

Call for Workplace Whistleblower Protections

CALL FOR WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTIONS

There are calls for new regulations to protect workplace whistleblowers, after research found the vast majority of those speaking out face negative repercussions – despite delivering positive outcomes for organisations.

The findings of the *Whistling While They Work 2: Improving managerial responses to whistleblowing in public and private organisations* report – a project by the Australian Research Council – were revealed at a Griffith University symposium in Sydney.

It drew on the experiences of 17,778 individuals from 46 separate organisations in Australia and New Zealand and found that of those who reported instances of unethical behaviour in their workplace, 81.6 per cent subsequently faced negative repercussions.

Meegan George, acting chief executive of the Governance Institute, said that protection for whistleblowers is rated by most Australians as being of great importance.

“Whistleblower protection was one of the top-ranking ethical issues in the Governance Institute Ethics Index 2018,” she said.

“With new whistleblowing legislation already introduced to federal parliament and in light of the banking royal commission, organisations need a clear understanding of the best approaches to take to protect whistleblowers.”

Ms George said the research found organisations are generally supportive of whistleblower policies, but the practice leaves people who do speak out subjected to adverse treatment.

“The report highlighted the importance of risk assessment and proactive management. The earlier the risk is assessed, the better the treatment of whistleblowers. We’re all responsible for raising critical red flags. This requires an open, honest relationship between whistleblowers and their managers,” she said.

Good outcomes for business, less so for individuals

According to the report, whistleblowing is “seen as critically important in the life of organisations” and that “reporting is widely supported, and no less in the private sector than the public sector”.

It found that, in the majority of cases (on average 55.5 per cent), employee reporting of unethical conduct led to positive investigation outcomes, which

it said ran “contrary to many stereotypes”.

This in turn led to positive reforms within organisations in 58.2 per cent of cases, while a further 4.4 per cent resulted solely in disciplinary action being taken against “wrongdoers”.

Despite the positive outcomes for businesses and organisations, those speaking out faced less positive outcomes.

Some 42.1 per cent of cases were found to have resulted in the whistleblower being treated badly by management and/or colleagues.

The report concluded that, “Overall, the results highlight the high value, importance and utility attributed to whistleblowing across the organisations, in theory and practice, both for organisational purposes and the wider social good – but the substantial and unsatisfactory contrast between this recognition of the importance of whistleblowing and the continuing level of poor outcomes for whistleblowers”.

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