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Organizational Innovators: A Study of Workplace Intra-Employee Conflict Management Strategies

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Organizational Innovators: A Study of Workplace Intra-Employee Conflict Management Strategies

Abstract

[Excerpt] Whilst the issue of intra-employee conflict is clearly one that impacts today's organization, it is less clear how this conflict is addressed and resolved in contemporary workplaces. Previous research has often treated workplace conflict as homogenous, but it is important that different conflicts should be treated separately (Jehn and Bendersky 2003). The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the management of conflict in the workplace by examining this under-researched form of conflict and perhaps more importantly how organizations address this prevalent form of workplace dispute, if they do so at all. Specifically, by examining the diffusion of policies that address intra-employee conflict within Wales we aim to reveal the antecedents of this emerging form of conflict resolution.

The article also considers which type of policies these organizations are using to address this form of conflict. A review of intra-employee conflict resolution mechanisms is important because whilst there is an understanding of the nature of intra-employee conflict itself and also the impact of such conflict on workplace practices, there is little systematic knowledge of the manner in which such conflict is addressed in organizations. Thus, the following research questions are considered:

- Who are the firms which introduce intra-employee of conflict management policies?
- What practices are being used to address intra-employee conflict?

The article finds that there are particular types of firms often with a distinctive HR approach, which can be considered 'organizational innovators' in this area. The research also observes that organizations seem to adopt policies to address intra-employee conflict to fit in with a broader high performance or even unitarist approach to the management of HR.

Keywords

conflict management, intra-employee conflict, conflict resolution

Disciplines

Dispute Resolution and Arbitration | Human Resources Management | Labor Relations | Organizational Behavior and Theory

Comments

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Organisational innovators: A study of workplace intra-employee conflict management strategies.

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Introduction and Literature

The presence and impact of conflict in the workplace is increasingly a focus of both practitioner and academic work (see, for example: CIPD 2015; Lipsky et al. 2012; Roche and Teague 2014; Saundry, Latreille, and Dickens 2014). It has also been the subject of policy reform in the UK and the US (BIS 2011; Stone 2015). What is evident, from the focus on conflict in current research, is that in today's business environment the "management of conflict is a core part of the management of the employment relationship" (Teague, Roche, and Hann 2012, p. 581).

Whilst the importance of conflict as a research and policy area has grown, the focus has been on individual and collective conflict. A 2015 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that 38 per cent of UK employees experienced interpersonal or intra-employee conflict in 2014 (i.e. with colleagues and not with management). The levels of intra-employee conflict are likely even higher than these numbers as a result of a perception gap, whereby one party may often fail to perceive the existence of conflict in circumstances than the other party identifies as conflictual (CIPD 2015; Jehn et al. 2010).

Whilst the issue of intra-employee conflict is clearly one that impacts today's organization, it is less clear how this conflict is addressed and resolved in contemporary workplaces.

Previous research has often treated workplace conflict as homogenous, but it is important that different conflicts should be treated separately (Jehn and Bendersky 2003). The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the management of conflict

in the workplace by examining this under-researched form of conflict and perhaps more importantly how organizations address this prevalent form of workplace dispute, if they do so at all. Specifically, by examining the diffusion of policies that address intra-employee conflict within Wales we aim to reveal the antecedents of this emerging form of conflict resolution.

The article also considers which type of policies these organizations are using to address this form of conflict. A review of intra-employee conflict resolution mechanisms is important because whilst there is an understanding of the nature of intra-employee conflict itself and also the impact of such conflict on workplace practices, there is little systematic knowledge of the manner in which such conflict is addressed in organizations. Thus, the following research questions are considered:

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- What practices are being used to address intra-employee conflict?

The article finds that there are particular types of firms often with a distinctive HR approach, which can be considered 'organizational innovators' in this area. The research also observes that organizations seem to adopt policies to address intra-employee conflict to fit in with a broader high performance or even unitarist approach to the management of HR.

The development and impact of intra-employee tensions in the workplace

The changes in the modern workplace have created an environment where employees are increasingly working with others in teams (Gallie, Felstead, and Green 2004). The use of

team-working has developed as organizations seek increased flexibility and productivity as well as benefits such as more creative solutions and improved commitment and motivation (Jehn and Mannix 2001). Although teams offer many benefits, they bring with them potential problems, such as suppression of ideas and the notion of free-riding, which in turn may lead to conflict between colleagues (Jehn and Mannix 2001). These conflicts are further exacerbated through increasingly flat organizational hierarchies, as colleagues struggle to define work parameters and practices without managerial support to arbitrate differences of opinions (Jehn and Bendersky 2003). In addition to internal organizational structural changes, broader societal changes also mean teams are more diverse than ever before. Research evidence shows that diversity in a workplace is associated with increased levels of conflict (Casebourne et al. 2006; Jehn and Bendersky 2003; Saundry and Dix 2014).

Harris, Ogbonna, and Goode (2008) note that the fields of management and organizational studies have a body of evidence looking at the friction between colleagues, but that other fields of business literature have been remarkably slow to evaluate this area to any great degree with studies tending to examine the different forms of intra-employee conflict may take. Jehn and Mannix (2001), for example, identify three forms of intra-employee conflict – based on relationships, tasks, and processes. Research suggests that differences in personality (relationship conflict) or differences in style of working (task conflict) are the biggest cause of or contributor to conflict at work, leading to 44 per cent of all work place conflict (CIPD 2015). These studies, whilst noting intra-employee conflict exists, do little to develop an understanding of the mechanisms which are used to address disputes between colleagues.

Research also exists on the effects of intra-employee conflict in the workplace (Jehn and Bendersky 2003). Much of the research considers the negative effects of intra-employee conflict on workplace operations, focussing on lower motivation and thus reduced productivity and potentially the loss of employees (CIPD 2015; Rowe 1997). Although there are some exceptions, research portrays intra-employee conflict as an activity to be minimized or avoided (Harris et al. 2008). This is perhaps a narrow conceptualization and research does exist which identifies positive outcomes stemming from intra-employee disputes, which include the development of creativity by preventing groupthink (Amason and Schweiger 1994; Jehn 1997; Schweiger, Sandberg, and Rechner 1989). This, in turn, can lead to better decision making processes (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988). Whilst the positive effects of intra-employee conflict should not be overlooked, a strong argument can be made that this issue is one that should be addressed within organizational policy and procedure. In fact, Rowe (1997) explicitly notes that some of the the negative outcomes, such as lost productivity, can be ameliorated through a systematic management of the conflict. Thus, if intra-employee conflict is prevalent within organizations and empirical studies point to the benefits of addressing and resolving such conflict, then further research is needed to improve our understanding of the current approaches taken.

Intrapersonal conflict – a gap in the literature

Whilst we know that this form of conflict exists, is prevalent in today's workplace and can have a significant impact on the business of the organization, little research has been undertaken to evaluate and articulate how these forms of conflict are addressed and resolved in the workplace. The knowledge we do have around the resolution of intra-

employee conflict in the workplace tends to be based on small-scale studies, often in non-organizational contexts (Behfar et al. 2008; Jehn, Rispens, and Thatcher 2010). There are also meta-analyses of the literature in intra-personal conflict more generally, which develop statements on the processes that may be used to address such conflict (Jehn and Bendersky 2003). Several studies find that trust based, cooperative approaches can be effective in addressing intra-employee conflict (Blake and Mouton 1984; Jehn and Bendersky 2003; Jehn et al. 2010). What is clear from Behfar et al. (2008) is that for strategies to be effective, they need to focus on equity rather than equality or explicit rules. These strategies tend to be pre-emptive rather than reactive and applied consistently to all groups and all group members. Thus existing research does not reveal a huge amount about the overall trends and approaches used within organizations or the outcomes of these approaches in the workplace setting. This paper is distinctive in that it examines the use of intra-employee conflict management in a broad range of organisational types within the Welsh economy.

Organizational Innovators or Conflict Eliminators

Notwithstanding the paucity of research in the area of intra-employee conflict management, we now consider the types of firms that we might expect to see policies or practices to address this form of conflict. Whilst conflict exists in all organizations, the formal management of conflict, whether intra-employee conflict or otherwise, is not as pervasive. We contend that there are particular types of organization that are more likely to adopt policies to address intra-employee conflict. We argue that you may expect to find this type of policy in two particular types of organization. Firstly, in firms that are generally more innovative in the field of conflict management. Put another way, we argue that where

you see organizations who have developed policies around Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), for example, you might also expect these proactive organizations to have also established policies and practices addressing intra-employee conflict. Secondly, we argue that organizations where conflict is viewed as particularly dysfunctional or problematic to the effective functioning of the company are more likely to be innovative in their approach to conflict management. Here we argue that firms embodying a unitarist approach to the employment relationship may be more proactive in ensuring a harmony by pre-emptively addressing issues between employees and returning the organization to the shared agenda.

Whilst our knowledge of the management of intra-employee conflict is partial, the identification of the types of firms, which have developed innovative approaches to the management of conflict more generally is well-rehearsed (see, for example: Hann, Nash, and Heery 2016; Lipsky, Avgar, Lamare, et al. 2012; Lipsky and Seeber 2000b; Roche, Teague, and Colvin 2014). Within the context of this body of literature, the interpretation of what constitutes innovative practice is often the existence (or otherwise) of ADR type practices. Previous research has explored the impact of a wide range of factors on the presence of ADR approaches, with clear relationships to many institutional factors.

The industrial sector within which the organization is located appears to have impact on whether the organization adopts an innovative approach when designing its conflict management policies. Lipsky et al (2003) found that ADR practices are most likely to be located in the manufacturing sector. They argued that these US firms are more likely to have used ADR type practices, such as mediation, in the commercial sphere, for example in commercial contract disputes and as a result be responsive to adopting similar approaches

for internal conflict as well. Evidence for the use of commercial ADR in the UK is, however, more limited. The Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution identifies that there was a total of approximately 10,000 civil and mediation cases throughout the UK in total in 2016 up from 6000 in 2010 (CEDR 2016). Statistics show that these commercial mediation practices tend to be found in the service sector (i.e. finance, retail and insurance) within the UK (CEDR 2010). As a result, there is perhaps less potential for the experience of using ADR in other, commercial spheres to encourage its use in an employment context and where it does we may expect to see innovative practices in the service sector in the UK as opposed to the manufacturing sector.

Although the body of literature around the development of conflict management practices is extensive, little has been written on the impact of organizational age on conflict management strategies. A number of studies have examined the relationship between organizational age and HRM practices more broadly (Kochan and Barocci 1985; Millward, Bryson, and Forth 2000). The fact that organizational age appears to have an influence on HRM suggests that it might also impact upon the approach to conflict management, although the relationship is less than clear. It could be argued that in start-up phases, entrepreneurial firms will shy from policies and thus be unlikely to instigate formalized policy at all. On the other hand the cost-saving nature of older firms might result in them instigating additional policies which they feel will help control for costly conflict (Kochan and Barocci 1985). It is therefore unclear as to what effect, if any, the age of the organization can have on the existence of innovative conflict management.

The motivation for the introduction of innovative conflict management practices, including those relating to intra-employee conflict needs to be examined. Research in the field of conflict management more generally does suggest that there is some alignment between particular HR practices and the existence of particular conflict resolution practices (Rowe 1997). ADR practices are more likely to be found where an organization adopts a 'high-road' strategic approach, i.e. they focus on quality and innovation over cost (Roche and Teague 2012). According to existing research (Mahony and Klaas 2014; Saundry et al. 2014), these 'high-road' organizations are more likely to view conflict management as part of a broader HR strategy to maximize competitiveness through the use of employee engagement and voice, thus innovative dispute resolution is more likely in organization with a high commitment HRM or high performance work systems approach or related practices (Colvin 2004a; Roche and Teague 2011, 2012).

An alternative interpretation may be that high performance of high commitment HR policies and practices are symptomatic of or at least compatible with the adoption of a unitarist approach to management. The unitarist stance rejects the idea that conflict has a place within an organization (Fox 1966; Heery 2016). The manifestation of this rejection may be expressed in a number of forms, including employers actively seeking to elicit employee concerns and align interests of employees and employers (Bray, Budd, and MacNeil 2015). This alignment is seen, for example, through the existence of performance management, as well as broader High Performance Work Systems practices (Bray et al. 2015; Heery 2016). Thus, policies which address intra-employee conflict may also aid the alignment of goals in the employment relationship.

The role of line managers is viewed as critical to the implementation and execution of HPWS (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). Consequently, if there is a relationship between a unitarist stance and the development of conflict management in an organization as elaborated above, then we would expect to see a clear role for line managers. Recent studies have found that line managers play an important role in the instigation of innovative and effective ADR, being able to offer proactive responses rather than reacting to issues (Roche and Teague 2014), but research suggests that the time, resources and support for line managers to do this effectively is often absent (Saundry et al. 2014; Teague and Roche 2012). Therefore, an organization's HR policies and actors may be a key agent in explaining the diffusion of policies to address intra-employee conflicts.

The unitarist frame of reference may also be articulated through the rejection of trade unions from the employment relationship (Bray et al. 2015; Cullinane and Dundon 2014). This may be via explicit policies to inhibit the growth of unions or alternatively through policies that reduce the need for such bodies, for example through additional voice mechanisms (Kelly 1996). Evidence for the impact of management orientation toward unions on the adoption of conflict resolution practices more generally is mixed. Earlier research in the US linked the growth of dispute resolution mechanisms to a desire to restrict unionization of the workplace (Budd and Colvin 2005; Colvin 2004; Lipsky et al. 2003). However, more recent studies, suggest that dispute resolution techniques are now present in both unionized and non-unionized organizations (Lipsky, Avgar, Ryan Lamare, et al. 2012; Lipsky and Seeber 2000a; Roche and Teague 2012). It is worth noting that there is evidence that suggests that unionized and non-unionized firms use dispute resolution approaches differently (Barrett and O'Dowd 2011; Budd and Colvin 2005), with unionized organizations

focusing on practices that emphasize collective aspects of conflict. In this paper, we aim to examine the extent to which conflict management policies are part of a wider agenda to exclude unions from the employment relationship.

The remainder of this article will consider the pattern and diffusion of intra-employee conflict management policies amongst Welsh employers. The results aim to assess whether their development is a reflection of the presence of an Organizational Innovator, the type of organization who is implementing the approach to reflect a broader conflict management strategy, and/or whether this is part of a broader aim to reinforce a unitarist approach that attempts to 'manage' conflict out of the employment relationship.

Methods

Research Design

The research evidence presented in this article was collected using the survey method, which was chosen to provide representative data on the management of workplace conflict in Welsh private sector organizations. The questionnaire was adapted from that used by Teague et al. (2012) in their study of conflict management in the Republic of Ireland. Consultations with the Irish research team and the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas), the UK Government's employment service, both served to increase the validity of the research instrument. The questionnaire was piloted on a selection of local HR professionals which resulted in changes to some question wording and the addition of a small number of new questions.

The sample frame was derived using data from Companies House (the source of official data on the characteristics of UK employing organizations) to identify those organizations whose head office is located in Wales. The questionnaire was addressed to the senior HR specialist in the company who it was assumed would have responsibility for dealing with workplace conflict. In the event of it not being possible to identify an HR specialist, the questionnaire was sent to the company secretary or to a general management contact with a specific request in the covering letter that it be passed on to the most appropriate person. The questionnaire was distributed by post, with an option for electronic completion, and two follow-up reminders were issued.

A census was taken of all firms in our sampling frame and 352 valid responses were received, representing a response rate of 20 per cent. This level of response is in line with similar surveys, including that of Teague et al. (2012). The data were subsequently weighted to correct for differences in response rate by sector and organizational size. The results presented here are calculated using those weighted estimates.

Variables and analysis

The questionnaire first asked respondents to describe the nature and incidence of workplace conflict in their organization before going on to examine how firms manage this conflict. The survey also contained a number of contextual questions about the organization, and the wider HR policies and practices that have been implemented. Respondents were asked for details of their approach to managing three distinct forms of conflict that are defined as follows:

- Grievances involving individual employees in conflict with the organization (henceforth individual conflict)
- Disputes involving groups of employees in conflict with the organization (henceforth collective conflict)
- Contentious issues and disputes between employees or groups of employees (henceforth intra-employee conflict).

It is this last category of intra-employee conflict which is the focus of this article. The management of conflicts between employees or groups of employees was not included in Teague et al.'s (2012) Irish study but was added to the current study to reflect the increasing significance of this form of evinced by CIPD research suggesting that 40 per cent of conflicts fall into this category (CIPD 2015).

This research seeks to fill the gap in our understanding of the content of organizations' conflict management policies that was identified by Dix (2012). The focus of the article, therefore, is those organizations who have formal written conflict management policies that are applied consistently irrespective of the circumstances, as opposed to those who adopt a more ad-hoc approach to conflict management. In the analysis that follows a three-way classification is developed that captures the various conflict management strategies that are employed by Welsh organizations. The first category of firms are those who have no formal written conflict management policies and, therefore, rely on ad-hoc practices to resolve workplace disputes. The second category of firms are those that have developed formal written policies for certain types of workplace conflict but not for those disputes that occur between employees. These firms may have formal policies relating to disputes between

individual employees and the organization or to collective disputes relating to groups of employees but they have no formal approach to dealing with intra-employee disputes. The third and final category of firms are those whose formal conflict management policy does include this form of dispute.

The characteristics of these firms with innovative conflict management policies are analyzed in the following section using bivariate analysis to examine the potential influence of a range of demographic, institutional and strategic variables. The significance of these associations is tested using statistical techniques and are reported with the results.

Results

The diffusion of conflict management policies in the Welsh private sector are presented in Table 1. It is striking that the majority of respondents reported having no formal written conflict management procedures for any of the three categories of conflict (56 per cent), and that only approximately one quarter of organizations have instigated a formal policy around intra-employee disputes. What is equally clear from Table 1 is that there are particular types of organizations, which are statistically more likely to establish this type of policy than other.

[[Table 1 near here]]

The data in Table 1 indicate that there are differences in the demographics of the three categories of firms outlined above. Whilst organizational size and nationality of ownership do not appear to be related to the form of conflict management policy, industrial sector clearly is. Approximately three quarters of firms that do not have a formal policy that includes

intra-employee conflicts are found in the service sector, but the proportion is significantly higher (93 per cent) for firms that do have such a policy. Whilst superficially at odds with Lipsky et al. (2003)'s observation that more innovative conflict resolution practices are likely to be found in manufacturing, it does reflect the usage of commercial ADR within the UK.

There is also a significant association between an organization's age and the scope of its conflict management policy. Firms that include intra-employee disputes in their written policy are predominantly found at either ends of the age spectrum with 28 percent of them under ten years old and 55 per cent over twenty years old. This bifurcated pattern is distinct from that for firms who have no formal intra-employee conflict policy, where the distribution is more even. Thus, an organization's demographic characteristics appears to only have a weak association with the nature of its formal conflict management strategy with just sector and age found to be significant.

Previous research has found that the conflict management strategy that an organization adopts is an expression of a broader management orientation towards the employment relationship in general (Budd and Colvin 2005; Lipsky et al. 2003; Roche and Teague 2014). Table 1 presents data on the relationship between organizations' conflict management practices and their wider employment relations strategy. A higher proportion of firms with a formal intra-employee conflict policy have a specialized HR function than those without such a policy. What is also clear is that HR is also more commonly represented on the senior management committee in those firms that have adopted a policy addressing intra-employee conflict. Thus, the results show that firms with an intra-employee policy appear to place greater emphasis on a role for HR.

The results in Table 1 lend some support for the idea that there is a link between organizations' adopting a 'high-road' strategy, i.e. innovation and quality, and their adoption of innovative conflict management practices (Lipsky et al. 2007). Using the methodology used by Osterman (1994) respondents were asked to indicate the relative priority their organization placed on cost, innovation and quality. Table 1 presents a mixed picture but what is clear is that firms with a formal intra-employee conflict policy ascribe higher priority to both innovation and especially quality when compared to those firms whose formal policies contain no such provision.

The survey asked organizations about their adoption of specific 'high commitment' or high performance work practices and these are again broken down according to the coverage of the organization's conflict management policy. The analysis in Table 2 lends weight to the argument that HR and conflict resolution strategies may be related (Rowe 1997; Mahony and Klass 2014). A higher proportion of firms with innovative conflict management policies that explicitly cover intra-employee disputes are found to adopt a range of particular HR policies. The only area of policy where this relationship is not evident is pay and reward where the only statistically significant finding is that fewer firms with an intra-employee policy implement profit sharing or share ownership plans. In other areas of HR, the differences are striking. Seventy per cent of firms with an intra-employee conflict policy have adopted a formal performance management system, compared to around 40 per cent of firms whose conflict management policies do not cover intra-employee disputes. There is a similar pattern with respect to recruitment and retention with 54 per cent of firms with an intra-employee policy using personality based assessment in recruitment versus 19 per cent of firms with no provision for intra-employee disputes in their conflict policy. In short, the organizations that

are most likely to have established policies addressing intra-employee conflict are those that attempt to screen-out individuals who do not align with management interests and then manage behavior to ensure that this alignment remains.

[[Table 2 near here]]

Examining the role of line managers adds further support for the idea that innovative conflict management practices are disproportionately found in firms with a unitarist stance. The importance of line managers in implementing conflict management policies and indeed mediating in disputes more broadly is highlighted in existing literature (Roche and Teague 2014). The role of line managers in conflict management is presented in Table 3. It is striking that for every variable the proportion of positive responses is significantly higher in those organizations that have a formal intra employee conflict management policy. These results suggest that line managers are viewed as important actors in the management of conflict in these organizations and are provided with training and support to help them accomplish this task. This is seemingly at odds with earlier research (Saundry et al. 2015; Teague and Roche 2012) but it should be noted that there is still some doubt as to whether line managers are sufficiently confident to resolve workplace conflict without recourse to HR with just over half of respondents agreeing.

[[Table 3 near here]]

The survey investigated the potential impact of an organizations' relationship with trade unions on their conflict management strategy and the results are also presented in Table 3. Whilst the presence of trade unions appears to be unrelated to the type of conflict

management policy the organization adopts, management approach to unions does appear to be significant in this regard. Overall, over three quarters of all firms reported that developing a less adversarial employment relations climate was an aim of their conflict management strategy, although the figure was highest for those firms without a formal intra-employee conflict management policy. Although an explicit anti-union stance does not have a statistically significant impact on the existence of intra-employee policies, policies which encourage the development of a non-union workplace do appear to be relevant. Thirty-four per cent of firms with such a policy stated that preventing unions from extending their influence into the organization was an important influence. This figure is significantly higher than for the other categories of firms and supports the findings of research in the US that found that the growth of dispute resolution practices was partially motivated by the desire to prevent the spread of unionization (Budd and Colvin 2005; Colvin 2004). The results in Table 3 suggest that firms which adopt innovative intra-employee conflict management policies place greater emphasis on internal actors over third-party actors in resolving disputes.

The provision of employee voice mechanisms that make efforts to elicit employee concerns whilst seeking to create an environment that precludes space for unions is highly consistent with a unitarist approach. Our research finds the area of HR policy where the presence of intra-employee policies is most pronounced is employee voice and engagement. Formal employee voice channels such as employee satisfaction surveys, focus groups and staff forums/consultative committees are more commonly found in firms adopting innovative conflict management policies that cover intra-employee disputes. The same is true of informal voice mechanisms such as regular coffee or lunch sessions that redesigned to identify areas of concern for employees. In terms of employee engagement, there is a

positive association between the adoption of formal team-working and the inclusion of intra-employee disputes in the organization's conflict management policy, which is perhaps unsurprising given the potential for team-working to generate disputes between employees and is in line with earlier research into the diffusion of ADR (Colvin 2004).

So far, the analysis has focused on the organization and institutional characteristics that are associated with the management of intra-employee conflict. In Table 4, the content of these formal conflict management policies is analyzed. The survey asked firms to indicate the use of 16 conflict management practices which have split into two groups according to whether they are pre-emptive and aimed at resolving disputes early or preventing them altogether, or whether they are more reactive in nature and designed to deal with disputes that have become established. The two leftmost columns show how the use of these practices differs according to whether the organization has a formal policy relating to intra-employee conflict. The right-hand column indicates the presence of the various mechanisms within the intra-employee policy itself.

[[Table 4 near here]]

The analysis in Table 4 reveals a number of significant findings. Firstly, it is striking that of all the conflict management practices listed by far the most commonly used are written disciplinary and grievance procedures that escalate up through progressively higher levels in the organization. Moving beyond these traditional forms of conflict management mechanism the results in Table 4 show that over half of the innovative ADR practices listed are more commonly found amongst firms that have an intra-employee conflict policy. Of the five practices for which these differences are significant (mediation, early use of Acas, open door

policies, employee advocates and personal development planning) four are more common amongst such firms. These results are consistent with Behfar et al.'s (2008) analysis that strategies for resolving intra-employee conflicts need to be pre-emptive rather than reactive. These findings also strengthen the earlier analysis that firms with intra-employee conflict policies tend to be organizational innovators in the field of conflict resolution.

Finally, the figures in table 4 suggest that the decision to implement intra-employee conflict management policies is one of conscious innovation. A higher proportion of organizations with intra-employee conflict policies reported having changed their policies in the preceding five years compared to firms with no such provision (60 per cent and 37 per cent respectively). Similarly, the figures show that a far higher proportion of these firms undertake formal audits as to the effectiveness of their conflict management practices and mechanisms (20 per cent versus 7 per cent for the sample as a whole). The same pattern is repeated in terms of the use of external consultants to review and advise on conflict resolution strategies with 30 per cent of firms with an intra-employee policy using them and just half that number for other firms. The audits and recent changes show a distinct pattern of behavior within these organizations, although the motives for these changes are less clear.

Discussion and conclusions

This article seeks to shed light on the management of intra-employee conflict in the workplace. What is clear from this analysis is that there are particular types of firms which choose to employ strategies which address this growing form of conflict. The defining characteristics of this type of firm are that they appear to be either those that establish

these policies because they are striving to develop advanced conflict management practices or those that do it to eradicate conflict which they view as a dysfunctional part of work life, or in fact a combination of both.

Our results suggest that the diffusion of intra-employee conflict management is not random. The findings broadly confirm the assertion that organizations which are generally more innovative in the area of conflict management, are also more likely to instigate a policy around intra-employee conflict management. The finding that firms in the service sector are more likely to implement policies that specifically deal with intra-employee conflict is consistent with Lipsky et al. (2003)'s hypothesis that exposure to ADR type strategies in the commercial sphere has isomorphic properties. However, whilst the results show that implementation of intra-employee policies is influenced to some degree by a range of organizational characteristics, the data is more convincing that the deciding factor is not who they are (i.e. size, sector, age), but rather what they do (approach to HR strategy more generally).

Our research suggests that organisations adopting unitarist management strategies are more likely to also embrace intra-employee conflict management policies. This unitarist orientation may manifest itself through a focus on the quality of their product and the consequent need for a stable and contented workforce. The role of HR is evident in the adoption of targeted recruitment strategies that screen out employees who do not fit with the approach of the organization and policies, such as formal performance management and employee voice with a clear role for line-managers in managing intra-employee conflict. These organizations tend to adopt an approach to conflict management that precludes any role for trade unions. This non-union rather than anti-union approach paints a picture of what Purcell and Ahlstrand

(1993) would consider sophisticated modern employers, who put a premium on making the most of individuals within a workplace and adopt a unitarist approach to doing so. This desire to utilise individual employees, and by doing so limiting a role for unions, would further resonate with the aim of these type of companies in terms of them developing quality-driven strategies over cost-based ones.

Further, firms adopting formal intra-employee conflict policies made greater use of more innovative ADR policies that are cooperative and designed to build trust. The proactive attempt to align interests rather than wait for conflict to occur sits comfortably with the unitarist position on conflict. Pre-emptive approaches to resolving disputes are, according to existing research (Behfar et al 2008, Blake and Mouton 1984; Jehn and Bendersky 2003; Jehn et al. 2010), also the most likely to be effective in addressing this form of conflict.

This research contributes to an emergent understanding of whether and how intra-employee conflict is being resolved within Welsh organizations. It is not yet clear whether these organizations have stumbled into these approaches to intra-employee conflict or whether this has been a conscious strategy to both develop best practice through the resolution of this form of conflict or more broadly reinforce the organization's unitarist management style. The fact that many of these organizations have undertaken recent audits of their conflict management policies would suggest an element of strategic thought behind the choices, but further, qualitative research is needed to understand the motives behind the adoption of policies designed to resolve intra-employee conflict.

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Table 1 - Characteristics of employers with formal conflict management policies

	Formal Written Conflict Management Policy		
	No formal policy (%)	Excludes IE disputes (%)	Includes IE disputes (%)
All firms	56.6	20.0	23.4
Size			
Small (<50 emps)	98.0	97.1	95.2
Medium (50-199 emps)	1.5	2.9	3.6
Large (200+ emps)	0.5	0.0	1.2
Sector			
Manufacturing	22.6***	25.7***	7.2***
Services	77.4***	74.3***	92.8***
Nationality of ownership			
UK owned	93.9	93.0	98.8
Foreign owned	6.1	7.0	1.3
Age of Organization			
<10 years	15.1***	26.5***	28.0***
10-19 years	33.2***	33.8***	17.1***
20+ years	51.8***	39.7***	54.9***
Union Recognition			
Unionized	9.9	16.2	17.1
Non-unionized	90.1	83.8	82.9
Specialist HR function			
Yes	25.9**	18.6**	37.8**
No	74.1**	81.4**	62.2**
Basis of competition ¹			
Innovation	107.6***	81.0***	96.3***
Quality	156.1***	112.5***	156.7***
Approach to conflict resolution has changed in the last 5 years	22.4***	36.8***	59.8***

*** significant at .01; ** significant at .05; * significant at .1

¹ These are absolute values relative to a benchmark (price=100) following the methodology used by Osterman (1994)

Table 2 - HR policies by coverage of dispute policy

	Disputes covered by formal written procedure			
	All firms %	No formal Policy %	Excludes IE disputes %	Includes IE disputes %
Performance Management				
A formal performance management system	46.7	38.7***	42.3***	69.9***
Pay and Rewards				
Individual performance-related pay	25.6	26.5	25.7	23.2
Group performance-related pay	10.0	12.1*	11.4*	3.7*
Profit sharing/share ownership	9.1	7.5***	19.7***	3.7***
Recruitment and Retention				
Applicants assessed for values, attitudes or personality to fit with company culture	29.5	23.5***	18.6***	53.7***
A policy of no compulsory redundancies	5.4	5.5**	0.0**	9.8**
Internal career progression as a formal objective for most employees	24.5	25.1	15.7	30.5
Employee voice & engagement				
Regular coffee/lunch sessions to identify areas of concern for employees	42.5	39.2**	36.6**	55.4**
Periodic employee satisfaction surveys	36.9	39.0***	18.6***	47.6***
Focus groups to identify areas of concern for Employees	11.4	7.0***	12.7***	20.7***
Staff forum/consultative committee	11.7*	10.1*	8.6*	18.3*
Formally designated team-working	19.3	12.5***	18.6***	36.6***
Policy Review				
Formal audits of conflict resolution practices and mechanisms	6.8	4.0***	0.0***	19.5***
Use of external consultants to review and advise on conflict resolution practices	15.1	9.5***	14.3***	29.3***

*** significant at .01; ** significant at .05; * significant at .1

Table 3 - The actors of conflict management

	No formal Policy	% of firms Excludes IE disputes	Includes IE disputes
Presence of Specialist HR			
Firms have a specialist HR manager/department	25.9**	18.6**	37.8**
HR is represented on the senior management committee	80.4***	23.1***	83.9***
Role of Line Managers (% agreeing)			
Line managers are formally trained to handle disputes	27.7***	48.6***	61.0***
Line managers are required to hold face to face meetings with staff to gauge areas of concern	69.1***	64.3***	92.7***
Line managers' competence in dealing with employment relations is formally assessed in their performance appraisal	45.3***	62.0***	74.7***
Line managers are provided with formal support to resolve employee problems	77.5***	85.7***	93.4***
In practice line managers have the confidence to resolve workplace conflict without the need for HR/senior management	49.7*	44.3*	51.9*
The company recognizes (one or more) trade unions			
Management's general attitude towards trade unions	9.9	16.2	17.1
In favor	5.8	18.8	13.6

Neutral	72.8	62.5	75.0
Not in favor	21.4	18.8	11.4
IR Objectives of the Conflict Management Strategy			
Developing a less adversarial employment relations climate	70.2***	91.4***	75.9***
Preventing unions extending their influence into, or within, the company	16.5***	4.3***	34.2***

*** significant at .01; ** significant at .05; * significant at .1

Table 4 - Incidence of conflict management practices by coverage of policy

	Use of conflict management practice		
	Firms without IE policy %	Firms with IE policy %	Within IE policy %
Pre-emptive policies			
Mediation	19.7***	42.8***	28.0
Early use of Acas	27.1***	10.8***	6.7
Formalized open-door policy	34.3**	53.0**	34.0
Employee hotline or email 'speak-up' service	4.2	3.7	3.5
HR managers as employee advocates	16.9***	36.6***	31.4
Review panels	21.4	19.5	15.4
Formal communication regarding impending change	45.1	49.4	28.5
Problem solving and related techniques	62.9	52.4	49.2
Coaching	38.0	31.3	26.3
Personal development planning	48.6***	69.5***	52.5
Interest based 'win-win' bargaining techniques	11.4	20.5	12.6
Reactive policies			
Written disciplinary procedures	92.9	96.4	84.6
Written grievance procedures	92.9	96.4	81.5
Use of Acas as a last resort	14.3	22.0	9.4
Use of External arbitrators	15.7	26.5	15.4
Use of company ombudsman	0.0	3.6	3.1

*** significant at .01; ** significant at .05; * significant at .1