



# Employee Activism

Influence and Action

BRUNSWICK



## Key Takeaways

1. **Employees are critical to the success of every organization. Companies need to work more closely with their employees and give them opportunities to influence decisions and actions.**
2. **Employee activism and action have become more far-reaching in recent years. Younger employees in particular expect their employers to speak out and act on critical global cultural and political issues.**
3. **Employee activism does not need to be as large as a full-scale walkout or protest to warrant serious consideration.**

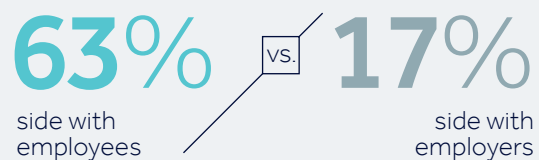
## Current Situation

### The Mobilizing Effect of COVID-19 and the Social Justice Conversation

In many ways, we have reached a point of reckoning with regard to employee activism. Over the last few years, employees have expected more and more from their employers, joining together to demand they take public positions – and action – on critical issues, from climate change and equal pay to immigration and human rights. This groundswell has only intensified as the global COVID-19 pandemic put employees' health at risk and the fatal shootings of unarmed Black Americans have sparked global outrage and demands for police reform, greater diversity and inclusion and the dismantling of centuries of systemic racism in the United States.

Using strength in numbers, employees are banding together – often with the support of unions, non-profit groups and other activists – to organize walkouts and protests, generate media coverage, pressure local officials and urge their employers to meet their demands. According to a recent Brunswick Insight poll, workers are supportive of employee walkouts, and a majority believe they will be effective. In fact, 63 percent say that when they hear about a walkout, they side with employees, versus the 17 percent who side with the employer.

#### Worker support of employee walkout and it's effectiveness



[Brunswick Insight Poll](#)

As employees speak out louder and more often, companies and organizations are faced with a range of tough business, legal and communications decisions. In this environment, preparation is key and the companies who navigate these issues most effectively understand which issues pose reputational, operational and financial risks and have a plan in place to address them.

## Employee activism comes in many forms



Protests / walkouts



Petitions



Negative social media campaigns



Leaks of sensitive information



Increased unionization talks



Openly acting against company / government guidelines and governance



Resistance to return to the workplace after demonstrating job performance while working remotely



Demands for greater diversity, equity and equal treatment of all employees



Visible demands about working environment, childcare and immigration

While many employees are responding, they are not a monolith. Whether they are remote or onsite, urban or rural, junior or senior, it is crucial to understand the needs of different workers and offer responses that reflect their experiences. According to a survey conducted by Brunswick Insight, different employee groups are experiencing unique impacts and emotions. For example, 28 percent of hourly workers, compared with 16 percent of salaried workers, feel less positive toward their companies in light of the health crisis. Similarly, 78 percent of salaried workers are satisfied with corporate communications, versus 65 percent of hourly workers.

In addition, certain subgroups, especially unionized workers, are more likely to pursue activist tactics.

Almost half of union workers said they would join a strike, raise concerns to news media and post on social media versus approximately a quarter of non-union workers. These differences in opinion underscore that employers must take specific needs and concerns into consideration when engaging and communicating with different employee groups.

Companies cannot ignore employees when they speak loudly about issues within their organization. Rather than ignoring or punishing those employees, the true work comes from **building a model of influence and action** to give employees opportunities to be heard and take action positively.

## Your employees are not a monolith

Positivity

28%

hourly worker  
feel less  
positive

vs.

16%

salaried worker  
feel less positive

Satisfaction

65%

hourly worker  
feel satisfied

vs.

78%

salaried worker  
feel satisfied

[Brunswick Insight Poll](#)

# Assessing Company Risk

Before taking steps to understand which issues are most important to employees, companies must seek to understand the landscape of issues

impacting employees' attitudes. If emotions are high, actions are more likely.

## Drivers for heightened employee action

- Anger that employers aren't reopening / rehiring fast enough or providing the right level of support
- Anxiety over instability of income
- Demand of balancing home needs due to lack of infrastructure

- Disappointment in COVID-19 / social justice response and commitments
- Abandonment of previous values/priorities (Environmental, Societal, Governance - ESG)

- Frustration at the cycles of opening and re-closing
- Difficulty in adapting to less personal contact/ in-person meetings
- Slowdown in turnaround/ process due to increased protections



- Health & Safety Concerns**
- Fear of the unknowns related to COVID-19 impact
  - Lack of / maintenance of enough safety precautions
- Data & Privacy Concerns**
- Resistance to possible infringements upon privacy / free speech

- Lack of physical gathering place outside of the home to connect
- Divide between employees experiencing different impacts and timing
- Concern about ability to contribute in rapidly changing environment

## Key questions

After identifying the drivers for employee action, companies must consider which are most likely to affect the company. Outlined below is a set of initial questions that can be used to determine which issues pose a risk. These questions can also be used to gather information about the issue to determine its scope and what actions the company should take.

1. Did any of these areas already present conflict / dissatisfaction with employee groups?
2. Does the issue tap into national, social or political debates related to citizen discontent?
3. Is there a reputational, operational or financial threat to the company?
4. Are there potential material, legal or regulatory ramifications if the matter is proven true?

5. Does the issue run antithetical to the company's ethos, values or mission?
6. Is the complaint / issue supported by few or a significant number of employees? (i.e., is there one squeaky wheel or is it part of a larger tide?)
7. How often does the complaint / issue come up? (i.e., is it a one-time complaint or a perennial issue?)

In addition to answering the questions above, it is important to determine the severity of the issue, which informs the communications planning and response process. Using an escalation matrix which reflects internal considerations, and is reflected in a regular global heat mapping exercise, can serve as a useful tool.

## Steps for Mitigating Risk

When building a mitigation plan, companies must consider the following question: how can we best build relationships with our employees—during a time of fast-paced decision making—before their voices become actions and their actions become activism? Below, we outline the five steps that must occur and should be continually evaluated when crafting an effective mitigation strategy.

### 1. Ensure a strong foundation

Decisions and communications should align with the company's behavior and values. If employees see a disconnect, employees will feel, at best, disappointed, and at worst, betrayed. To increase the likelihood of satisfied employees, a leader's first step should be aligning their company's behaviors with its values. Activism often is sparked when companies are perceived to fail to live their values.

Employee communications must be done with transparency, integrity and intensity during this time, while also promoting trust. That cannot happen until an organization determines its north star, or philosophy for decision-making, which it then communicates and adheres to.

### 2. Put humans first

First and foremost, workforce and business continuity decisions should be centered on an assurance to protect human life, ensuring that businesses and communities can survive and thrive, which in turn contributes to a better society.

While it should not be the rationale for putting this into action, it is worth noting that the media has been closely tracking the support companies are providing their employees. This has given some companies the opportunity to create a halo effect around their subsequent actions externally while also building or rebuilding trust with their employees.

### 3. Prepare and constantly update

While every situation will be unique, there are steps companies can take to prepare core materials that can serve as a basis for responding to potential employee dissatisfaction in the future. These should be based on the work done to assess employees' concerns and should include language on the value placed on employees' points of view.

Tailored documents that respond to specific areas of potential risk should be developed in response and reflect where the company and, importantly, the management team stand on key societal issues and national conversations. It is critical to have senior leadership's buy-in on these position statements and ensure they are comfortable taking the agreed stance internally and externally.

#### 4. Invite employees to be heard and influence where they can

This environment makes it particularly critical to listen to employees. Gathering the views of employees will help inform re-opening strategies, uncover the values and culture drivers that employees find most meaningful and communicate to employees that their voices matter. Examples of ways to establish a dialogue with employees include:

- Listening sessions with leaders and teams
- Surveys to solicit inputs on process, policy and infrastructure decisions
- Engaging actively and regularly with affinity groups – not just when a relevant issue arises
- Virtual focus groups to gather concerns and inputs
- Inside-out research pulling views shared on social media and external platforms
- Anonymous feedback

#### 5. Establish proactive platforms for employees to take positive actions

We recognize that companies need to be ready to listen to employees, to be influenced by what they are hearing, to provide opportunities and encourage the right actions. This is where employee engagement comes into play.

True employee engagement extends beyond internal communications. It happens when employees have the opportunity to interact with leaders, raise their voices to influence the actions of the company, participate in conversations with each other to discuss and respond to changes and are provided a way to take positive action. Today's employee engagement keeps employees feeling calm, informed, motivated and possibly even inspired. Examples include:

- Developing dialogue platforms or working groups to solicit ideas and actions
- Establishing new outreach programs – beyond a first round of donations – for how the company will continue supporting society, and building distinct ways for employees to get involved
- Creating new culture programs to bring in what has been learned and help change the way people work and how the business operates
- Inviting employees to new learning or training opportunities to prepare them for the future of the company

## How Brunswick Can Help

Assess	Mitigate	Respond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Evaluate your risk</li> <li>▪ Conduct an audit of existing engagement approaches</li> <li>▪ Map your internal audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop leader-led engagement campaigns</li> <li>▪ Recommend and develop campaigns for new engagement platforms</li> <li>▪ Build new measurement strategies</li> <li>▪ Advise on manager engagement programs</li> <li>▪ Build activism response plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide strategic and tactical support for live non-union activism situations and employee crisis response</li> <li>▪ Draft content and coordinate multi-stakeholder response</li> <li>▪ Coordinate response team efforts across advisors and internal functions</li> </ul>

## Author information



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Rebekah specializes in providing counsel to companies during times of change – connecting communications strategy and business strategy to drive results. Drawing on her 20 years of experience in corporate communications, Rebekah has a strong focus on strategy, M&A and employee communications.

She has worked in the U.S and London, with global experience across Europe and Asia. Before joining Brunswick in 2018, Rebekah was a member of the leadership team at a strategy execution firm focused on transformation communications, leadership development, employee engagement and culture initiatives for Fortune 500 companies.

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### Katharine Cralle Director, New York

Katharine has spent over a decade advising Brunswick clients around the world, having worked in the London, New York, Dubai and Hong Kong offices prior to her return to New York.

She specializes in helping companies position themselves to global stakeholders, both internal and external, around times of significant change, with a focus on crisis events and significant strategy shifts. An employee engagement specialist, Katharine aids companies in developing change communications campaigns that empower and engage employees around business-critical issues.

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