



EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNALS

Claimant: Mr P Bitakaramire

Respondents: LTE Group and others

Heard at: Manchester

On: 14 June 2024

Before: Employment Judge Cookson

REPRESENTATION:

Claimant: In person

Respondent: Mrs P Fernandez-Mahoney, Solicitor

JUDGMENT having been sent to the parties on 28 June 2024 and written reasons having been requested in accordance with Rule 62(3) of the Employment Tribunals Rules of Procedure 2013, the following reasons are provided:

REASONS

Introduction

1. The issue which I had to decide at this public preliminary hearing was whether the claimant had made a protected disclosure as defined by section 43A of the Employment Rights Act 1996. That was an issue which was set out by Employment Judge McDonald in his Case Management Order from 19 March 2024.

2. In the same orders, EJ Macdonald provided that I would have the discretion to consider a possible strike out application if made by the respondent. Such an application was made, but the ground relied upon was that the claimant had no reasonable prospect of establishing that he had made a protected disclosure.

3. I could not decide both issues. I could either decide the claimant had no reasonable prospect of establishing he had made protected disclosure, or I could

decide whether, as a matter of fact and law, the claimant had made a protected disclosure.

4. I raised this with the parties, inviting the claimant to say what he would prefer me to do. He told me that he would prefer me to decide whether he had had a protected disclosure. The respondent agreed and I proceeded on that basis.

5. This hearing had been listed for a 3-hour hearing. I was provided with a bundle running to some 373 pages including two versions of the claimant's 13-page witness statement. Neither party had raised any concerns that insufficient time might have been allocated to this case. I was concerned that there was insufficient time to consider the issues. I was able to clarify with the claimant that he accepted that only the first fifty-seven paragraphs of his witness were relevant to the issues to be determined today and I noted the statement contains both evidence and what amount to legal submissions. In order to manage the timing of the hearing it was necessary for me to somewhat limit the claimant's submissions on the basis that the oral submissions he made reflected the submissions contained in his witness statement. Even so time was pressured but I was assisted by a judicial colleague who was able to take over my afternoon case to enable me to consider my judgment and give an extemporary judgment.

The Facts

6. The facts in this case can be briefly summarised.

7. The claimant was engaged via the employment business Reed to providing support to students at Manchester College.

8. The claimant had responded to an email sent by a senior manager at the College and this in turn had led her to contact Reed to complain about his conduct. It is the email the claimant sent when he found about that which was the subject of this hearing. For these purposes, the key factual context was that the claimant was engaged as an agency worker by Reed and had no direct contract with LTE or any of the other respondents (who are individual managers).

9. The claimant says he made a disclosure of information in three particular paragraphs of an email which he sent on 12 June 2023. The disclosures of information he says he made are:

"It's worth your knowing that at no time since the two emails that appear to be the subject of Jenny's brooding resentments has she once had a conversation with me about them. Not once. To the contrary, she greets me with a smile each time she sees me and gives the impression that all is well between us.

This is a sociopathic and abnormal set of behaviours on her part that are creating a toxic working relationship about which I can no longer remain silent.

Luke, for his part, has informed me that it is perfectly normal for Jenny to communicate her resentments to him without once raising them with me since Reed, not Manchester College, is my employer. That too is questionable, and I've taken the liberty of copying into this email Luke's own managers at Reed for their clarification."

10. The respondent manager, Ms Barnard, had raised her concerns with Reed about email(s) the claimant had sent her without raising them with him. The claimant told me that he thought that must be improper and a breach of some legal obligation although he was not able in any precise terms what the legal breach would have been. By acting in this way, the claimant considered that Ms Barnard was creating a hostile working environment which he felt raised a risk to his mental health.

11. The claimant's evidence was that because he raised his email as someone providing support for students and he described himself and his managers as mental health professionals, the harms he was concerned about must have been obvious to the LTE managers.

12. The claimant also told me that it will be obvious to a reader of his email 12 June 2023 that he stressed when he wrote the email.

13. The claimant suspected Ms Barnard's reasons may have been tainted by race discrimination, but he conceded in cross examination there is no reference whatsoever to that in the email.

14. The claimant's evidence was that he copied in others beyond the immediate managers dealing the issues from the earlier emails because he concerned that his concerns should be brought to the attention of more senior managers at Reed and within LTE because Manchester College engages many agency workers.

15. There is further discussion about the evidence I heard from the claimant in the conclusions section below.

Submissions

16. I heard submissions from both parties. In brief terms the respondent argued that the claimant had no disclosure of information and simply voiced allegations without conveying any facts linked to the alleged breaches. It asserted that the claimant did not have any belief in a public interest, the disclosure email related only to his personal situation and there is nothing in the email to suggest that the issues were raised with the interests of any others in mind. It is argued this is obviously simply an email about a private dispute. The respondent further disputed that the email does tend to show any relevant breach.

17. The claimant argued that his email is protected by what is commonly called the whistleblowing legislation. He says that the email has to be read in the context of an email which he claims clearly demonstrates his distress and stress that the issues

raised about a toxic working relationship have to be seen in the context of emails between professionals experienced in working in mental health matters. By referencing the endangerment of his mental health he says that he clearly raised health and safety breaches and disclosures about a breach of the respondent's duty of care. He also argued that both Mr Webster of Reed and Ms Barnard had failed, were failing or were likely to fail to comply with their legal obligations towards the claimant as a worker "whom neither employed."

18. The claimant argued that his belief that his concerns are raised in the public interest is demonstrated by the fact he was copied others into his email and his concerns were relevant not only to the claimant but to many others who work as agency workers or may do so in the future.

19. I have sought to deal with the issues raised in submissions in more detail in the discussion section below.

The law

20. The Employment Rights Act says this about what will be protected.

a. s43A Meaning of "protected disclosure".

In this Act a "protected disclosure" means a qualifying disclosure (as defined by section 43B) which is made by a worker in accordance with any of sections 43C to 43H."

b. S43B Disclosures qualifying for protection.

(1) In this Part a "qualifying disclosure" means any disclosure of information which, in the reasonable belief of the worker making the disclosure, is made in the public interest and tends to show one or more of the following—

(a) that a criminal offence has been committed, is being committed or is likely to be committed,

(b) that a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which he is subject,

(c) that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur,

(d) that the health or safety of any individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered,

(e) that the environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged, or

(f) that information tending to show any matter falling within any one of the preceding paragraphs has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed.

21. There are five necessary components of a qualifying disclosure set out in section 43B ERA. Unless all five conditions are satisfied, there will not be a qualifying disclosure. They were summarised helpfully by HHJ Auerbach in **Williams v Michelle Brown AM** UKEAT/0044/19/OO:

“9. It is worth restating, as the authorities have done many times, that this definition breaks down into a number of elements. First, there must be a disclosure of information. Secondly, the worker must believe that the disclosure is made in the public interest. Thirdly, if the worker does hold such a belief, it must be reasonably held. Fourthly, the worker must believe that the disclosure tends to show one or more of the matters listed in sub-paragraphs (a) to (f). Fifthly, if the worker does hold such a belief, it must be reasonably held.”

Is there a disclosure of information?

22. In deciding whether it is or is not a disclosure of information I start with the judgment of the EAT in **Cavendish Munro Professional Risks Management Ltd v Geduld [2010] IRLR 38**. In that case the EAT appears to draw a clear distinction between giving information and making allegations. However it is important to approach this with some caution. Later cases show that seeking to apply a rigid distinction between what is information and what is allegations will add an unnecessary gloss to the wording of section 43B(1), and in particular I must take into account the decision **Kilraine v London Borough of Wandsworth [2018] EWCA Civ 1436** highlighted to me by the claimant, in which the Court of Appeal held that information in the context of section 43B is capable of covering statements that might also be categorised as allegations. “Information” and “allegations” are not mutually exclusive categories of communication. What the **Cavendish Munro** case does make clear is that a statement which is general and devoid of specific factual content cannot be said to be a disclosure of information which tends to show a relevant failure.

23. The Court of Appeal in **Kilraine** stressed that the word “information” has to be read with the qualifying phrase “tends to show.” The worker must reasonably believe that the information tends to show that one of the relevant failures has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur. For a statement of disclosure to be a qualifying disclosure it must have sufficient factual content to be capable of tending to show one of the matters listed in section 43B(1)(a)-(f). This is a question for evaluation by a Tribunal in light of all the facts of the case.

24. It is a question that is often be closely aligned with the issue of whether the claimant making the disclosure had a reasonable belief that the information he or she disclosed tended to show one of the relevant failures. That involves both a subjective and objective element. If the worker subjectively believes that the information

disclosed does tend to show one of the listed matters, the statement or disclosure made must have sufficient factual content and specificity so that it is tending to show the listed matter, and if he does so it is likely that his belief will be a reasonable one.

25. The context of disclosure is also relevant. In the Court of Appeal in **Kilraine** the example given in Cavendish Munro of the hospital worker informing their employer that sharps had been left lying around on a hospital ward was considered further. The Court of Appeal pointed out that if instead of expressing that concern verbally, the worker had brought their manager to the ward and pointed to the abandoned sharps and said, “*you’re not complying with health and safety*”, the oral statement would derive force from the context in which it was made, and that could mean it constituted a qualifying disclosure. The statement would clearly have to be made with reference to the factual matters being indicated by the worker at the time.

26. An expression of opinion can also amount to a disclosure, but the Tribunal must engage with the claimant’s case to understand the nature of the information which is embedded in that opinion to assess whether or not it has the sort of content which could potentially be regarded as tending to show a relevant wrongdoing.

27. In terms of understanding in how disclosures of information and expressions of opinion or allegations can interact, the case of **Eiger Securities LLP v Korshunova** is useful illustration of how the law applies.

28. In that case the individual worked in a financial instrument broking business as a sales executive on a trading floor. Brokers often used Bluebird Chat to converse and make deals with traders and there was a practice of sharing passwords for computers and for messenger service called Bluebird Chat. The claimant in the case had challenged the managing director and compliance officer about use of her computer without identifying to a client with whom they were dealing. The claimant considered that it was wrong for the managing director to log in and trade under her name without making clear to clients who was making the trade. She also said that her clients did not like that practice. An Employment Tribunal found that these statements included a disclosure of information capable of establishing a qualifying disclosure, and the EAT agreed. They said that if the individual’s statement to the employer had stopped at telling him that she thought it was wrong for him to use her computer without identifying himself to clients, that would have been no more than an allegation of wrongdoing, but when she went on to say that her clients disapproved of the practice, she was giving new information. The two sentences read together and considered in their context were a disclosure of information.

Did the claimant believe that the disclosure is made in the public interest and was that belief reasonable?

29. For a disclosure to qualify as a protected disclosure, the worker must have a reasonable belief that his or her disclosure is made in the public interest. A tribunal is not tasked with asking itself the objective questions of what the public interest is, and whether a disclosure served it.

30. In **Chesterton Global Ltd (t/a Chestertons) and anor v Nurmohamed (Public Concern at Work intervening)** 2018 ICR 731, CA, the EAT rejected the suggestion that a tribunal should consider for itself whether a disclosure was in the public interest and stressed that the test of reasonable belief remains that set down by the Court of Appeal in **Babula v Waltham Forest College** 2007 ICR 1026, CA. The EAT concluded that the public interest test in S.43B(1) can be satisfied even where the basis of the public interest disclosure is wrong and/or there was no public interest in the disclosure being made, provided that the worker's belief that the disclosure was made in the public interest was objectively reasonable. Further the necessary belief is simply that the disclosure is in the public interest — the particular reasons why the worker believes that to be so do not need to be identified specifically. A disclosure does not cease to qualify simply because the worker seeks to justify it after the event by reference to specific matters which the tribunal finds were not in his or her head at the time. In principle, a tribunal might find that the particular reasons why the worker believed the disclosure to be in the public interest did not reasonably justify his or her belief but nevertheless find it to have been reasonable for different reasons which he or she had not articulated at the time: all that matters is that his or her (subjective) belief was (objectively) reasonable.

Did the worker believe that the disclosure of information tends to show one or more of the matters listed in sub-paragraphs (a) to (f) and was that belief reasonably held?"

31. It is not enough for the worker to believe that wrongdoing has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur. The claimant's reasonable belief must be that the information disclosed *tends to show* that a relevant failure has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur. As the EAT put it in **Soh v Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine** UKEAT/0350/14/DM there is a distinction between saying "*I believe X is true*" and "*I believe that this information tends to show X is true*".

32. Turning to what "likely" means in this context, **Kraus v Penna PLC and another** [2004] IRLR 260 concerned a disclosure that was alleged to fall within section 43(1)(b) breach of a legal obligation, although the EAT said that the same approach to the meaning of "likely" should be applied in relation to all of the subsections (a)-(f).

33. In the EAT's view in that case "likely" should be construed as requiring more than a possibility or a risk that an employer or other persons might fail to comply with a relevant legal obligation. Instead the information disclosed should, in the reasonable belief of the worker at the time it is disclosed, tend to show that it is probable or more than probable than not that the employer will fail to comply with the relevant legal obligation.

34. I must look at the reasonable belief of the worker making the disclosure, not the belief of a reasonable worker. In **Fincham v Her Majesty's Prison Service** [2002] 12 WLUK 590 the employee perceived herself to be the subject of a campaign of racial harassment and she wrote a letter to her employer which contained the statement "I feel under constant pressure and stress awaiting the next incident". An Employment Tribunal found that that was not sufficient to amount to a qualifying disclosure, but the

EAT concluded otherwise. It said, *“We find it impossible to see how a statement that says in terms ‘I am under pressure and stress’ is anything other than a statement that the employee’s health and safety is being, or at least is likely to be, endangered.”* That is not a matter which can take its gloss from the particular context in which the statement is made.

35. In **Blackbay Ventures Ltd T/A Chemistree V Ms K Gahir** the Employment Appeal Tribunal suggested that when considering claims by employees for victimisation for having made protected disclosures Employment Tribunals might take the following approach in relation to the question of whether a disclosure had been made

- a. Each disclosure should be separately identified by reference to date and content.
- b. Each alleged failure or likely failure to comply with a legal obligation, or matter giving rise to the health and safety of an individual having been or likely to be endangered as the case may be, should be separately identified.
- c. The basis upon which each disclosure is said to be protected and qualifying should be addressed.
- d. Save in obvious cases if a breach of a legal obligation is asserted, the source of the obligation should be identified and capable of verification by reference for example to statute or regulation. It is not sufficient for the Employment Tribunal to simply lump together a number of complaints, some of which may be culpable, but others of which may simply have been references to a checklist of legal requirements or do not amount to disclosure of information tending to show breaches of legal obligations. Unless the Employment Tribunal undertakes this exercise, it is impossible to know which failures or likely failures were regarded as culpable and which attracted the act or omission said to be the detriment suffered. If the Employment Tribunal adopts a rolled up approach it may not be possible to identify the date when the act or deliberate failure to act occurred as logically that date could not be earlier than the latest act or deliberate failure to act relied upon and it will not be possible for the Appeal Tribunal to understand whether, how or why the detriment suffered was as a result of any particular disclosure; it is of course proper for an Employment Tribunal to have regard to the cumulative effect of a number of complaints providing always they have been identified as protected disclosures.
- e. The Employment Tribunal should then determine whether or not the claimant had the reasonable belief that it was made in the public interest.

Further discussion and conclusions

Was there a disclosure of information?

36. When I considered the email of 12 June 2023, I concluded that it did contain disclosures of information and I did not accept the respondent's submissions that it merely made allegations. The key information disclosed was that Ms Barnard had not had a conversation with the claimant about her concerns before raising them with Reed, had not given him any suggestion that she had any concerns; and this was something which was not a one-off, but was quite common place and Reed were clearly aware of that. It is on the basis of those facts that the claimant went on to allege that Ms Barnard had created a toxic working relationship. His dissatisfaction with her conduct is clear, but he does not say that he has been caused stress or other harm.

Did the claimant believe that the disclosure is made in the public interest and was that belief reasonable?

37. The claimant must reasonably believe that his disclosure was made in the public interest, but he is not required to show that his disclosure tends to show that it was made in the public interest.

38. In this case I accept that the claimant, in raising an issue about what he regarded as toxic working by a senior manager through what he thought of an unlawful practice of not raising concerns with him personally, believed he was raising issues which were in the public interest because it could be an issue which also affected other agency workers.

39. I also accept that the claimant genuinely believed this was a health and safety issue and that as such it was reasonable for him to believe that this was a matter of public interest.

Did the worker believe that the disclosure of information tends to show one or more of the matters listed in sub-paragraphs (a) to (f) and was that belief reasonably held?

The health and safety issues

40. I have looked at those provisions in turn, firstly looking at the health and safety ground. The claimant says that the reference to a "toxic working relationship" and a set of behaviours which were sociopathic and abnormal tends to show that the information was a breach of health and safety of an individual who has been, is being or is likely to be endangered. Under the heading of "Legal Obligations" in his witness statement, which I have also considered as submissions, there are also references to breaches of duty of care, to breaches of the Health and Safety at Work Act and to the respondent's own safeguarding policies and procedures.

41. In this case I do not consider that anything turns on whether the disclosure is said to fall under s43B(1)(b) (legal obligation) or s43B(1)(d). For ease I have referred to the concerns raised by the claimant about "a toxic working relationship" and "a

sociopathic and abnormal set of behaviours” as the health and safety concerns whether or not they are argued to fall under (d) or (b).

42. The respondent argued that the claimant cannot reasonably have believed that the information he disclosed tended to show such a risk, because no facts are referred to in his email and he only expressed an opinion or made an allegation and there is nothing in the email which suggested a breach of health or safety or that anyone’s health has been or is likely to be endangered.

43. The claimant argued that I must read his disclosure in relation to the “toxic working relationship” in the context of this being a communication between professionals who are dealing with mental health issues. The claimant told me that the reference to “a situation which was abnormal and sociopathic generating a toxic working relationship” was one which posed a risk to his mental health, and he says that the risk of harm which is implicit in a toxic working relationship would be very obvious to those working in a mental health arena, and that is the context in which I must read his email. He also says that the risk of harm must be clear to anyone who reads the email because this email is clearly sent by someone who is in distress, under stress and angry.

44. I accept of course that I have to look at the reasonable belief of the worker who made the disclosure, not the belief of a reasonable worker. In the context of that guidance from the EAT referred to in the legal section, I reflected carefully on whether disclosing that concerns had been raised with a third party rather than with an individual face to face, which the claimant regarded as sociopathic, abnormal, and creating a toxic working relationship, tended to show that it was probable or more than probable that the claimant’s health was or was likely to be endangered. I find it difficult to see how raising concerns about someone without speaking to someone first is inherently something which creates a risk to mental health or even necessarily improper. In that context I do not accept that any employee, whether or not a mental health professional, can reasonably believe the risk is so obvious the danger or harm does not need to be spelt out.

45. It is significant that claimant does not refer to being caused any harm or stress. In his evidence the claimant said that the information disclosed tends to show that he was stressed, but that word (or any indication of ill health) is not referred to anywhere in the email. I do not read this as an email written by someone who is obviously unwell. There is no suggestion that the claimant believed he has been made unwell or caused harm. There is no evidence before me that the claimant was in fact unwell at the time or that the respondent had reason to believe he was unwell which might have been a relevant context. In the email the claimant said that he felt he could no longer remain silent about the situation and that he should not put up with behaviour that was beneath his or anyone else’s dignity. I have no doubt that he genuinely believed that, but that is a long way from suggesting harm or a risk of harm, a risk to health and safety or a breach of any legal obligation.

46. I considered whether that it could be said that in the context of this being an email between, on the claimant's case, professionals working in the mental health arena, the claimant was right to say it was inevitable that those individuals would not have to explain precisely what the concern was or refer to all the background because things may be taken as read between such professionals. However in that context I concluded if the claimant had believed there was a risk of harm to his or anyone else's mental health there would have been some explicit reference to harm, that is some reference to an adverse consequence, rather than simply a statement about a something having been done which he thought was improper or unsatisfactory. I reminded myself that the test is not, as the claimant appeared to suggest, simply what was in his mind, but whether the claimant could reasonably believe his disclosure tended to show the relevant breach.

47. I concluded that as a professional working in mental health the claimant could not reasonably believe that the information contained in his email tends to show that health and safety was likely to be endangered or that there was a breach of a duty of care or a health and safety obligation under the Health and Safety at Work Act without being more specific and precise about the alleged harm. Nor could he reasonably believe that his email tended to show a breach of safeguarding policies as alleged when there is no reference at all to those policies. This means the disclosure cannot be protected under the grounds set out in section 43(1)(b) or (d) on the grounds put forward by the claimant.

Breach of other legal obligations including the Equality Act

48. The claimant also relied on other grounds to suggest that the email could be protected. He relies on section 43B(1)(b) – that a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which he is subject. Aside from the mental health issues to which my previous conclusions apply, the claimant says that his email tends to show to a breach of a legal obligation by the manager not raising matters with him personally but directly with Reed, and that his disclosure tends to show victimisation under the Equality Act. In the course of his evidence the claimant has clarified that he used the word "victimisation" in the ordinary sense of the word, in other words I understand him to say that he believed the information disclosed tended to show that he had been the victim of unlawful race discrimination, rather than in the technical sense he had been subject to victimisation.

49. Looking first at the breach of a legal obligation through matters not being raised directly and personally with the claimant, the claimant in his email says "*Luke for his part has informed me that it is perfectly normal for Jenny to communicate her resentment to him without raising them with me since Reed not Manchester College is my employer, that too is questionable, and I have taken the liberty of copying into this email Luke's own managers at Reed for their clarification*". The claimant told me that by doing that he was ensuring that "Mr Webster's legally dubious employer justification was communicated or disclosed to Reed's consultant superiors." However it is unclear to me what legal obligation the claimant believed this tended to show a breach of or why.

50. Given the wide variety of legal obligations that exist and the range of sources from which they can arise (contracts, common law, statute), there is of course plenty of scope for the non-expert to be mistaken as to the existence of a legal obligation covering a particular situation, but if there is no obvious legal obligation the Tribunal must identify the source of the legal obligation which the claimant believes the individual was subject to and has failed or is likely to fail to comply with.

51. I understand that what the claimant says about the legal obligation is this: he says that there “must” be a legal obligation to raise concerns with him personally which either stems from his contract or from what he says is his status as a self-employed person, but he is unable to identify any particular contractual term or any particular legislation even in broad terms which would contain or be the source of such a legal obligation. The identification of a legal obligation (if this heading is relied upon) does not have to be detailed nor does not have to be precise, but there has to be something more than a “hunch” that certain actions are wrong. Actions can be wrong because they are immoral, because they are undesirable, because they are in breach of guidance, but that does not make them breaches of legal obligations. Looking at the disclosure itself the claimant said that he thought what was being done was “questionable”– he did not put it any higher than that. I conclude that the claimant cannot reasonably have believed that by saying something was questionable he was disclosing information which tended to show a legal obligation was not or was likely to not to be complied with, or this tended to show a legal breach within the scope of s43B(1)(b) in this regard. I have no doubt that the claimant thought that what had been done was somehow wrong, but that is not sufficient to be protected by the public interest disclosure legislation.

52. Finally, I come to the question of whether there had been a disclosure of information which tended to show discrimination or a breach of the Equality Act in some way, and again I am looking to see whether the claimant can have reasonably believed the information he disclosed in his email tended to show a breach of the Equality Act in some way. I can see nothing in the email which even hints at discrimination.

53. The claimant appears to suggest that because he was doing a very good job and that there was an overreaction to emails Ms Barnard’s response must have been motivated by his race, but I find no suggestion of that whatsoever in this email. For the claimant to hold a reasonable belief that the information in his email tends to show unlawful discrimination, there would have to be at least some reference to a taint of discrimination or disparity of treatment with other colleagues from different backgrounds, but there is none. It may be that at the time he wrote his email, the claimant believed that he was being treated in discriminatory way, but he did not communicate that in any way to the respondent so that it could be said he had disclosed information about that.

54. In the circumstances I concluded that the claimant had not made a protected qualifying disclosure within the meaning of sections 43A and 43B of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

**Case Nos. 2409323/2023
2409490/2023
2409368/2023
2409324/2023**

Employment Judge Cookson
Date: 16 July 2024

REASONS SENT TO THE PARTIES ON
22 July 2024

FOR THE TRIBUNAL OFFICE

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