



**Employment & Labor  
Group**

# **THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE EMPLOYEE RELATIONS & LABOR RELATIONS FUNCTIONS**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRATEGIC,  
BIGGER-PICTURE MINDSET**

**CHRO GUIDE**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The advent of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Biden administration wrought immense change in the labor relations landscape. The pandemic – and particularly the lines it drew between desk and deskless workers – helped bring about a resurgence in employee voice, and, consequently, a renewed interest in union membership. A surge in union organizing activity (including at several high-profile companies) as well as unprecedented strike actions have captured considerable media attention and put many employers on the defensive. Notably, this surge has the full-throated support of the current administration, which has used all possible levers of government power to tip the scales in favor of organized labor.

***The pandemic brought about a resurgence in employee voice and a renewed interest in union membership.***

**This challenging labor relations environment** comes at a time when the in-house labor relations and employee relations function is in flux. While many employers have leveraged HR expertise to adapt to and meet the needs of rising employee voice, traditional labor relations experience– including the ability to deal directly with unions and engage in collective bargaining – appears to have atrophied in the years since the Obama administration. Many employers have reported the need to bolster their in-house labor relations teams – both the number of resources and level of experience - to better handle the current environment, which has seen unions begin to make inroads into industries and companies that have never before been at risk of worker organizing.

**HR Policy Association, through its Employment and Labor Group**, has heard many of these concerns from member companies over the last 24 months. Accordingly, we undertook this project to examine the evolution of the employee relations and labor relations role within our member companies and the key skills and characteristics of those who perform it. In essence, our project aimed to answer the question: How and why has this role changed, where is it going, and what are the implications for member companies?

**We hope this report provides a clearer understanding of** the employee relations and labor relations role, its importance to successful organizations, and the profile of a successful practitioner.

**The findings of this project were reached through two main sources of information:**

- 1. A series of in-depth interviews with more than a dozen labor relations and employee relations practitioners, as well as Chief Human Resource Officers, conducted in the fall of 2023.***
- 2. A comprehensive survey of more than 40 labor relations and employee relations practitioners conducted in 2023 and 2024.***

# Employee Relations and Labor Relations – What’s the Difference?

It is important to understand what we mean when we say “employee relations” vs. “labor relations.” Understanding how companies define and use these terms was an initial threshold goal – if a simple one – of this project.

## EMPLOYEE RELATIONS OR LABOR RELATIONS?

**Through our conversations with different leaders** and practitioners in this field, we gleaned that these terms were often used interchangeably. However, the main difference between their usage centers on the presence of unions. “Employee relations” was most often used in reference to workforces without unions – conversely, “labor relations” was generally only used in reference to teams with unionized workforces.

***While the terms are often used interchangeably, the main difference between their usage centers on the presence of unions.***

**The simple takeaway:** although there are exceptions and variance amongst companies, nearly every company has “employee relations” teams, while only companies with unionized workforces have dedicated “labor relations” teams. In the latter circumstances, these groups were usually couched within the overall “employee relations” teams.

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**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

1



***Experience***

The labor and employee relations function is filled by individuals with many years of legal and/or HR experience. Labor and employee relations teams are often relatively small (10 or less people) with leaders that directly report to the CHRO or a similar HR executive.

2



***Focus***

The labor and employee relations practitioner focuses primarily on internal complaint and investigation handling, HR policy design and implementation, and coordination with outside counsel. For labor relations teams, the primary focus is collective bargaining and union avoidance. In either case, the list of responsibilities continues to grow in response to a resurgence in employee voice and more complex external factors.

3



***Relationships***

The key relationships of the employee and labor relations function are with HR teams and HR business partners, and to a lesser extent, the CHRO.

4



***Knowledge***

The successful labor and employee relations practitioner balances and translates legal risks, business goals, and employee voice into sound, coherent policies consistent with company culture. Leaders must be able to operate comfortably in higher-risk environments and deliver proactive labor and employee relations strategies that are readily adaptable to external factors.

5



***Moving Forward***

As employee voice continues to reach a crescendo and organized labor increases its reach, employee and labor relations leaders will be tasked with a growing set of responsibilities – with, more often than not, less resources.

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Of our survey respondents, nearly all had more than 15 years of work experience; a large majority (85%) have more than 10 years of experience in a labor or employee relations role specifically; and more than 80% have at least 6 years in leading such functions.

Our respondents have a variety of different career experiences prior to their labor or employee relations role, but prior legal experience – whether it is in-house, as outside counsel, or traditional legal practice – is most common (34%). Nearly as common is prior HR experience (31%); this reflects a theme detailed further in this report – the dual HR-and-legal nature of the employee and labor relations function. Notably, very few respondents had prior specific labor and employee relations experience.

**The three most common responsibilities of the employee and labor relations function are:**

**1. Internal complaint handling and investigations (75%)**

**2. Collective bargaining (65%)**

**3. Coordination with outside counsel (63%)**

**Consistent with HR Policy Association membership as a whole**, nearly half of respondents work at companies with large workforces (50,000 or more employees). Nearly a third of these companies are at least 10% unionized, while roughly a quarter have zero union presence.



**Smaller teams are more common** – of those surveyed, 48% reported running teams of 10 or less employees. However, nearly a quarter are in charge of 50 or more employees. A significant majority (nearly 80%) directly report to the CHRO or one to two levels below – very few report to the General Counsel or other C-suite individuals.

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## WHAT THEY DO

### ***Candid Conversations with Employee/Labor Relations Leaders and CHROs***

#### ***How the Role is Being Performed Today***

Learning the day-to-day functions and responsibilities of employee and labor relations leaders and practitioners provides important context for determining key success factors. Our conversations revealed a wide variety of experiences – the role and its responsibilities are very much a product of unique or company-specific structures, cultures, union presence, and, to a lesser extent, industry. Regardless, several key themes emerged from our conversations, as detailed below.

**Today’s employee and labor relations leaders focus mainly on** HR policy development and management, internal investigations, and managing the employee relations team.

**“[The employee and labor relations leader] focuses on what the company’s strategic needs are in the labor space and translates those needs into an actionable business plan.”**

**As with many aspects of the employee and labor relations space,** the single greatest variance point in responses was the presence of a union (or lack thereof). For those with unionized workplaces, or who operate with a high risk of union organizing, by far the largest focus is on union relationships, including collective bargaining and union avoidance, as part of a broader focus on labor relations strategy generally.

**For those with non-union workforces,** the most consistently expressed day-to-day responsibilities included internal investigations and managing the overall employee relations team. Large internal case intake often takes up the bulk of the employee relations team’s time. Team leadership and performance management are also key responsibilities.

**Partnership in business planning generally** – and HR/workplace policy development and management specifically – is also a focus of the typical employee relations leader. Many of our interviewees emphasized that the employee relations team has ownership over most – if not all – HR policies, from design and implementation to management.

**While some identified continued compliance** with changing labor and employment laws as a day-to-day responsibility, in general, this is not a main focus of the employee relations team. Employee relations leaders are similarly less involved, if at all, in talent acquisition responsibilities.

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**Key Relationships**

The key relationships of employee and labor relations leaders are with HR teams and HR business partners, and, to a lesser extent, the CHRO and HR leadership team generally. Frequent collaboration and integration with HR teams and business partners requires cultivating strong relationships with the same.

**The relationship with the CHRO and the C-suite varies** considerably. Some leaders have direct channels to their CHRO and work closely with them on a daily or weekly basis to keep them informed on key internal and external employee and labor relations developments. Others have more of an “as needed” type of relationship with their CHRO. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, a common thread is the importance of keeping the senior HR leadership team, including the CHRO, briefed on employee and labor relations issues, so they can in turn report such developments to the rest of the C-Suite and the Board. In general, employee and labor relations leaders have little to no interactions with the Board.

***“It is difficult to make sure you are always including everyone that needs to be – finding the right balance between all of the necessary relationships is the most important.”***

**The nature of the relationship** between employee and labor relations teams and general legal teams and the General Counsel varies considerably, and is largely dependent on company structure. Generally, there is much less interaction between these two groups as compared to the relationship between employee and labor relations teams and the rest of the HR function. In some cases, where the employee and labor relations team are housed within, or closer to, the general legal team, there is a strong relationship between the ER/LR leader and the General Counsel.



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## THE CHALLENGES

### ***Employee and Labor Relations Teams Lack Traditional Experience***

**Experience, or lack thereof:** this was the common refrain regarding the biggest obstacles to successful employee and labor relations leadership. At a time when union organizing has reached a fever pitch not seen in recent memory, ER/LR leaders are finding that traditional labor relations experience – and particularly time actually spent at the bargaining table – is in short supply.

***One of the biggest obstacles to successful employee and labor relations leadership is lack of experience***

**Further, where there are no labor relations teams or roles,** employee relations is expected to handle union issues despite a lack of experience, bandwidth, or both. This often results in reactive labor relations strategies and responses, as opposed to “proactive heat mapping.”

***Where there are no teams or roles, reactive labor relations strategies and responses are often used, despite experience or lack thereof***



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# Balancing the Needs of HR and Legal

Employee and labor relations leaders wear multiple hats as part of an employee relations or labor relations team. Turning HR business directives from the top into successful workplace policies, while appropriately managing potential legal risks, requires a delicate balancing act across several different company functions. The employee relations and labor relations teams often finds itself at the crossroads of the C-Suite, HR, and Legal and is forced to manage the often-competing expectations of all three areas.

***“We have nobody who has ever actually sat at a bargaining table before...there is nobody who has ever been through a union organizing campaign before.”***



**KEY SUCCESS FACTORS**

# Key Success Factors

The successful employee relations and labor relations leader properly balances the needs and expectations of HR and Legal and takes a proactive approach to employee and labor relations. “Experience or exposure to as many workplace management issues as possible” is key for successful ER/LR leaders.

**“Suspend your law license at the door.”**

**Proper risk calculus and management** was the most consistently emphasized key factor for success in the role. Particularly for those coming from a legal background, understanding an enterprise’s appetite for risk – which usually involves a much higher tolerance than the typical labor and employment attorney – is critical. The successful employee relations leader understands that they are a business partner first, and it is important “not to have a black and white decision-making lens.” Comfort in operating in a higher-risk environment is a must. The importance of good risk management is unsurprising, as it encapsulates the dual HR and legal nature of the role.

**Similarly, having a strategic, bigger-picture mindset** is important. Avoiding myopic approaches, and understanding the broader relevant business context, as well as relevant external factors, is critical. It is necessary to “understand the temperature of the C-Suite and what is important to them,” as one leader put it.

- 1. Proper risk calculus and management is a key factor for success*
- 2. A strategic, bigger-picture mindset is important*
- 3. People management and communication skills are paramount*

**Finally, people management and communication skills** are equally important for success. The role is “one of people management first,” and it is important to keep teams engaged and unfatigued, particularly as the portfolio of issues continues to grow. The ability to communicate effectively across different management levels and functions of the company is also important – “you have to be stellar in written and verbal communications.”

**Most of those interviewed came from legal backgrounds**, either as in-house counsel or as litigators, or both. While they acknowledged the importance of such legal experience to success in their roles, they all emphasized the ability to “take the lawyer hat off” as increasingly valuable. Common gaps in experience upon entering the role included business and communications, as well as people management. Those with more HR-focused backgrounds found themselves more prepared in these areas (and in general).

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## Looking Ahead: Engaging the New Employee Voice

Most of those interviewed identified leverage shifting to employees and new expectations regarding external factors as top challenges (and opportunities) for practitioners moving forward. Whether or not gains in union membership are achieved, current and future generations of workers expect a seat at the table and a voice in the company’s direction. This may not take the form of unions, but of ERGs, social media channels, open town halls, and more consistent, direct communication with management. “It used to be business as usual – we had a process and just told our employees how it was going to work – that has changed, and the leverage has shifted,” one leader warned.

**This new labor and employee relations playing field** necessitates dedicated teams that can evaluate, understand, and solve employee relations issues from a legal, HR, and business partner perspective. The successful ER/LR practitioner of the future will be able to wear all three hats seamlessly – the need for this cross-sectional expertise was cited again and again by our respondents.

***This new landscape requires dedicated teams to evaluate, understand, and solve employee relations issues from multiple angles***



**Many of those interviewed also noted that external factors** are increasingly shaping the scope of the role, particularly as expectations of how companies should be responding to socio-political events and developments have changed. Those leading the function see labor and employee relations heads as playing a significant role in shaping a company’s direction in this area based on their experiences in engaging with employee voice in general. In the past, the team’s function may have been simply to communicate the company’s direction or response to the employee population; in the future, it may become a two-way street between employees and management, with the employee relations team as the necessary go-between.

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**Particularly as union membership continues to decline** in the United States, many felt that employee and labor relations teams will be asked to do more with less. Without the imminent threat of unionization, leaders felt that companies may fail to see the need to invest in their employee and labor relations teams. This could continue the current trend of a scarcity of practitioners with traditional labor relations experience, and stretch teams even thinner as the portfolio of issues continues to increase.

**Leaders cited the emergence of new technologies** – particularly artificial intelligence – as playing a significant role in the future of the role. Properly integrating and leveraging data tools and AI to better capture employee voice will be a key factor for success in the future. While automation may replace certain HR functions, those interviewed believed that new technologies will augment employee relations teams, rather than render them obsolete. “The human touch” will be increasingly critical as workplace automation expands, as one interviewee noted.

***Successful future employee relations teams will be built to proactively measure and respond to employee engagement issues and external factors***

**Overall, those interviewed believe** that employee relations teams must start becoming more proactive rather than reactive. Instead of responding to unionization threats, employee issues, law and policy changes (to name a few) on an ad-hoc, reactive basis, successful employee relations teams of the future will be built to proactively measure and respond to employee engagement issues, as well as external factors, before they ever pose a significant risk to company operations.

**The future of employee relations requires** adaptability, proactiveness, and leveraging technology to meet changing employee expectations and external influences. Companies that invest in strong employee relations teams will be better positioned to navigate this evolving landscape.



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## Acknowledgements

**HR Policy Association would like to thank** the executives and employee and labor relations leaders featured in this report, as well as those who participated in our survey.

We appreciate them for contributing their time and sharing their experiences with labor and employee relations.

Modern labor and employee relations leaders are more than just technical experts. They're trusted advisors, blending strategic thinking with deep knowledge to help organizations tackle evolving work environments and workforce trends.

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[Find results from HRPAs Employee Relations/Labor Relations Project Survey here.](#)

**EMPLOYEE RELATIONS & LABOR RELATIONS PROJECT**  
 HRPAs EMPLOYMENT & LABOR GROUP SURVEY RESULTS | MARCH 2024  
 41 Responses

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HR Policy Association Survey Results | March 2024

**EXPERIENCED LABOR RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS SHARE INSIGHT**

Q: In total, how many years of professional work experience do you have?

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| 10 years or more  | 85% |
| 6 to 9 years      | 7%  |
| 2 to 5 years      | 5%  |
| Less than 2 years | 3%  |

Q: How many years of total experience do you have in the labor/employee relations function?

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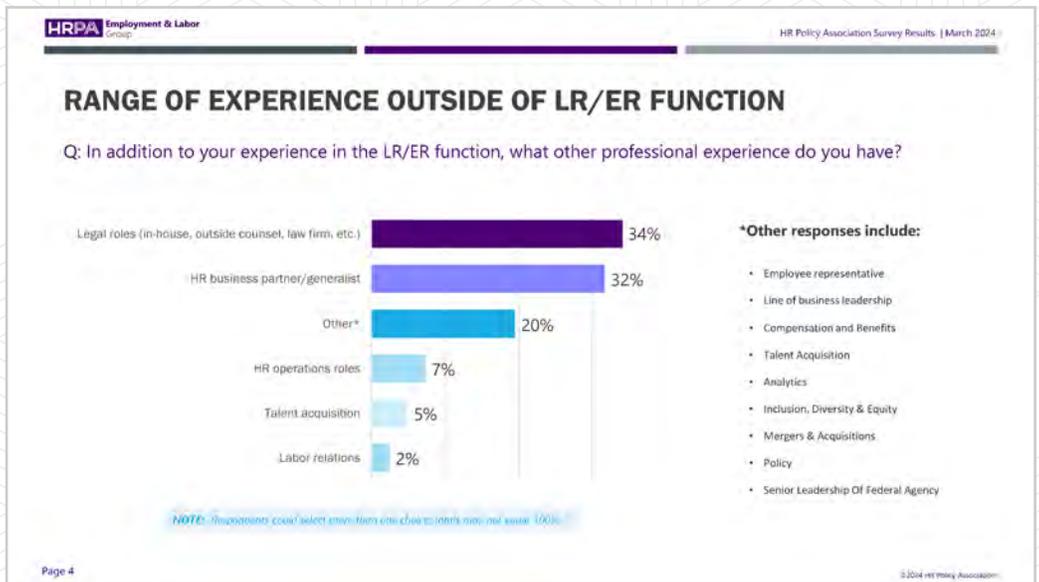
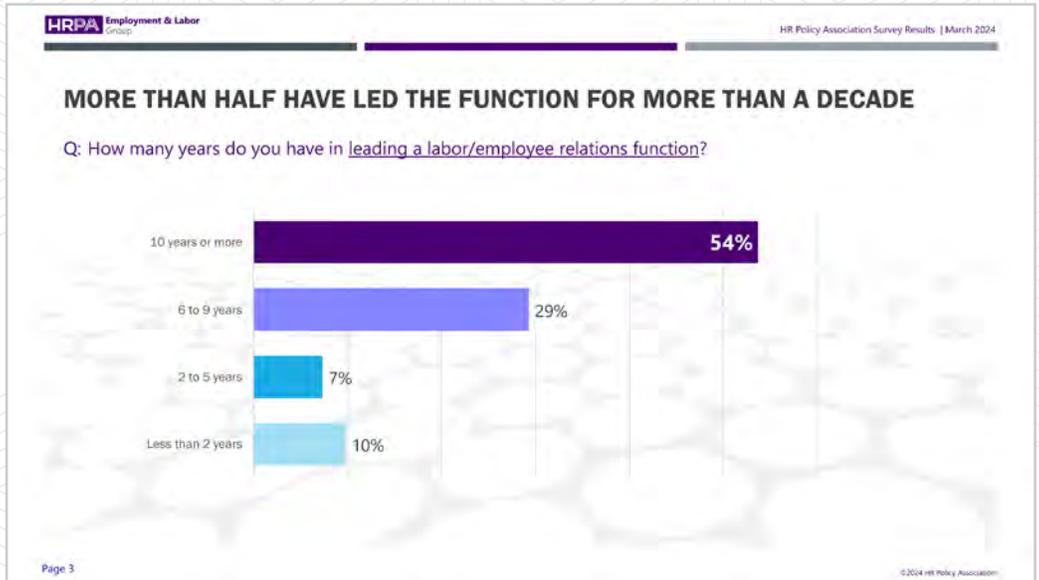
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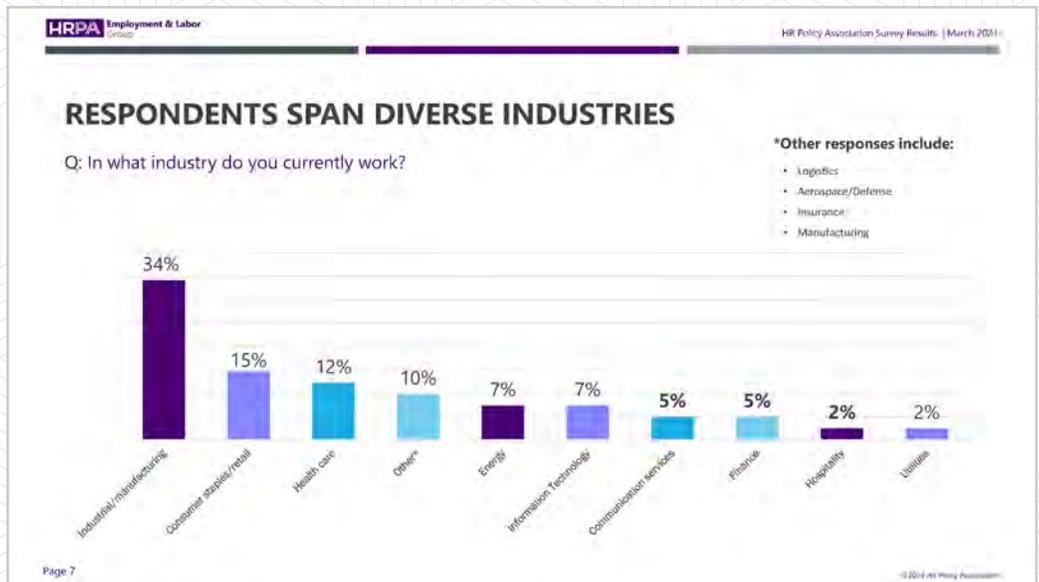
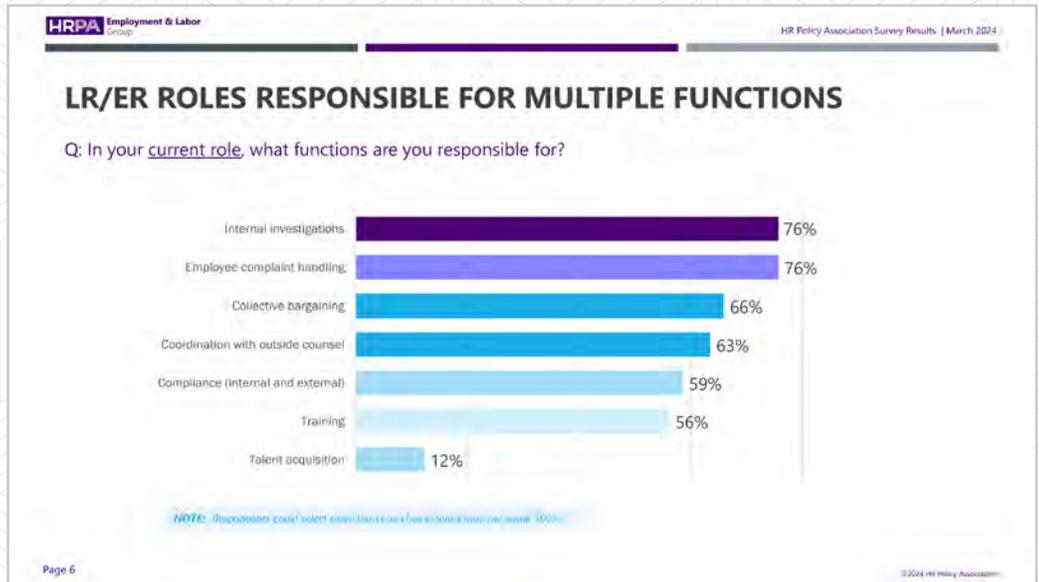
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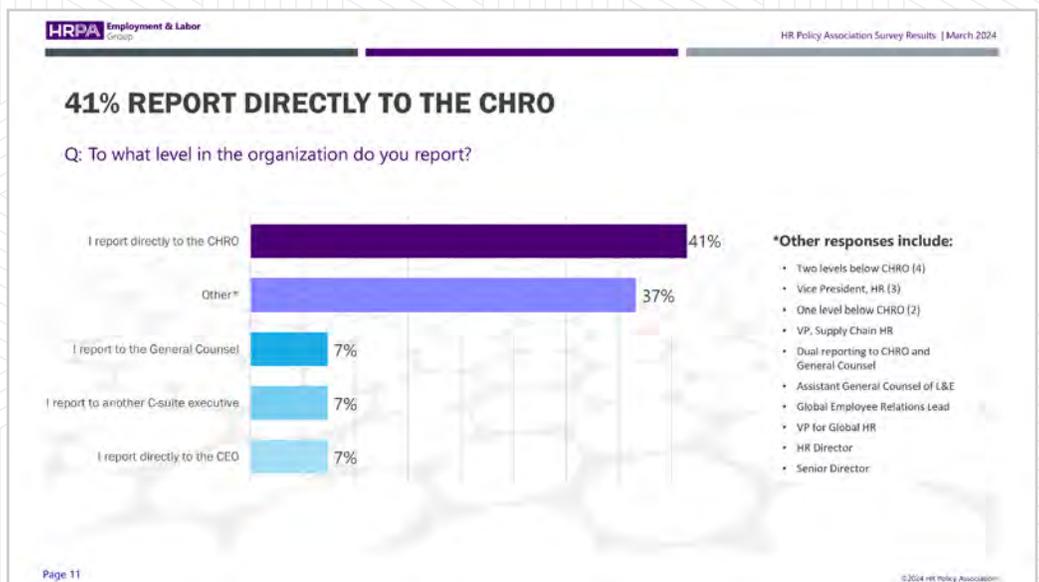
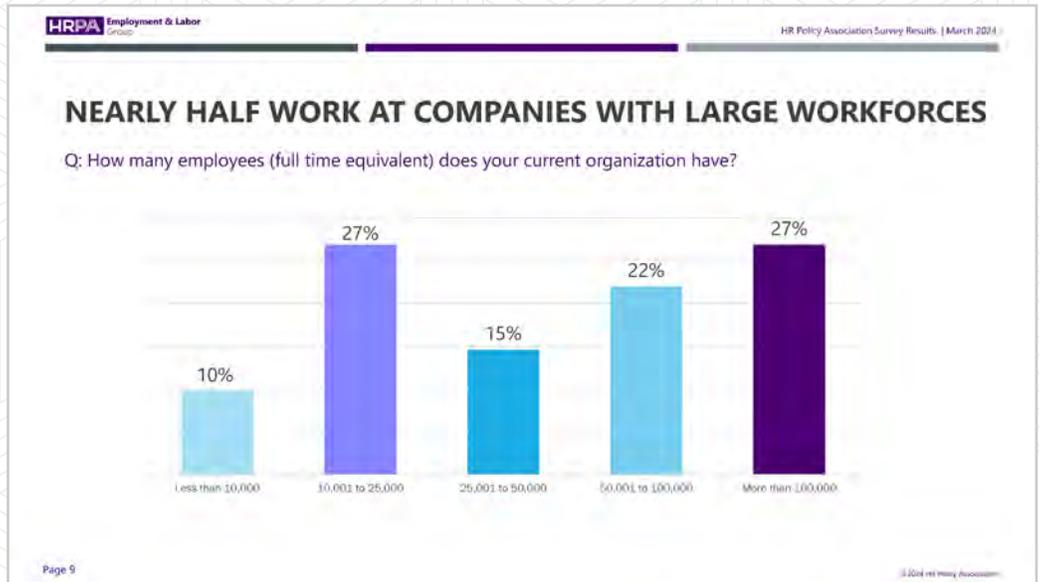
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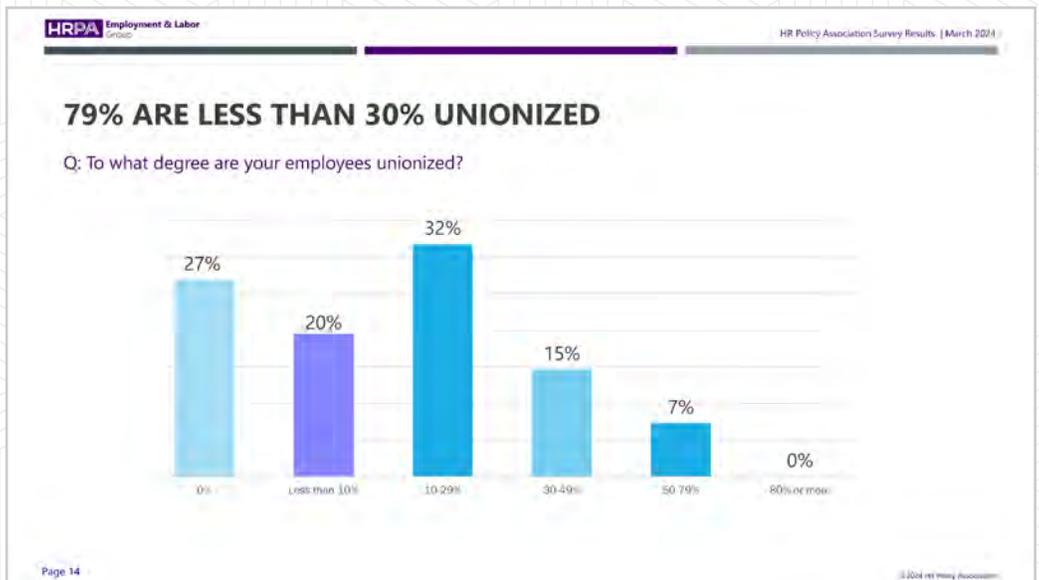
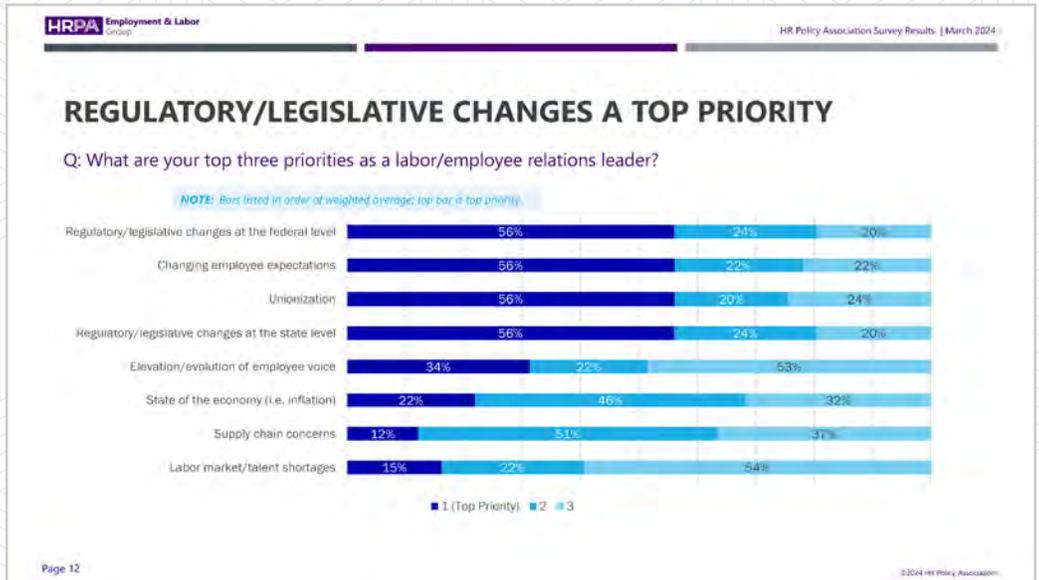
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## About HR Policy Association

**HR Policy Association is the lead organization** representing Chief Human Resource Officers at major employers. The Association consists of almost 400 of the largest corporations doing business in the United States and globally, and these employers are represented in the organization by their most senior human resource executive. Collectively, their companies employ more than 10 million employees in the United States, over nine percent of the private sector workforce, and 20 million employees worldwide. These senior corporate officers participate in the Association because of its commitment to improving the direction of human resources policy.

[To learn more, visit hrpolicy.org.](http://hrpolicy.org)

## About the Employment & Labor Group

HRPA’s advocacy efforts are rooted in its longstanding emphasis on capturing and effectively deploying the employer view in policy debates. The **Employment & Labor Group, composed of HRPA members from every industry and size** represented in the Association, exemplifies this practice. As workplace policy developments shift to match changing social, economic, and technological realities, the Group’s insights and guidance ensures that the Association remains ahead of the curve. Access to the Group’s events, resources and expertise is included in your HRPA membership.

[Learn more here.](#)

## About the Author



**Gregory Hoff** is Associate Counsel, Director of Labor and Employment Law and Policy at HR Policy Association, primarily focusing on labor and employment law and policy issues. Mr. Hoff received his J.D. from George Mason University in 2019 and a B.A. in history with honors from Wake Forest University in 2016. Mr. Hoff is currently a member of the District of Columbia Bar.