Taking the “Open-Door” Policy Global

Why—And How—An Effective Hotline Solution Can Help HR Professionals Build Trust And Keep Communication Lines Open Across A Global Organization
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Abstract

As more corporations expand globally, the situation presents new challenges and opportunities for HR professionals. What does an effective open-door policy look like when it’s deployed across multiple borders, time zones, languages, and cultures? And is a hotline the right tool for encouraging feedback and building trust among employees?

This paper covers the HR potential of the traditional hotline to organizations that maintain one or more locations, agents, or contractors outside the country, including:

• Reaching employees across multiple barriers of distance, language, and culture
• Gaining visibility and insight into a widely distributed enterprise
• Managing Title VII and other employee-relations issues in a global context

Plus, we’ll cover the seven essential hotline features to look for in a solution and the four best practices for creating and maintaining effective hotlines.
Traditionally seen as an enforcement and compliance tool, “whistleblower” hotlines are quickly becoming an essential part of the HR professional’s toolkit. But for HR departments managing global organizations, the value of a hotline goes far beyond simply identifying potential employee-relations disasters.

Today’s hotlines are sophisticated, two-way communication channels capable of drawing distant employees closer to the heart of the organization. Customizable, multilingual, and equipped with reporting and training capabilities, they’re helping HR professionals gain employee trust and protect employee interests more effectively in a global workplace.

The right hotline can overcome these communication issues and bring a globally distributed organization closer together in a number of ways. Designed with the global workplace in mind, today’s advanced hotline systems can be configured in hundreds of different languages and customized to reflect preferred terminology and culture. More importantly, communications flowing between the corporate head office and other locations can be expertly translated by hotline staff, effectively removing the language barrier and enabling employees to ask questions and receive the right response from the right person, even when the answer comes from halfway across the world. By the same token, HR professionals—who might otherwise be completely cut off from a remote workforce or reliant on local management to alert them of relevant issues—can receive valuable tips and information directly from employees.

Enabling employees to submit a report or ask questions anonymously and without fear of judgment or reprisal is just as important as empowering them to open a dialogue in their preferred language. Scrupulous standards of anonymity and protection are one of the hallmark attributes of a hotline—another reason to consider one when open communication is the goal. In addition to the “soft” benefits of a happier workforce, building a more inclusive corporate culture has the power to improve some key HR metrics, including staff retention and productivity.

Seeing Beyond The Horizon
Maintaining adequate visibility into the organization is harder when its borders stretch around the world. Here, too, hotlines can help, providing much-needed insight into a broader, more complex HR landscape.

The right hotline system will capture and file a complete record of all employee reports and follow-up activities. From an integrated online dashboard, HR professionals can see in granular detail exactly who is reporting an
issue, what that issue is, and what local management is doing about it. They can also identify and generate reports about organization-wide trends, including the type and frequency of reports from specific locations, offices, departments, countries, and much more. Access to this kind of information enables HR departments to keep a finger on the pulse of the organization and make better, more informed, more defensible decisions about how to allocate time and budget to specific HR activities, including on-site visits and training for remote locations.

**Faster Reaction Times, Better Outcomes**

Even in an era of instant email correspondence and overnight deliveries, managing HR issues in a timely fashion is challenging for global organizations. The distances involved, the time zones, the more complex chains of command, and the language barriers all conspire to slow reaction times. But when it comes to sensitive matters such as Title VII and other employee-relations issues, time is of the essence.

By fast-tracking communications between distant employees and the corporate head office, hotlines enable the organization’s most skilled and experienced HR leaders to respond swiftly to potentially explosive situations. Because local managers may not have the same high-level understanding of more complicated HR issues, they may not recognize the need to act swiftly and decisively. That means an employee complaint might sit on a local manager’s desk or in their inbox, waiting to be addressed or forwarded to the right party. Meanwhile, the situation may escalate quickly, or a frustrated employee may choose to take the issue to a lawyer or regulator.

A hotline system prevents this situation in two ways. First, employees are empowered to address their concerns directly to the highest management levels, giving corporate HR an opportunity to evaluate the situation and respond appropriately. A report can be sent from anywhere in the world and reach the right person’s eyes within minutes. Second, local managers or HR staff can use the hotline to ask questions and obtain clarification from the corporate head office. Instead of making arbitrary or uninformed decisions, they receive prompt and helpful guidance from official channels.

**Navistar Streamlines Communication**

As Navistar expanded into multiple states and countries, they knew they needed a way to keep communication flowing smoothly from each location to the corporate office. The Convercent hotline and case management system helped them open the lines of communication and build trust between employees and HR.

“Before we started using Convercent, the local HR person or manager conducted their own investigations according to their own interpretation of the rules, so the process lacked consistency”, said Carl Radford, Navistar’s Corporate EEO Program Manager.

Worse than incomplete information was no information: “Either the HR department wasn’t passing issues on to corporate, or HR didn’t even know about the issues because we didn’t have an HR person at that location. Either way, there were too many surprises. By the time corporate heard about it, it was too late. It was in litigation.”

With a hotline in place, Radford says, “Not only do we have knowledge of what’s going on, but we can manage it much better. This kind of system is critical for Fortune 500 companies. My recommendation to other companies would be to look at a system like this, not only to help employee morale, but to protect the corporation’s assets in terms of more limited exposure to litigation. In the end, you’re going to get some major cost savings.”
A fast response to HR issues protects not only the best interests of employees, but also the best interests of the company by minimizing their exposure to external investigations and legal action.

7 Essential Hotline Features

All hotlines are not created equal, and choosing one that fits your organization and reflects best practices can make all the difference to the success of your global HR initiative. Make sure the solution you choose meets these 7 criteria:

1. It’s Developed And Maintained Externally.
   Employees tend to trust hotlines maintained by third parties more than they do internally maintained systems. Submitting reports through an external hotline is perceived to offer an extra layer of anonymity and impartiality compared to a system developed in-house. A third-party provider is also more likely to come with specialist expertise that’s difficult to match within the organization.

2. It Supports The Collection Of Detailed Information.
   When more information can be gathered and recorded at every point during the complaint life cycle, HR officers have greater insight into the situation, and the company can protect itself more effectively from accusations of negligence or wrongdoing. Look for a system that offers consolidated, real-time access to data across all departments and locations, plus analytic capabilities that allow you to uncover trends and “hot spots”—issues that recur regularly or departments and locations with higher (or lower) than average reporting patterns. Ideally, the system will enable managers to open a file to record meeting notes before an employee has registered a formal complaint. All report materials should be consolidated in one comprehensive, chronologically organized file, so that you can monitor ongoing progress and make better, more informed decisions.

3. It Meets Your Company’s Data Retention Policies.
   Collecting rich data on report submissions and follow-up is essential, but retaining data in a manner consistent with your internal data retention policies is just as important. Make sure your hotline offers a secure, accessible report retention database, or you may be faced with making your own complicated and costly arrangements for transmitting and storing older reports to a permanent storage location.

4. It’s Designed To Inspire Employee Confidence.
   The fear of retaliation remains strong among reporting employees, and it can destroy the effectiveness of the internal reporting process and poison the corporate culture. To reassure employees and encourage participation, the hotline must be seen to offer the highest levels of protection and anonymity. The hotline should allow them to bring their concerns directly to someone outside their immediate chain of command or workplace environment—especially when the complaint concerns an immediate superior. Look for a system that connects employees directly to a high-level HR officer. Ideally, the submission process should also be set up to automatically block access to the report for any individuals named within it. The hotline should also enable employees to submit a report from the privacy of an off-site computer or telephone. It may seem like a small convenience, but giving employees the freedom to enter a complaint from a location that “feels safe” can make a huge difference to participation rates.

5. It Offers On-Demand Support From Subject Matter Experts.
   Opening the lines of communication can expose the HR team to new issues, and once those reports are entered into the system, the company has a responsibility to follow up in a timely manner. To ensure you’re ready to address
complex issues, invest in a hotline that provides access to complimentary consultations with experts in diverse fields. Look for hotline services offering specific expertise in areas such as employment law, workplace violence, substance abuse, forensic psychology, loss prevention, IT forensics, and corporate internal investigations.

6. It Provides Litigation Support And Avoidance Tools.
Make sure the hotline you choose is designed to meet the needs of all employees in every location, not just the needs of the corporate head office. Look for a system that can be customized to accommodate cultural differences and that offers multi-language capabilities for both online submission AND phone support. A hotline should act as a central hub through which employees from every location can communicate in their preferred language with their corporate head office.

A hotline should open the lines of communication and give you a direct sightline into the heart of the organization. Look for a system that enables you to connect directly, privately, and anonymously with the person filing a complaint. Being able to follow up as early as possible to request more information or clarify specific points helps you to determine the true scope of the issue and deal with it more effectively. Direct communication also signals to employees that their complaints are being heard at the highest levels.

4 Best Practices For Effective Hotlines
With a growing trend among third-party regulators such as the EEOC to appeal directly to employees for information, it’s more important than ever to create a corporate culture of openness, trust, and communication. A well-planned, well-executed hotline can help you discover and resolve internal issues before they escalate into very public and very costly situations. To encourage employee participation, follow these four best practices for hotline management:

1. Publicize.
If employees don’t know about the hotline, they won’t use it. Allocate a portion of your time and budget to promoting the corporate hotline through multiple channels. Put up posters and distribute cards that employees can keep in their wallets or desk drawers. Deliver in-person presentations where possible. And don’t think of the promotional initiative as a one-time effort. It’s important to remind employees regularly—through

“The reality is, people are going to sue. But now we can maintain an archive of historical issues that we have dealt with. If we’re notified of litigation and it’s a t or other employee-relations issue, we can go into Convercent and see whether the litigant has filed a complaint before, whether the corporation was aware of the issue, what our internal investigation turned up, and what we did about it.”

-Carl Radford, Corporate EEO Program Manager Navistar, Inc.
in-person communications, via email, or through intranets, newsletters, and so on—that this resource is available to them. Some hotlines offer promotional materials to help make the job easier. Make sure you ask what type of promotional support may be available.

2. Educate
Getting employees to use the system is one half of the challenge; ensuring they use it properly is the other half. This is where education becomes essential. Make sure people understand what types of activities or observations are appropriate for reporting and which are not. This will cut down on misuse of the system, reduce the time HR officers spend sifting through materials, and ensure the important issues stand out. HR and management staff may need training, too, to help them understand how the hotline impacts their day-to-day activities. Company leaders also need to understand the role the hotline plays in the organizational culture, and the importance of their visible support for this initiative. For every audience, face-to-face interaction and training tends to be more effective than more passive educational outreach, such as training manuals that sit on a shelf.

3. Analyze
When a hotline is sophisticated enough to enable extensive data collection across the organization, it becomes a powerful analytical tool. Don’t waste the opportunity to learn more about the HR landscape within your company. Use the data to identify unexpected trends or issues. For example: what percentage of employees are using the hotline? And what types of issues are they submitting? A healthy system will yield reports from 0.5 to 2% of your employee base. If your reporting patterns are higher or lower, it may indicate mistrust of the hotline, misuse, or a widespread employee-relations breakdown. Isolate the data by location and department to identify micro-trends that could indicate problems within a subset of your corporate culture. Analyzing the data can help you stay a step ahead of emerging issues and train your HR staff to prepare for them effectively. Data analysis can also help you allocate resources more efficiently by identifying the locations most in need of training or in-person visits from corporate HR staff.

4. Respond
By responding promptly and appropriately to hotline complaints, you’ll ensure robust participation and ongoing success. Even when a complaint proves to be unfounded, it can still provide an opportunity to open a dialogue with employees and clear up any misunderstandings. When people see that their concerns are heard clearly and addressed fairly, they will learn to view the hotline as a valuable conduit. Responding to reported issues also gives HR professionals a chance to prove that issues can be resolved or addressed while protecting the privacy and anonymity of the employees involved. Seeing the system in action in this way can go a long way towards dispelling fears of being ostracized or experiencing retaliation.

Facing Potential Litigation Confidently
No HR professional relishes the thought of litigation, but it’s important to be prepared for the possibility. Make sure your hotline is preconfigured to meet the legal requirements for document retention, attorney work product protection procedures, and attorney privilege. Developing these tools in-house can add significantly to your costs, and maintaining a hotline without one exposes your organization to unacceptable risk. Surprisingly, not every hotline offers an built-in legal framework, so look before you leap.
About the Author

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About Convercent

Convercent is the first SaaS product that modernizes the way companies bring their values, culture, policies and compliance activities together with a positive employment engagement experience. Hundreds of companies rely on Convercent to systematically align corporate values with individual behavior to create thriving, productive and compliant cultures of engaged, high-performing employees. Based in Denver, Convercent funding is led by Azure Capital Partners and Mantucket Capital.