

GOING VIRAL: SOCIAL MEDIA, AI AND THE NEW ER PLAYBOOK



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ABOUT CRF

Corporate Research Forum (CRF) is a research-led learning network dedicated to building the capability of HR leaders and their teams to drive organisational performance.

Through more than 30 years of research and practical expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes – what works, what doesn't and in what circumstances. We support our network of over 275 organisations through an evolving programme of evidence-based insights: delivering expert led events, facilitated peer exchange, personalised and timely answers through our AI research tool and impactful technology-enabled learning – all informed by research and shaped by practice. Our focus enables HR to become a more strategic, future-ready function delivering consistent and measurable value tailored to the needs of your organisation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a century, employee relations has been viewed through two lenses: **interests** and **structures**. Whose interests are at stake, and through which structures should they be reconciled? This report argues that a third factor now determines how employee relations works. This is the **informal network** – who employees trust, who shapes their views, and how information and sentiment spread through the organisation.

That network has always been present, working invisibly, but has been weakening for years. Successive waves of restructuring have removed the long-tenured “connectors” who did the organisation’s interpretive work, helping colleagues understand what an announcement really meant and resolving tensions before they became formal disputes. Social media is filling the vacuum, becoming the place where employees make sense of work, benchmark their employer and organise their discontent – quickly and publicly, often without any means of resolving the underlying issues. AI is now arriving on both sides of the employment relationship at once. Employers are deploying AI assistants at the interface where trusted colleagues once stood, while employees use the same tools to research, draft and escalate grievances at unprecedented length and pace.

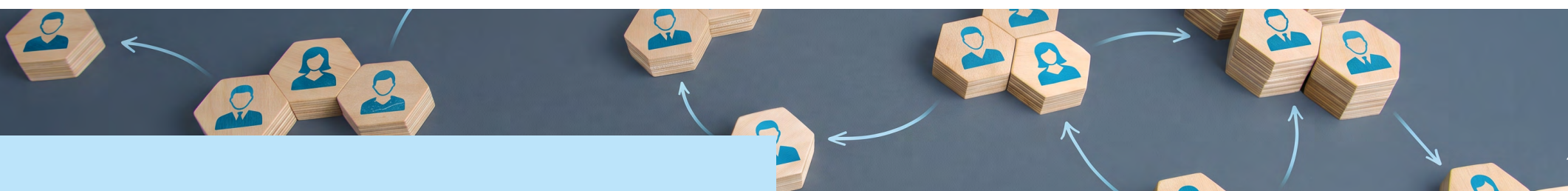
The four case studies at the heart of this report show what this looks like from inside, and they highlight three factors:

First, they highlight the importance of informal networks in distinguishing **noise** from **risk**. In the past, genuine risk outweighed noise, because the informal organisation filtered issues before they became formal. That relationship has inverted. Noise now exceeds underlying risk, and at sufficient volume, noise itself creates risk. One case reported a twenty-page grievance accompanied by a zip file of email correspondence analysed by AI; another, a “27-page ChatGPT letter” where a half-page representative’s letter once sufficed. At the same time, social media has shifted power away from employers *and* unions alike. Neither can control the conversation as they once did.

Second, they show that a **new playbook** exists, and it can take more than one form. Our financial services case has gone furthest in building a *designed* network of volunteer squads, culture catalysts, learning communities and thousands of AI champions. These are supported by data dashboards and connected to leaders with authority to act, with the unions brought inside the change rather than consulted after it. Our passenger transport case has rebuilt the network by deliberately *human* means: replacing appraisals with conversations, holding briefings in depots and tying manager bonuses to engagement. The guiding principle is “it’s all about the informal. If we are in grievance and discipline, we have lost.” The two approaches look different but follow the same logic: rebuild the connective tissue, wire it to resolution, and then measure it.

Third, they are realistic about **constraints**. Our logistics case recognises the new playbook but judges it “too big a leap at the moment” for a stressed, cost-constrained business in the middle of structural transformation. That candour matters, as the gap between awareness of what needs to change and capacity to deliver is the reality for most organisations. The report’s recommendations focus on practical steps they can take within those constraints.

The report closes with a new playbook of **seven practices** distilled from the cases. It highlights what it means for the ER function itself, which faces the same pressure to do more with less as the workforces it serves. The practical agenda covers three horizons: what any ER function can do this quarter with what it already has; how to rebuild the connections over one to two years; and how to redesign the system in the longer term. This requires treating the informal network as the primary asset and focus of employee relations because, as our cases show, everything else now depends on it.



1. INTRODUCTION

The shifting interplay of interests, structures and networks

Employee relations has a well-established grammar of its own. Identify the **interests** at stake and design the **structure** to reconcile them. The paternalist **welfare schemes** of the early twentieth century, the **collective bargaining** machinery of mid-century, the **grievance procedures, works councils** and **engagement surveys** that followed — these are very different answers, but they share the same underlying approach: identify the interests, then work them through bespoke structures.

That grammar worked because the structures rested on dense, trusted informal relationships. The canteen, the shop floor and the long-service veteran told people what an announcement ‘really meant’, absorbed friction before it became formal, and made consultation credible when it happened. Organisational research has understood the power of this informal layer for decades: Granovetter’s foundational work showed that it is often the “weak ties” between groups that carry the most consequential information (Granovetter, 1973), and Krackhardt and Hanson described the informal network as “the company behind the chart” — the place where work and meaning actually flow, whatever the organogram says (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993). These informal relationships were largely taken for granted, with little explicit recognition of the effort needed to sustain them or the risk that they might weaken.

Our contention is that this third element, the **informal network**, which is so often just assumed or understood, now determines whether employee relations works at all. Even with a clear view on interest, and the best designed structures and processes, without attention to networks, the whole edifice collapses. In most large organisations these networks have been quietly coming apart for years. Social media has filled the vacuum that has been created, taking over the sense-making role. AI is now arriving on top.

The rest of this report is about what that means and what to do about it.

One of our interviewees put the practical consequences starkly. His organisation’s employee relations, he said, is now governed by the difference between **noise** and **risk** — yet the machinery his function inherited was designed for an era when informal networks helped distinguish between the two before issues reached the ER team. It no longer works, “and a new playbook is needed now.” Another, from a very different industry, arrived at the same destination from the opposite direction: “It’s all about the informal. If we are in grievance and discipline, we have lost.” This report considers the implications of what sits between these two quotes.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report is the product of:

- a desk review of the academic and practitioner literature on employee voice, social media, organisational networks and AI at work.
- in-depth interviews, conducted in July 2026, with senior employee relations and people leaders in four large organisations: an energy company, a financial services company, a logistics company and a passenger transport company. Each interview summary was shared back with the interviewee for confirmation.

The case organisations are deliberately not named. Each employs tens of thousands of people in the UK. They span the full range of employee relations contexts, from largely non-unionised professional workforces to some of the most highly organised industrial environments in the country. Direct quotations are drawn from the interviews. References are listed at the end.

The report is written for senior employee relations leaders in the UK, and for anyone interested in how the connective tissue of organisations is changing. It is practitioner-led: the argument was tested against practice, and practice has amended the argument. Where the two conflict, we have sided with practice.

2. FIVE FORCES RESHAPING EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

2.1 Restructuring removes the connectors

In any organisation, a handful of people carry most of the connections. Network researchers have repeatedly found that information flow, influence and even innovation depend disproportionately on these brokers who span the gaps between groups (Burt, 2004; Cross and Parker, 2004). They are the people everyone goes to when they want to know what is really happening.

Ongoing restructuring since 2008 has disproportionately removed these people, who tend to be expensive, long tenured and often hard to justify on a spreadsheet. Each reorganisation then does more damage than the last, because fewer connectors remain to absorb the shock. Complete's organisational network analysis shows how vulnerable organisations can become when connectivity depends heavily on a small number of people. "Across our client work, we see examples of fragmented networks, disconnected groups and disproportionate reliance on key connectors – patterns that can create significant risk when those people leave or organisational structures change."

The damage remains hidden at first, because old relationships persist in memory and habit after the organisation chart has moved on. We call these **ghost networks**. Everything appears to work until the people holding them retire or leave at which point the loss becomes suddenly apparent, often misdiagnosed as a problem with engagement, management capability or leadership.

The interviews bore this out in detail. In the energy company, the ER leader described the old networks as trusted colleagues, representatives and line managers – the people who were an employee's first port of call and who brought context and nuance to a problem. Those networks have faded. "The human interface has gone." In the passenger transport company, management ratios of one to 150 meant that the only conversations managers had with staff were disciplinary ones. "No one ever talked to anyone to tell them they were doing a good job." At those ratios managers had neither the time nor the knowledge. This has often been made worse by the trend to outsource or automate the first line of HR response.

2.2 Social media took over the sense-making

Into the vacuum came social media. The academic evidence is now substantial: WhatsApp groups, Reddit threads, review platforms and internal anonymous channels have become voice mechanisms in their own right, making employee sentiment visible to large audiences and giving people direct access beyond their line manager (Khan and Wilkinson,