Your organization may handle employee complaints and workplace disputes adequately but how well are you tracking and auditing these incidents? Do you know the types of complaints that arise most frequently, for example? Are you seeing any patterns related to discrimination, sexual harassment, workplace bullying or an unsafe work environment? Is one of your locations or functional areas particularly prone to complaints? Is your Employee Relations group resolving these issues consistently and without further legal incident? What are the impacts to retention, productivity, your employment brand and overall employee relations?

Just one sexual harassment case or discrimination lawsuit can cost a company dearly.

How U.S. Employers Manage and Track Complaints

If you don’t have easy access to this critical data, you’re not alone. According to a 2012 survey conducted by the HRmarketer Services Group, 72 percent of U.S. employers say they do not produce audit trail reports for their employee complaints, despite the fact that just one sexual harassment case or discrimination lawsuit can cost a company dearly in terms of its bottom line and its reputation.

Many of these companies have human resource management systems (HRMS) and talent management systems in place—but these systems typically aren’t built to archive and monitor sensitive matters such as disputes and grievances. If faced with legal action, these companies will have to try to cobble together audit trails from disconnected sources across the organization—emails, voicemails, paper forms and spreadsheets that may or may not have been accurately logged and retained by HR, managers and employees (see chart How U.S. Employers Manage and Track Complaints). Bottom line: the legal risks these employers face grow with every day that passes.
So the question is how can employers gather and leverage all of their employee complaint data effectively and without a huge investment of time and effort? With a robust HR case management system—one that unifies and automates complaint tracking, auditing and reporting.

Mitigate Risk with a Case Management System

HR case management systems are designed specifically to capture comprehensive information related to your employees’ interactions with Human Resources and Employee Relations. Having this information gives you three critical advantages: 1) it enables you to spot potentially dangerous trends and take appropriate action before they become litigious hot spots; 2) it improves your ability to prevent these types of issues from spreading or arising in the future; and 3) it improves the consistency with which you manage employee complaints and grievances.

“In fact, the number one error that Employee Relations makes is being inconsistent in the way it handles grievances and employee-related issues,” notes attorney and legal consultant, Clay Hartmann of the Hartmann Firm. “Inconsistency is at the root of many costly discrimination and retaliation claims in employment-related lawsuits.”

Hartmann also points out the often-overlooked costs of litigation: the weeks and months that a company must devote to gathering and preparing documentation, the loss of employee morale caused by a lawsuit, and the potential harm to an organization’s reputation and employment brand.

The risk for discrimination charges alone has escalated steadily for the past four years, according to the records of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In 2011, the EEOC received 99,947 discrimination filings—the most in its 46-year history. These filings encompassed retaliation, race, disability and age discrimination among others. The trend toward record numbers of EEOC filings is expected to continue due to the struggling economy, a bigger EEOC enforcement budget, and employee-friendly revisions to Equal Employment Opportunity laws.

Again, discrimination lawsuits are only one of many potential threats to your organization. The beauty of an HR case management system is that it captures all of your employee relations data, regardless of the type of case or complaint, and helps to reveal information that would otherwise remain buried in your files or disparate systems. The comprehensive audit trail and rich reporting that you get enable you to learn from your experiences. You can discover the root causes of complaints and disputes, and you can identify troubling patterns before they become widespread.
The Benefits of a Case Management System

At their core, HR case management systems are designed to arm your company with the information it needs to manage employee complaints more effectively. Companies that implement these systems reap a host of functional and strategic benefits.

1. **An HR case management system serves as a single, consistent repository for critical data.** At many companies, information related to a single dispute is spread across the organization—some with Employee Relations, some with managers, some in paper files, some on hard drives, etc. A case management system eliminates this disarray, serving as a convenient, consistent and secure data storehouse. (See the sidebar, *HR Case Management: One Company’s Experience.*) This aids in enhancing the integrity and accuracy of your data—and in tracking cases as they progress. Indeed, the solid audit trail the system provides is one of its greatest strengths.

2. **Hidden employee relations trends and patterns are revealed.** For instance, your CEO is concerned that Finance seems to be experiencing a wave of complaints from employees across the function. After a careful examination of the analytics, however, you see that the trend is limited to the direct reports of a single manager. Your case management system has shed light on a situation that might otherwise have remained hidden.

3. **Metrics help you determine where to deploy new policies or regulations, better training and education, additional coaching, etc.** Even the most advanced talent management systems can’t help you make these judgments. You need the comprehensive data archived and analyzed by a case management system.

4. **Cases are easily accessible even after they’re closed.** Again, companies that implement case management systems can learn from their experiences and apply what they’ve learned going forward. Past cases become models and a rich source of information for better outcomes in the future.

5. **Opening complaints, inputting data and updating cases are all simple and straightforward.** Truly sound HR case management systems are easy to use, which helps to ensure that managers and employees actually use the system. This is crucial to maximizing the system’s reporting capabilities and its ROI.

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**HR CASE MANAGEMENT: ONE COMPANY’S EXPERIENCE**

**THE COMPANY:**
VT Group, an international engineering firm:
- 15,000 employees
- Multiple decentralized business units
- Several HR and IT groups

**THE ISSUES:**
- No central repository or knowledge center to track cases and answer questions
- Records kept on paper
- Existing HR systems didn’t reveal the “whys” behind cases—only the when and where

**THE SOLUTION:**
Dovetail Support Suite for HR

**THE OUTCOMES:**
- Improved ability to spot employee relations trends and insights
- Improved HR service delivery and Help Desk function
- 55% reduction of time and resources needed for service delivery and Help Desk
- New system benefits all functions (Finance, IT, Operations, especially)—not just Human Resources & Employee Relations

Here are five of the most significant:

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Again, the benefits of an HR case management system are functional as well as strategic. HR is empowered to function more efficiently and cost-effectively while it also is given the insights it needs to take action before complaints become widespread or do damage to your reputation and bottom line.

The Power of Sound Case Management

For one international development firm, the benefits of implementing an HR case management system were immediately apparent—especially in terms of its HR department’s productivity and efficiency. With several individuals dedicated to handling employee relations issues, the firm’s HR team wanted to know how these people spent their time, where the employee relations issues were coming from and how efficiently these issues were being handled.

Prior to launching its system, the HR staff spent hours searching through old emails and other records to find information about the history of an employee issue. The firm’s new case management system, on the other hand, does this work in a matter of seconds. According to the company’s HR department, having a reliable platform that integrates and analyzes all of its employee interactions has been a huge advantage.

Kane Frisby, former head of Management Information Systems/HRIS at VT Group, an international engineering organization, says that an HR case management system helped bring order to the way his company handles employee interactions with HR. “Before we launched an HR case management system, we had no central repository for information,” Frisby observes. “Implementing a system not only resolved these problems but it also created a knowledge center that generates metrics and reporting filled with insights about our employee relations. Now we can see trends as they develop and do something about them.”

Unfortunately, too many companies don’t implement HR case management systems until they’ve been hit with legal actions—and then they’re forced to focus wholly on damage control. They lack the tools to examine why these incidents occurred and how they might have been prevented.

Your Human Resources and Employee Relations teams work diligently to protect your company’s reputation and safeguard its bottom line. Implementing an HR case management system not only helps you achieve these objectives but it also helps to ensure that you bring much-needed consistency and compliance to your employee relations.

About Dovetail Software: Dovetail Software delivers web-based case management and help desk software that manages and tracks employee interactions with HR—including employee grievances and general policy questions, payroll and benefits, recruiting-related questions and compliance issues. Our customers cite cost reduction of supplying support, increased productivity, access to complete records of employee interactions with HR, and visibility into analytics that help them improve their processes as key product benefits. For more information, visit www.dovetailsoftware.com.