

Understanding the Role of Contact Officers in the Workplace

A safe, inclusive, and respectful work environment doesn't happen by accident; it is built through intentional support systems. One of the most effective tools for maintaining this environment is the **Contact Officer** network.

This document outlines what Contact Officers are, their specific responsibilities, and why they are a vital asset to any modern organisation.

What is a Contact Officer?

A **Contact Officer** (sometimes called a Peer Support Officer or Harassment Contact Officer) is a trained employee who acts as a first point of contact for employees experiencing workplace issues such as bullying, harassment, discrimination, or victimisation.

They are **not** HR professionals, counsellors, or investigators. Instead, they serve as "supportive peers" who provide a confidential and safe space for employees to discuss their concerns and explore their options without fear of judgment.

The Role of a Contact Officer

The primary function of a Contact Officer is to empower employees to decide how they want to handle a situation. Their role can be broken down into four key pillars:

1. Providing a Listening Ear

They offer a neutral, non-judgmental space for employees to voice their concerns. This initial step often helps reduce the emotional distress or isolation an employee might be feeling.

2. Information and Education

Contact Officers explain the organisation's policies regarding workplace conduct. They help clarify what constitutes "bullying" or "harassment" under the law and the company's specific Code of Conduct.

3. Explaining Options

A Contact Officer helps employees understand the different paths available to them, which usually include:

- **Informal resolution:** Such as the employee speaking directly to the person involved.
- **Formal grievances:** Lodging an official complaint through HR.
- **External options:** Seeking advice from relevant legal or government bodies.

4. Referral to Support Services

If a situation requires professional intervention, the Contact Officer will guide employees toward internal or external resources, such as an **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** or specialised counselling. This ensures that the employee is never left to navigate their well-being alone.

What a Contact Officer does NOT do:

- Investigate the claims or interview other parties involved in a dispute.
- Tell the employee what they "should" do or make decision on their behalf.
- Advocate for the employee in meetings.
- Mediate or facilitate direct negotiations between the parties involved.

Benefits to the Organisation

Implementing a Contact Officer network provides significant strategic advantages beyond simple compliance:

Early Intervention and Conflict Resolution

By providing an informal channel for concerns, many issues are resolved at the "simmering" stage before they boil over into formal grievances, legal disputes, or resignations.

Increased Employee Confidence

Knowing there are trained peers available to talk to fosters a culture of psychological safety. Employees feel the organisation takes their well-being seriously, which boosts morale and engagement.

Data and Cultural Insights

While maintaining individual confidentiality, Contact Officers can provide de-identified, high-level feedback to HR about the *types* of issues being raised. This allows the organisation to identify systemic cultural problems or specific departments that may need additional training.

Reduced Liability

Demonstrating that the organisation has a functional, trained network of Contact Officers is a key component of "vicarious liability" protection. It shows the organisation has taken all reasonable steps to prevent and manage workplace harassment.

Comparison: Contact Officer vs. HR representative

Feature	Contact Officer	HR representative
Relationship	Peer-to-peer	Management/Employer rep
Primary Goal	Support and options	Resolution and compliance
Formal Action	No power to take action	Can initiate investigations
Confidentiality	Highly confidential*	May be required to act on info

**Exceptions apply if there is a risk of harm to self or others*

Discover the Benefits of Contact Officers

Pauline Tarrant and Kate Page are both facilitators of Contact Officer training. Leveraging expertise as Licenced Investigators, accredited AMDRAS Mediators and qualified in Mental Health First Aid.

Contact us today to learn how our bespoke workshops can help complaint and dispute resolution processes as well as enhancing psychosocial safety at work.

pauline@paulinetarrant.com, 0420 945 814 / kate@paulinetarrant.com, 0428 186 706

Definitions

Term	Definition
Bullying	Repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.
Harassment	Unwelcome conduct that a reasonable person would expect to offend, humiliate, or intimidate another person.
Discrimination	Treating a person or group less favourably than others because of a protected characteristic (such as age, race, or gender).
Victimisation	Subjecting someone to detrimental treatment because they have made, or intend to make, a complaint or report.
Employee Assistance Program (EAP)	A confidential work-based intervention program designed to enhance the emotional, mental, and general well-being of all employees.
Psychosocial Safety	A workplace climate where the psychological health and well-being of employees is prioritised, and workers feel safe to speak up about concerns without fear of negative consequences.