

**The Effect Of Workplace Conflict Management On Employee Relations At The National Water And Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), Kampala, Uganda**

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**Abstract**

This study examined the effect of workplace conflict management on employee relations at the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) in Kampala, Uganda. The research was motivated by increasing reports of interpersonal and structural conflicts within public utility organisations in Uganda, which had adversely affected service delivery and staff morale. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A sample of 120 respondents was selected from NWSC Kampala using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews, then analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis via SPSS version 25. The findings revealed that negotiation ( $\beta=0.412$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), mediation ( $\beta=0.374$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), and arbitration ( $\beta=0.289$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had statistically significant positive effects on employee relations. The study concluded that effective conflict management mechanisms substantially improved teamwork, communication, and employee commitment. It was recommended that NWSC management institutionalize conflict resolution frameworks and invest in training supervisors in mediation and negotiation skills.

**Keywords: Workplace Conflict, Conflict Management, Employee Relations, Negotiation, Mediation, Arbitration, NWSC, Uganda**

**1.0 Background of the Study**

Workplace conflict was widely recognised as an inevitable phenomenon in modern organisations, particularly in complex public utility institutions where diverse workforces operated under competing interests, hierarchical structures, and resource constraints (Irumba et al., 2024). The National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), a government-owned entity mandated to provide water and sewerage services across Uganda, had over the years grappled with various forms of conflict ranging from interpersonal disagreements among staff, role ambiguity-induced tensions, to broader organisational disputes rooted in policy implementation gaps and resource allocation disparities (Isaac et al., 2023a).

At the global level, organisations had increasingly recognized the centrality of conflict management in sustaining productive employee relations (Kazaara & Kazaara, 2023). Studies conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and various Asian economies demonstrated that unmanaged workplace conflict cost organisations billions of dollars annually through absenteeism, reduced productivity, employee turnover, and legal costs (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The emergence of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms including negotiation, mediation, and arbitration had transformed how organisations approached conflict, shifting the discourse from punitive measures to collaborative resolution strategies (Alex & Kazaara, 2023).

In sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda in particular, public institutions such as NWSC faced unique conflict dynamics driven by ethnic diversity, gender disparities, salary inequities, and the persistent intersection of formal bureaucratic structures with informal cultural norms (Sarah & Audrey, 2024). Research conducted by Munene and Schwartz (1995) observed that Ugandan organisations often operated within a collectivist cultural framework where saving face and maintaining communal harmony sometimes overshadowed the adoption of transparent conflict resolution mechanisms (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022b). These cultural underpinnings often rendered Western conflict management models only partially effective without significant contextualisation.

NWSC, with a workforce exceeding 2,500 employees distributed across Kampala and surrounding urban service areas, presented a particularly rich case for examining how conflict management strategies shaped the quality of employee relations (Isaac et al., 2023b). Reports from the corporation's human resource department indicated that between 2018 and 2022, formal grievance submissions increased by approximately 34%, with interpersonal conflicts, supervisor-subordinate disputes, and interdepartmental communication breakdowns cited as the most prevalent categories. These trends raised urgent questions about the adequacy of existing conflict management frameworks and their alignment with international best practices (Julius & Kazaara, 2025).

The study was therefore situated within a broader body of academic and policy discourse concerned with improving organisational effectiveness in public utilities through the enhancement of human resource management practices (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). By focusing on NWSC Kampala, the research sought to generate context-specific evidence that could inform policy reforms not only within NWSC but also across analogous public corporations in Uganda and the East African region.

## **2.0 Problem Statement**

Despite the critical importance of harmonious employee relations to organisational productivity, NWSC Kampala continued to experience escalating workplace conflicts that threatened its operational efficiency and service delivery mandate (Christopher, 2024). Data from the corporation's Human Resource Department indicated that formal grievance cases had risen from 47 in 2018 to 63 in 2022, representing a 34% increase (Kazaara & Kazaara, 2023). These conflicts manifested in reduced employee morale, increased absenteeism rates estimated at 12% above the sectoral average, and documented cases of project delays attributable to inter-team disputes (Mark & Jacob, 2023). Furthermore, exit interview data suggested that 22% of employees who resigned between 2019 and 2022 cited unresolved workplace conflicts as a primary contributing factor to their departure (Muhamad et al., 2023).

The existing conflict management mechanisms at NWSC appeared insufficient in addressing these challenges comprehensively (Jul et al., 2024). The corporation's grievance handling policy, last revised in 2015, had not kept pace with evolving workforce dynamics, technological changes, and the growing complexity of organisational structures resulting from recent expansion programmes (Winnie et al., 2023). Supervisory staff reported limited training in conflict mediation techniques, while employees expressed low confidence in the fairness and impartiality of the internal dispute resolution processes. These structural and procedural gaps in conflict management had direct

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implications for employee relations, including deteriorating trust, weakening team cohesion, and declining employee commitment to organisational goals.

Despite the significance of this problem, empirical research specifically examining the relationship between conflict management strategies and employee relations outcomes within NWSC or similar Ugandan public utilities remained sparse (Nafiu et al., 2012). Most existing studies on conflict management in Uganda focused on small and medium enterprises or educational institutions, leaving a notable knowledge gap in the public utility sector. This study therefore sought to fill that gap by generating robust empirical evidence on the effect of workplace conflict management on employee relations at NWSC Kampala.

### **3. Main Objective**

The main objective of this study was to assess the effect of workplace conflict management on employee relations at the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), Kampala, Uganda. The specific objectives were: (i) to examine the effect of negotiation on employee relations at NWSC; (ii) to assess the effect of mediation on employee relations at NWSC; and (iii) to determine the effect of arbitration on employee relations at NWSC, Kampala.

### **4.0 Literature Review**

#### **4.1 Theoretical Framework**

The study was anchored in three key theoretical frameworks. The Conflict Process Theory, developed by Pondy (1967), conceptualised organisational conflict as a dynamic process comprising five stages: latent conflict, perceived conflict, felt conflict, manifest conflict, and conflict aftermath (Julius & Nancy, 2025). This theory provided the structural basis for understanding how conflicts at NWSC evolved from latent tensions — rooted in resource scarcity and role ambiguity — to manifest disputes that affected employee relations. The theory also highlighted that the aftermath of conflict, whether constructive or destructive, depended significantly on the management approaches employed (Ntirandekura et al., 2022).

The Human Relations Theory, articulated by Mayo (1933) and refined by subsequent scholars, emphasised that organisations were fundamentally social systems in which employee behaviour was shaped by interpersonal relationships, group norms, and the quality of management-employee interactions (Kazaara & Kazaara, 2023). From this perspective, effective conflict management was not merely a procedural exercise but a relational investment that built trust, reciprocity, and a sense of fairness among employees (Christopher et al., 2022). The theory suggested that when management at NWSC responded to conflicts with empathy, fairness, and structured resolution processes, it enhanced the overall quality of employee relations (Julius & Audrey, 2025).

The Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provided additional theoretical grounding by positing that employee behaviour in organisations was governed by a principle of reciprocity: when organisations invested in employee wellbeing including resolving conflicts fairly employees reciprocated through increased commitment, cooperation, and productivity (Winny et al., 2023). Applied to the NWSC context, this theory predicted that the quality of conflict

management would directly influence the level of employee engagement and relational harmony within the organisation.

#### **4.2 Negotiation and Employee Relations**

Negotiation, as a conflict management strategy, involved the direct engagement of conflicting parties in dialogue aimed at reaching a mutually acceptable resolution without the involvement of a third party. Scholars such as Fisher, Ury, and Patton (1991) distinguished between positional negotiation where parties argued from entrenched positions and principled negotiation, which focused on interests rather than positions (Julius & Nancy, 2025). Research consistently demonstrated that principled negotiation produced more durable and satisfying outcomes for all parties involved. In organisational settings, studies by Rahim (2002) showed that employees who participated in negotiated conflict resolutions reported significantly higher satisfaction with the outcomes and greater trust in their supervisors compared to those subject to imposed decisions.

In the African public sector context, Ayoko (2016) found that organisations that embedded negotiation skills in their management training programmes experienced measurable improvements in team cohesion and communication effectiveness. Specifically, supervisors trained in interest-based negotiation at Kenya's water utilities demonstrated a 28% improvement in subordinate-reported trust scores over a two-year period. These findings were relevant to NWSC Kampala's context, where supervisor-subordinate conflicts had been identified as a primary driver of the corporation's escalating grievance cases.

#### **4.3 Mediation and Employee Relations**

Mediation involved the intervention of a neutral third party who facilitated dialogue between conflicting parties without imposing a resolution. The mediator's role was to create a safe communicative environment, help parties articulate their underlying interests, and guide them toward a mutually agreeable solution. Research by Wall and Callister (1995) demonstrated that mediation was particularly effective in complex interpersonal conflicts where power imbalances and emotional dynamics made direct negotiation difficult. In public organisations, the structured neutrality of mediation was associated with improved perceptions of procedural justice the belief that conflict processes were fair and transparent (Julius & Nancy, 2026b).

Studies conducted in Ugandan universities and government ministries found that peer mediation programmes reduced formal grievance filings by up to 40% over three years (Namayengo, 2019). The success of mediation in these contexts depended critically on the training and impartiality of mediators, the voluntary participation of conflicting parties, and the confidentiality of mediation proceedings. Research also indicated that mediated resolutions were more likely to be sustained over time compared to arbitrated or adjudicated outcomes, because parties retained agency over the resolution process and outcomes.

#### **4.4 Arbitration and Employee Relations**

Arbitration represented a more formal conflict resolution mechanism in which a neutral third party the arbitrator reviewed the evidence and arguments presented by conflicting parties and issued a binding or advisory decision (Julius

& Nancy, 2026a). Unlike mediation, arbitration transferred decision-making authority from the parties to the arbitrator, making it more appropriate for disputes that had escalated beyond the capacity of negotiation or mediation. Research by Colvin (2003) found that arbitrated resolutions in employment disputes were associated with lower rates of repeat conflict compared to litigation, while maintaining shorter resolution timelines and lower costs. However, the binding nature of arbitration sometimes generated resentment among losing parties, potentially undermining long-term relational outcomes(Deus, 2023).

In Uganda's public sector, arbitration had been institutionalised through the Labour Disputes (Arbitration and Settlement) Act, Cap 224, which established mechanisms for the arbitration of collective labour disputes. Research examining the application of this framework in utility corporations found that while arbitration effectively resolved wage disputes and collective bargaining impasses, its impact on individual employee relations was more nuanced, often requiring supplementary measures such as post-arbitration counselling and team rebuilding interventions to restore collaborative working relationships.

## **5.0 Methodology**

### **5.1 Research Design**

The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design, which involved collecting data from a representative sample of the target population at a single point in time. This design was selected because it was cost-effective, allowed for the examination of multiple variables simultaneously, and was well-suited to generating generalizable findings from a defined organisational population. The study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches a mixed-methods strategy to achieve methodological triangulation and enrich the depth and breadth of the findings. The quantitative component enabled statistical testing of hypothesised relationships between conflict management strategies and employee relations, while the qualitative component provided contextual richness and nuanced insights that complemented the numerical data.

### **5.2 Population, Sample, and Sampling**

The target population comprised all 340 employees of NWSC Kampala, including management staff, technical officers, and support personnel. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for sample size determination, a sample size of 181 was initially calculated. However, after accounting for potential non-response and incomplete questionnaires, the effective sample was set at 120 respondents. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across three strata: management (n=20), technical staff (n=60), and support staff (n=40)(Nafiu et al., 2012). This approach ensured that all employee categories contributed to the findings in proportion to their representation in the overall workforce.

### **5.3 Data Collection**

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and key informant interview guides. The questionnaire comprised four sections: demographic characteristics, negotiation practices, mediation practices, arbitration practices, and employee relations outcomes. All items measuring conflict management strategies and employee relations were



adapted from Rahim's (2002) Organisational Conflict Inventory and scaled using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.81 for negotiation, 0.78 for mediation, 0.76 for arbitration, and 0.83 for employee relations, all exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978). Ten key informant interviews were conducted with senior HR officers and departmental heads to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative insights.

**5.4 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were entered and analysed using SPSS version 25(Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed to characterise the study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess bivariate relationships between conflict management strategies and employee relations. Multiple linear regression analysis was then performed to determine the independent effect of each conflict management strategy on employee relations, controlling for demographic variables. Qualitative data from key informant interviews were analysed thematically, with codes and themes identified through iterative reading and refinement of interview transcripts.

**6.0 Results**

**6.1 Descriptive Statistics**

The analysis of respondent demographic characteristics revealed that 62% of the sample was male and 38% female, reflecting the gender composition of the broader NWSC Kampala workforce. The majority of respondents (54%) had served in the corporation for between 5 and 10 years, suggesting a relatively experienced workforce. In terms of educational attainment, 68% held bachelor's degrees, 22% held postgraduate qualifications, and 10% held diploma-level certificates. These characteristics affirmed the suitability of the sample for providing informed assessments of organisational conflict management practices.

*Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Negotiation Practices	120	1.20	5.00	3.62	0.784
Mediation Practices	120	1.00	5.00	3.41	0.812
Arbitration Practices	120	1.40	5.00	3.28	0.763
Employee Relations	120	1.60	5.00	3.55	0.791

**Source: Primary Data, 2025**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the four key study variables. Negotiation practices recorded the highest mean score (M=3.62, SD=0.784), indicating that respondents moderately agreed that negotiation was practiced at NWSC. Employee relations also recorded a relatively high mean (M=3.55, SD=0.791), while mediation (M=3.41) and arbitration (M=3.28) recorded comparatively lower means, suggesting that these formal third-party mechanisms were perceived as less consistently applied than direct negotiation. The standard deviations across all variables were

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moderate, indicating that while there was some variability in respondents' perceptions, the majority clustered around moderate to high ratings.

**6.2 Correlation Analysis**

*Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix*

Variable	1. Negotiation	2. Mediation	3. Arbitration	4. Employee Relations
1. Negotiation	1.000			
2. Mediation	0.523**	1.000		
3. Arbitration	0.418**	0.461**	1.000	
4. Employee Relations	0.574**	0.512**	0.436**	1.000

**Source: Primary Data, 2025**

Table 2 illustrates the Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables. All three conflict management strategies demonstrated statistically significant positive correlations with employee relations at the 0.01 significance level. Negotiation recorded the strongest correlation with employee relations ( $r=0.574$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), followed by mediation ( $r=0.512$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and arbitration ( $r=0.436$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). These findings indicated that as the quality and frequency of conflict management practices improved, employee relations outcomes correspondingly strengthened (Nelson et al., 2023). The moderate inter-correlations among the three independent variables (ranging from 0.418 to 0.523) confirmed that each construct captured distinct aspects of conflict management while remaining conceptually related. The absence of multicollinearity concerns was further confirmed by variance inflation factors (VIFs) below 2.5 in the subsequent regression analysis.

**6.3 Regression Analysis**

*Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis – Effect of Conflict Management on Employee Relations*

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	0.842	0.213		3.952	0.000
Negotiation	0.395	0.078	0.412	5.064	0.000
Mediation	0.341	0.082	0.374	4.159	0.000
Arbitration	0.264	0.089	0.289	2.966	0.004

$R^2 = 0.487$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.474$ ;  $F(3,116) = 36.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$

**Source: Primary Data, 2025**

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis examining the independent effects of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration on employee relations. The overall model was statistically significant ( $F(3,116)=36.72$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and explained 48.7% of the variance in employee relations outcomes ( $R^2=0.487$ ). Negotiation emerged as the strongest predictor of employee relations ( $\beta=0.412$ ,  $t=5.064$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), indicating that a one-unit increase in the quality of negotiation practices corresponded to a 0.412 standard deviation improvement in employee relations.

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holding other variables constant. Mediation followed as the second strongest predictor ( $\beta=0.374$ ,  $t=4.159$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), while arbitration, though statistically significant, exerted a relatively weaker influence ( $\beta=0.289$ ,  $t=2.966$ ,  $p=0.004$ ). These results affirmed that all three conflict management strategies contributed uniquely and significantly to improving employee relations at NWSC Kampala.

#### **6.4 Qualitative Findings**

Key informant interviews corroborated and contextualized the quantitative findings. One senior HR officer noted: 'When supervisors sit down with their staff and genuinely listen to their concerns, you can see the change in the working atmosphere almost immediately. The number of formal complaints we receive tends to drop after those conversations.' This statement affirmed the central role of negotiation in defusing tensions before they escalated. Regarding mediation, a departmental head observed that while the corporation had a mediation policy, its implementation was inconsistent and dependent on the goodwill of individual managers, suggesting the need for institutionalized mediation protocols. On arbitration, interviews revealed a degree of skepticism among junior staff, who felt that arbitration decisions sometimes favoured management, pointing to concerns about perceived neutrality and fairness in the arbitration process.

#### **7.0 Conclusions**

The study concluded that workplace conflict management had a significant and positive effect on employee relations at the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), Kampala, Uganda. Specifically, negotiation was identified as the most potent conflict management mechanism, followed by mediation and arbitration. The regression model explained approximately 49% of the variance in employee relations, indicating that nearly half of the variation in relational outcomes among NWSC employees could be attributed to the quality of conflict management practices. These findings were consistent with the theoretical predictions of the Conflict Process Theory, Human Relations Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, all of which posited that structured and fair conflict management would enhance organisational harmony and employee commitment.

The study also concluded that NWSC's existing conflict management frameworks were moderately effective but insufficient for addressing the growing complexity and volume of workplace conflicts. Structural gaps, including outdated grievance policies, inadequate supervisor training in mediation, and perceived partiality in arbitration processes, had undermined the full potential of these mechanisms. The qualitative evidence further highlighted the importance of consistency, transparency, and fairness in the implementation of conflict management strategies, particularly given the strong influence of perceived procedural justice on employee trust and relational outcomes.

#### **8.0 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, it was recommended that NWSC management undertook a comprehensive review and update of its conflict management policy, with particular attention to aligning grievance handling procedures with current labour laws and international best practices. The corporation should develop and implement a structured supervisory training programme focused on principled negotiation and interest-based mediation skills, targeting all levels of

management. Additionally, NWSC should consider establishing an independent internal mediation unit staffed by trained mediators from outside the immediate line of command to address concerns about impartiality in conflict resolution processes. Finally, the corporation should invest in regular organisational climate surveys to monitor conflict trends and evaluate the effectiveness of conflict management interventions over time.

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