage and the idea of using an external mediator was dismissed out of hand. The innovations that were identified and discussed by the HR managers mostly related to role innovation aimed at enhancing the established conflict management procedures.

The value of having a distinct HR manager to support employees with grievances or dedicated well-trained employee advocates was explored. It was argued that such roles enabled employees to be represented effectively in a conflict management process, but it was also argued that having employee advocates could have a downside in that it could potentially take the onus away from line managers to deal with grievances effectively. It was this downside that led some organizations to abolish the use of employee advocates. It was felt that the line management role in managing conflict should not be compromised in any way. Overall, the HR managers participating in the focus group were of the view that line managers are and should be at the centre of conflict management.

Participants reported a number of reasons why the line management role was important in managing conflict. The devolution of conflict management to line management was viewed as a necessity given reductions in headcount across many HR departments. Furthermore, delegating conflict management to line management was seen as freeing time for HR managers to engage with more strategic people management matters. The importance of managing conflict efficiently and effectively at the line management level was also highlighted to avoid imposing extra time burdens on senior management and to make it less likely that solicitors would become

involved in a grievance or dispute. Although the focus group participants viewed conflict management as integral to the line management role, they also recognized that line managers faced a number of challenges in dealing with conflict.

The challenges that were identified related mostly to the increasingly demanding work roles of line managers. It was argued that the pressures on line management to deliver operational improvements were putting at risk their people management responsibilities. The changing employee profiles of many organizations were seen as making the matter worse as it increased the complexity of the conflict that line managers had to address. Issues of workplace stress, mental health, and well-being are increasingly becoming entangled with more general performance management grievances and thus require more attention and sophisticated problem-solving skills. The depressed labour market arising from the recession meant that employees with grievances were less likely to leave of their own accord, thus obliging line managers to address more problems that are difficult to resolve. The lack of appropriate conflict management skills amongst line managers was also identified as a concern.

It was evident from the focus group that the participating organizations were making few radical changes to improve and enable the conflict management role of line managers. Different aspects of line management training on conflict resolution were discussed and it was apparent that few organizations were fully satisfied with their training initiatives or with the seeming reluctance of their line managers to participate in training sessions. In one example a number of line managers were offered conflict management training but few actually attended. Problems also occurred with delegating conflict management responsibilities to line managers. For example, it was reported that line managers were finding it increasingly difficult to prioritize conflict management issues over more pressing operational issues. Curiously, few of the organizations assessed the conflict management role of line managers during their performance appraisals, which risks sending out the signal that solving problems is not considered integral to their overall performance.

The monitoring of conflict management practice and outcomes was not mentioned by most participants. However, one participant did explain how his organization was developing a system that collated relevant conflict management data which would then be used to drive conversations aimed at improving the management of conflict

making line managers better problem-solvers. It was hoped that the data would influence senior managers to think more strategically about conflict management. None of the participants said they were doing or likely to do anything similar. In summary, the findings from the focus group of non-union HR managers suggest that there is little appetite for radical innovation to conventional conflict management practices. For the most part, workplace conflict management in non-union firms rests primarily on line management. However, it is recognized that this approach works imperfectly as line managers face real challenges in performing their conflict management role effectively.