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Reporting challenges for remote and hybrid workers

By Iveta Wentink, Lori Tansey Martens, and Jason Lunday

Despite increasing attempts to get employees back to the office, remote and hybrid work arrangements are a fact of life for most organizations and will be for the foreseeable future. Initial studies on the impacts of this shift indicate significant changes in intracompany communications, raising an important question for those in the ethics and compliance field: What risks do these remote and hybrid work realities pose, and how comfortable are these employees in raising concerns about misconduct?

Observations of misconduct

Solid evidence is emerging that one of the biggest impacts of remote work has been a decline in employee observations of misconduct.

According to the 2023 *Ethisphere Culture Report*, employee observations of misconduct from pre- to post-pandemic declined by 20%.^[1] This appears to be largely driven by remote employees, as the 2021 *Gartner Compliance Culture Survey* found that remote workers are 40% less likely to observe misconduct than their in-office peers (15% versus 26%, respectively).^[2] The differential between observations of misconduct between hybrid and in-office workers is significantly less: 23% versus 26%, respectively.

However, do these declines reflect an actual reduction in misconduct or simply fewer opportunities to observe its occurrence? Unfortunately, definitive data is lacking, but prudent ethics and compliance professionals should implement additional strategies to foster speak-up cultures and uncover violations of the organization's standards.

Types of observed misconduct

Among those observing misconduct, the most common types are generally consistent across remote, hybrid, and in-office employees. The 2021 *Gartner Compliance Culture Survey* found that while observations of some traditional compliance issues, such as discrimination and conflicts of interest, were lower among remote and hybrid employees, preferential treatment was considerably higher, observed by 49% of hybrid workers and 52%

of remote workers versus only 33% for their in-office colleagues. The most commonly observed misconduct for all groups was “bullying, intimidation, unwanted behavior,” with hybrid and remote employees reporting a substantially higher percentage than their in-office colleagues.

These higher rates of perceived favoritism and bullying may trace to remote workers having difficulty reading body language or contexts in some work-related situations. Technical glitches from teleconference software, cameras not turned on, or poor connections may make it challenging to understand whether someone is joking, being sarcastic, or deadly serious. These feelings and concerns can be exacerbated by time delays in transmitting information among team members, when teams delay or simply forget to inform remote workers of changes that may have occurred “on the fly” in the office. Remote and hybrid staff may also feel unfairly treated depending on what perks and opportunities in-office coworkers receive. However, the types of issues will vary depending on the company and how well it managed the shift to remote work.

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