

A time for consensus how can workplace collaboration be built from organisation to nation

12 May 2025

Foreword

This discussion paper is intended to prompt a conversation about the value of good industrial and employment relations in contemporary Britain. It provides potential key elements of successful relations for policy makers, researchers, employer and worker representatives and trade bodies as well as business leaders thinking about the future of work and growth.

We have also provided a model of the key factors for success – from organisation level, including small and medium-sized enterprises right up to national system requirements to open discussion about what's working, what's missing and what's next.

We are opening a conversation around 3 key questions:

- What are the elements that drive employer/worker collaboration at organisational level? What does your evidence and experience say?
- What is the architecture required at sector, regional and national level to ensure that collaboration endures?
- What capabilities are required to manage collaboration and conflict: do we have them and how can we fill gaps in organisations and the wider system in Great Britain?

Introduction – working well together and disagreeing well

1. For most employers and workers, Britain continues to be a great place to work and grow a business. In Acas we are best known for our work on disputes, but we also see the best of times in the workplace – when employers and workers come together to break new ground, solve problems and grow.

2. There is a unique opportunity today, as the government drives for growth, to forge a new strategy that realises our aims for the British workforce – high productivity, high-quality, well-paid jobs growing a modern economy. That future is dependent on partnership, collaboration and problem-solving together.

3. Over the last decade the general trend across Britain has been fewer disputes – with a decade of historically low working days lost to strike action (ONS, 2025). In 2022 and 2023 industrial relations came into sharp focus with approximately 2.5 million and 2.7 million working days lost to strike action, the highest annual figures since 1989, before dropping again throughout 2024 (UK Gov, 2025).

4. During this period a host of factors have contributed to a changing picture of employment relations: trade unions remaining a primary channel for collective bargaining and seeing a small uptick in membership after reducing memberships and finding new ways to engage members. At the same time, social media facilitates new ways for workers to share and voice workplace issues, and other means such as information and consultation forums and employee councils (Adam et al, 2024).

5. Most stark has been a drop in experience and skills to manage relationships and a change in tone on collective workforce conflict, with disputes quicker to escalate. The disputes reaching Acas having intensified with relations often felt to be more tense and a wider gap between positions (Adam et al, 2024).
6. The global headwinds are also increasing and becoming less predictable – economic pressures, weak growth and the rising cost of living, increasing concerns around mental health and wellbeing and the growth of workplace inactivity are straining collaboration. Certainties are changing from the growth of hybrid working to new types of employment (Adam et al, 2024).
7. At this key moment, where they are needed most, the systems, skills and capability required to 'disagree well', to resolve issues early, have been eroded.

The case for renewed focus on healthy employment relations and managing conflict well

8. In Acas, it is our firm belief that good workplace relations and being able to manage conflict well are key enablers of resilient, successful organisations and good business. Not all workplace conflict need be harmful to businesses or workers: we have seen the benefit for all when diverse perspectives with differing views come together. Collaboration and creativity support productive relationships.
9. Poorly handled workplace conflict harms workers, employers and the economy. Acas research on the costs of individual-level workplace conflict in the UK estimates the total cost at around £28.5 billion each year, equating to £1,000 for every worker and just under £3,000 for each person involved in conflict. The cost of collective conflict, often felt in industrial action, is widely judged to cost many further billions of pounds to the economy (Saundry and Urwin, 2021).
10. There is a wealth of evidence that well-managed workplaces, offering good work with high levels of mutual trust and worker engagement, can – with the right strategy – be more productive, more profitable, more resilient, and more likely to contribute to economic growth. A range of workplace factors contribute, including: engagement, skills, innovation, culture, loyalty and a range of dimensions of good work, including management practices, satisfactory pay and benefits, and health, safety and wellbeing. Many employers in Britain recognise that and deliver benefits for their business and their workers as a result (Acas, 2023; Bosworth and Warhurst, 2020; Siebern-Thomas, 2005; Carnegie UK Trust and RSA Future Work Centre, 2018; ONS, 2018; CIPD, no date).
11. The time for change could not be more opportune. There is a shared desire for high productivity, high-quality, well-paid jobs growing a modern economy. Combine this with the government's ambition to reset industrial relations, recognise the important role of collective voice in securing sustainable, inclusive economic growth and that this needs the steady platform of healthy employment and industrial relations to be realised.

Enabling success through healthy employment relations

12. Acas has long championed the principles of good employment relations, characterised by balanced dialogue and partnership between workplace actors. In our experience these are more likely to succeed where diverse views are valued and there is a framework for the relationship that enables trust and collaboration throughout the system: from team to small organisation to sector to national systems and government. This is mirrored in the views of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) whose 2024 [social dialogue report](#) advocates for processes that bring together social partners at national and sectoral level (ILO, 2024).

There are no magic formulae here, but there are common identifiable factors that enable success, and 3 key elements:

- Positive intent is the starting point in effective employment relations – the intent to hear all voices, see all sides, to represent members, to seek solutions, to support business and individual well-being and growth, to challenge, to collaborate, to disagree well.
- Good systems, practice and culture build representation and voice enabling everyone to talk and to listen.
- Systemic capability sustains those relationships and helps to deliver on the approach. Intent is only realised through a deliberate and co-designed 'method' for joint problem solving and conflict resolution at team, unit, regional, national (and where appropriate) international level.

Positive intent

14. Underpinning the success of healthy employment relations is the strategic intent of the organisation: a deliberate co-design for collaboration and problem solving at the heart of the organisation, based on mutual trust and respect. Underlying the actions of individuals and on workplace culture, is a deeply held mutual regard for the value and views of all parties in the workplace relationship. It is this shared, intentional strategy which sets the tone, and can establish the culture which enables healthy workplace relationships to flourish at all levels from team, to unit, to national and international and in all types of organisations.

Representation and voice

15. The essence of any relationship is engagement: that all parties have a voice, and that voice is both listened to and responded to (Acas, 2010). Providing for effective individual and collective engagement builds trust, enables effective collaboration, and helps to channel conflict in a positive way to collectively solve problems. Having well-established and effective mechanisms for engagement provides a readymade route to resolution where a dispute occurs.

16. How people want to engage is changing. Though memberships have declined, trade unions give effective representatives for their members and provide the voice for many, a role the government plans to underpin through modernisation of the legislative framework for recognition, collective bargaining and negotiation to provide firm foundations at national and sectoral level as well as organisational.

17. Where there is no trade union in place other mechanisms are necessary for employees and workers to have their voice heard, to feel confident in speaking up, as well as meet regulations. The best engagement is not driven by regulations or necessity, but by that positive intent, through the confidence and ability of all relevant parties in the workplace to talk and to listen. The literature roots this in dialogic, two-way communications. As the Macleod Review noted "extending employee engagement is not an issue for legislation or regulation: it requires culture change. More people need to 'get it' – and more people need to do it" (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, page117; Acas, 2014).

18. Changing expectations of society and the workforce mean there must be a willingness to 'listen to hear' and to work towards mutual interests on matters that count. Acknowledging diversity of views, different starting positions, different status of employees and workers and looser forms of employment relationships add complexity. Knowing how to 'not agree' is not easy, structures or frameworks are more necessary than ever to give workers and their representatives a regular voice.

Skills and confidence

19. The dearth of skills, knowledge and understanding in employment relations and conflict management in both collective industrial relations and individual conflict management is widely recognised and its impact is far reaching. In Acas's practical experience, and as evidenced by our research, there are significant challenges in terms of skills and confidence at workplace level where greater

capability is needed to improve employment relations:

- Collective industrial relations, both as a concept and a practice, have diminished over successive years, to the extent that the skills, knowledge and confidence required to underpin effective collective relationships in the workplace are often weak or absent. This remains a primary foundation for success and there is a pressing need to address this gap so that industrial tensions and potential collective conflict are managed effectively and at an early point, reducing the risk of escalation to industrial action where possible (Adam et al, 2024).
- There is likewise a clear shortfall in individual collaboration, conflict management and dispute resolution skills among key actors in the workplace, in particular line managers, which hampers the early resolution of conflict at work. Greater investment in this area is needed so that there is earlier informal intervention where appropriate and avoidance of unnecessary escalation to formal procedures (Saundry et al, 2024; 2019; 2016; Urwin et al, 2024).

20. Leading organisational change at board level, understanding how to handle pay negotiations or knowing how to deal with a colleague complaint all require specific capabilities. Capability is required at individual level to work better together and at organisational level to build collaboration by design into the business and operating model. This is true for small and medium sized enterprises as much as large where designing good relations from the start has potential to support rapid scale up and avoid the risks that can curb growth as teams grow rapidly.

21. A shortage of these capabilities impacts on the levels of conflict and dispute which occur across all dimensions of the economy, in small and large business and the private and public sector, and in government. This deficit was amplified in the recent waves of industrial action in Great Britain, and its history is described in academic papers which have identified a 'resolution gap' over many years (Sweeney and Saundry, 2013; Adam et al, 2024).

Foundations up: what this looks like from organisation to nation

22. Positive intent is rarely enough to sustain and propagate good employment relations, though in smaller enterprises it can go a long way. It is the combination of intent with collaboration-by-design and appropriate structures that can deliver excellent employment relations. Clarity of purpose combined with the rhythm of process delivers sustainable and effective partnerships.

23. Today's diverse workplaces require structures and frameworks that are purposeful, proportionate and productive. There are no one-size fits all, but all require structures that facilitate regular contact, problem solving and creative collaboration, going beyond firefighting. The informal, weekly staff meeting to share news about progress or challenges can be as valuable as more structured communication processes that form part of recognition and bargaining arrangements with a trade union – both have a role to play. It is their purpose and regularity that builds relationships and that applies to government bodies as well as the private sector.

24. To provide framing for discussion we have illustrated below the pillars within which these elements – positive intent, representation and voice and systemic capability – can be enabled. They are:

- everyday good relations
- conflict managed well where and when it arises, disputes resolved efficiently
- government, workers, representatives and employers in lockstep together

25. Every organisation investing in the foundational aspects of good everyday workplace relations on issues such as health, safety and well-being, equality, diversity and inclusion, learning and development and fair treatment.

26. This is supported by the scaffolding of employment law, representation and practical codes that balance employer and worker interests, rights and responsibilities.

27. Where conflict occurs this is managed well by employers, workers and their representatives who have the knowledge, skills and confidence to have open conversations and build trusting relations. This is supported by the structures of effective joint problem-solving and collective bargaining where required.

28. At the point of dispute, effective mechanisms are in place for speedy, effective resolution that redresses the problem and reinstates good relationships. High-quality and well-resourced architecture of conciliation, dispute resolution and enforcement are in place, with a judicial system as the final step for the most complex cases.

29. Finally, positive intent, representation, voice and skills, and confidence are embodied at sector, region and national government level where collaborative tripartite working is built into all aspects of strategy and system.

Conclusion: building collaboration from organisation to nation

30. We see ahead a new strategy that realises our aims for the British workforce – high productivity, high-quality, well-paid jobs growing a modern economy. That future is built on collaboration, partnerships and shared problem-solving from team to organisation to national level.

31. Three common identifiable factors can make this happen: positive intent as the starting point in effective employment relations; good systems, practice and culture that build representation and voice; systemic capability to sustain those relationships – good intent realised through a deliberate and co-designed 'method' for joint problem solving and conflict resolution at every level.

32. The time is now for good workplace relations and being able to manage conflict well must be recognised as the key enablers they are of good organisations and good business.

Systemic pillars of good employment relations

A discussion model

Everyday healthy employment relations

Strong organisational systems and culture:

- leadership and management capability, and investing in training and development
- health, safety and wellbeing
- fairness including equality, diversity, inclusion and opportunity
- employee voice and participation including contractual terms and conditions

Conflict managed well when it occurs

Deliberate organisational design and intent:

- manager and leaders skilled in conflict management
- collective bargaining
- constructive dialogue
- deep listening
- collaborate partnership

Effective formal systems when conflict moves to dispute

Systems primed to resolve dispute quickly:

- negotiation skills
- an accessible, efficient dispute resolution system
- balancing interests
- conciliation, mediation, arbitration
- effective judicial system
- enforcement

Collaboration by intent and design: strategic and systematic 3-way dialogue (government, workers, employers)

- tripartism
- sector discussion
- legislative and policy framework
- model of social sustainability
- industrial strategy

About Acas

Acas is an independent, non-departmental public body with a duty to promote the improvement of industrial relations in Great Britain (s.209 TULR(C)A1992). We fulfil this duty by exercising our powers to provide general advice on matters concerned with or likely to affect industrial relations (s.213), issue Codes of Practice (s.199) and provide collective conciliation in trade disputes (s.210). Acas also provides individual conciliation and early conciliation services in actual and potential employment tribunal cases.

We work with millions of employers and workers every year to improve workplace relationships. We provide free and impartial advice on employment rights, good practice and policies, and preventing and resolving workplace conflict. In 2023 to 2024 we saw:

- approximately 18 million visits to our website
- 12 million visits to our advice
- almost 600,000 calls to the Acas helpline
- over 2,000 training sessions delivered by Acas advisers

An independent research paper estimating the economic impact of Acas services calculated an overall benefit-cost ratio of £12 for every £1 invested in Acas services delivered during the 2018 to 2019 financial year, with a total net benefit to the economy of Acas services of £644 million.

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