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HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

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Chaired by

EVERSHEDS SUTHERLAND

Speakers:

Rob Gray
Partner
Eversheds Sutherland

Leanne Sokolski
HR/ER Consultant,
Accredited Workplace
Mediator and Coach

Discussing the topic:

'Employee use of technology and AI in conflict and grievance situations'

Setting the Scene

This session explored the growing impact of artificial intelligence on employee relations, particularly workplace investigations, grievances, mediations and employment litigation. Whilst AI continues to create opportunities for efficiency and accessibility, delegates discussed the increasingly complex challenges emerging as employees and employers navigate a rapidly evolving landscape.

The discussion was chaired by Robert Gray, Partner from Eversheds Sutherland's Employment team, and led by Leanne Sokolski, Human Resources/Employee Relations Consultant, Investigator, Mediator and Coach. Combining legal and practical perspectives, they explored how organisations can manage the increasing influence of AI whilst maintaining fair processes, effective employee relations, and human-centred decision making.

The conversation centred on a key tension facing organisations today: how can businesses embrace technological advancement without losing the human judgement, critical thinking, and relationship-building skills that underpin successful workplaces?

Participants shared experiences of AI-generated grievances, increasingly sophisticated legal challenges, covert recording, and shifting employee expectations. Whilst many acknowledged the benefits AI can bring, there was broad agreement that organisations are entering largely uncharted territory, comparable in some respects to the rise of social media, but on a much larger scale.

The Changing Shape of Employee Relations

One of the strongest themes throughout the discussion was the transformation of traditional employee relations processes.

Delegates reported a noticeable increase in lengthy, highly detailed correspondence linked to grievances, disciplinary proceedings, and tribunal claims. In many cases, HR teams are receiving documents running to dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of pages, containing extensive references to legislation, case law, and alleged breaches of employment rights. The challenge is that much of this information may be inaccurate, taken out of context, or even entirely fabricated, yet employers are still obligated to investigate and respond appropriately.

Participants reflected that AI has fundamentally changed how employees access information. Historically, an employee might have sought advice from a manager, colleague, trade union representative, or family member. Today, many are

turning first to AI-powered tools, which can generate compelling and authoritative responses within seconds.

This is creating a new dynamic in workplace conflict. Employees often arrive at formal processes with strongly held views about what they are entitled to, influenced by AI-generated advice that lacks organisational context and legal nuance. Delegates noted that this can make constructive resolution more difficult, particularly where expectations have already become entrenched.

When Technology Changes Expectations

A recurring discussion point was the relationship between AI and employee expectations.

Several organisations reported instances where individuals had relied on AI tools to determine appropriate salaries, compensation levels, or potential claim values. In some situations, employees became frustrated when workplace realities failed to align with the outcomes suggested by technology.

Interestingly, delegates observed that AI often appears designed to provide certainty and reassurance, whereas workplace challenges are frequently more complex and nuanced. This creates a risk that people become increasingly convinced they are right before meaningful conversations have even begun.

There was broad agreement that whilst AI can be a valuable source of information, it cannot replace judgement, context, or an understanding of the commercial and human realities facing organisations.

The Legal Landscape: New Challenges Emerging

The legal implications of AI generated significant discussion.

Delegates explored examples where AI-generated documents had introduced unnecessary complexity into disciplinary and grievance processes. There were also examples of legal arguments supported by quoted ‘case law’ that did not exist, alongside situations where employees challenged evidence by claiming recordings or documents had been generated using AI technology.

Participants discussed the emergence of AI-powered legal services and automated employment advice platforms. Whilst these tools are increasing accessibility, they are also creating fresh challenges for employers attempting to manage disputes effectively.

A particular concern was the growing volume of claims and correspondence reaching tribunals. Cases are often becoming longer, more complex, and more difficult to resolve, placing additional strain on an already stretched system. Judges and tribunals are becoming increasingly alert to the risks associated with AI-generated evidence, fake case citations, and inaccurate submissions, but the burden on all parties continues to grow.

Key Insight:

The legal framework itself has not fundamentally changed. However, AI is changing how individuals engage with it, creating additional complexity, cost, and delay for both employers and employees.

Different Industries, Different Experiences

Whilst the challenges were shared across sectors, delegates highlighted significant differences in how AI is being used within various workforces.

For organisations operating within manufacturing, logistics, and operational environments, AI was viewed as a valuable tool for employees whose first language is not English and for those who may benefit from additional communication support. In many cases, this has helped employees articulate concerns more confidently and participate more fully in workplace discussions.

However, participants also noted that the resulting submissions can be difficult to interpret, with some employees struggling to explain the content once they enter formal discussions.

In professional services environments, the challenge tends to look different. AI-generated outputs are often more detailed, sophisticated, and legally focused, creating increasingly time-consuming employee relations cases. Although the context varies, organisations across sectors reported facing the same underlying question: how do you separate genuine concerns from the volume of AI-generated content surrounding them?

Risk, Compliance and Governance

Alongside employee relations challenges, delegates explored the broader risks associated with AI adoption.

Recruitment was identified as an area requiring particular attention. Examples were discussed where algorithm-driven systems had produced unintended outcomes for certain groups of employees, highlighting the importance of careful

implementation and ongoing oversight. Organisations were reminded that responsibility for fair and lawful decision-making remains with employers, regardless of the technology being used.

Data protection was another key consideration. As AI becomes embedded within workplace processes, businesses must ensure employees understand how data can be used appropriately and what safeguards are required. Strong governance frameworks, clear policies, and ongoing education were all highlighted as essential.

Participants also stressed that AI should support decision-making rather than replace it. Whether used during recruitment, investigations, disciplinary proceedings, or grievance processes, leaders must be able to demonstrate that decisions have been reached through human judgement rather than automated recommendations.

The Human Element: Returning to Resolution

Despite the focus on technology, the discussion repeatedly returned to one central theme: people.

Delegates explored the idea that workplace conflict rarely stems from the issue presented on paper. More often, disputes originate from underlying concerns relating to matters like relationships, communication, values, interests, or perceived fairness. Understanding these drivers remains critical to finding meaningful and sustainable resolutions.

Participants reflected on how employee relations processes have evolved. Historically, mediation and investigation served distinct purposes. Today, organisations are increasingly blending these approaches, seeking not only to establish facts but also to understand motivations, feelings, expectations, and desired outcomes.

A particularly powerful discussion focused on the importance of asking employees what success looks like in relation to resolutions. By exploring expectations early and testing proposed solutions, employers can often help individuals gain perspective before positions become entrenched.

There was also strong support for introducing mediation earlier. Too often, mediation is offered once relationships have significantly deteriorated. Delegates agreed that if organisations want employees to choose constructive dialogue over formal escalation, intervention needs to happen much earlier in the process.

Actions and Insights

Review Policies

Organisations should ensure AI policies clearly define acceptable use, responsibilities, and decision-making boundaries. Where policies do not yet exist, delegates agreed this should be treated as a priority.

Simplify and Clarify Processes

Many participants have started introducing measures designed to encourage concise grievance submissions and greater clarity around the issues being raised. The aim is not to restrict employee voice, but to support meaningful resolution.

Develop Manager Capability

Leaders and managers require greater confidence in handling difficult conversations, challenging assumptions, and addressing concerns before they escalate into formal processes. Human judgement remains a critical capability.

Prioritise Early Resolution

Informal dialogue, mediation, and expectation-setting conversations should take place before positions become fixed and AI-generated narratives take hold.

Closing Summary

The session reinforced that whilst AI is rapidly transforming workplace communication, employee relations, and dispute resolution, the most important challenges remain fundamentally human.

Organisations are navigating increasing volumes of information, more complex employee expectations, and new forms of workplace risk. Yet the core principles of successful people management remain unchanged. Trust, fairness, communication, and sound judgement are still the foundations of effective employee relations.

Delegates concluded that AI should be viewed as a tool rather than a solution. The organisations that thrive will be those that embrace the opportunities AI creates whilst maintaining strong governance, clear accountability, and a relentless focus on meaningful human connection. Ultimately, technology may influence how workplace issues are raised, but resolution still depends on people.

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