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A CEO’s Solution to Workplace Harassment and Discrimination: Ensuring Every Voice Is Actually Heard



Jared Pope
CEO and Founder

Work Shield
www.workshield.com
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/workshield/>

Contact:
Jared Pope / Work Shield
hello@workshield.com

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

“Work Shield is the first and only solution that protects employers, employees and workplace culture. We do that by removing the fear of reporting any form of harassment or discrimination by empowering employees with a voice to be heard, while at the same time managing the investigation process and ensuring there is a clear path to solution for all of our clients.” Jared Pope

CEOCFO: *Mr. Pope, what is Work Shield?*

Mr. Pope: Work Shield is the first and only solution that protects employers, employees and workplace culture. We do that by removing the fear of reporting any form of harassment or discrimination by empowering employees with a voice to be heard, while at the same time managing the investigation process and ensuring there is a clear path to solution for all of our clients.

CEOCFO: *How does it play out in practice; how would a company work with Work Shield?*

Mr. Pope: You first have to understand what the problem is and that the existing system is broken with how employers manage and address work place harassment and discrimination. 98% of the companies out there basically have a solution or policy that says if you have been harassed or discriminated against go to your manager, supervisor or HR or call that anonymous hotline. However, guess where it goes back to? It goes back to the company to investigate.

Work Shield is different because we not only manage the intake of every single issue, but we also do the investigation and partner with the employer to ensure a clear path to resolution. The key distinction between our platform and anybody else is that we actually do the investigation, and for every single one of our incidences, we have an average turnaround time from incident intake to resolution of less than five days. This is six times faster than the national average.

CEOCFO: *I certainly can see why employees would want this and why companies should want it, but do both groups see the value?*

Mr. Pope: You look at the historical aspects of harassment and discrimination, and when you fast-forward to the society we live in today, most CEOs and executives are understanding that the workplace culture is just a microcosm of society at large and what is happening in the world. When you take a step back and think about that, everything that is going on in society and America is actually happening in our workplace culture, they may just not see it.

Executives today have to understand that with the instant gratification of today's technology and social media platforms, everybody wants solutions now. Therefore, they are realizing that if we give our employees a voice to be heard and we actually intently listen with empathy and understanding, then we can create the best culture. That company culture is not only made of diversity and equality, but also of inclusiveness that allows every person to understand and know that their company not only cares about them but wants to make sure that they are always heard no matter what.

CEOCFO: *How do you conduct the investigation and what is different about how you put the pieces together at Work Shield?*

Mr. Pope: You have to think about where society is coming from. Most investigations can take 25 to 30 days. There is a new article out of the New York Times about an incident at Google that took three months for an issue to be completely resolved. Most investigations today without Work Shield would be done by an HR manager or supervisor or some other manager. They may get someone internally who is frustrated because it is taking up their time, as they have 9,000 other things to do and they are just trying to get to the bottom of it.

How our approach is different is that we actually come at it to make sure the voice is heard. A prime example is if I am being interviewed or I am a witness or an accused or someone that filed an incident. If someone comes and asks me a question or if it is an attorney that asks me a question and they ask how I discriminated against this person, the natural reaction is to be defensive. However, if you actually approach the individual and say, "Hey every person has a voice to be heard, would you help us understand your story and what happened?" All of a sudden, that person would want to be heard. Our approach provides that unbiased third party who can investigate a situation with no preconceived notions about what happened.

The reality of these situations that we are talking about today with the harassment and discrimination is that it goes back to the fear. The number one reason why people do not report is fear of retaliation, fear of being terminated and fear of being ridiculed. That is why people do not necessarily report, but when they know they can report to a third-party and that third-party is the one doing the investigation and not the company itself, all of a sudden that fear is swept away. The employee really just wants to make sure that their anxiety is heard and that what they are feeling is heard and that someone is listening to them and truly understands. It conveys "hey I see you, hear you and understand what

is going on, and we are going to get to the bottom of it." When that happens all of a sudden, culture improves and the incidences go down, as the bad actors are dealt with accordingly. That is where our main differences are in these investigations.

It is about making sure that the employee's voice is always heard. There are a lot of cookie-cutter solutions out there that say, "Go report to a chatbot or fill out a survey or do an anonymous online evaluation of your company." That does not do anything. What happens is you have to listen to the employee and understand where they are coming from and only then can you solve the toxicity, harassment and discrimination and really get to the base root of how to create a more diverse, inclusive and equal workplace culture for everyone. That is what we are really good at.

CEOCFO: *As an employee I might still be concerned that ultimately my concerns will get back to my employer in some way that would be negative. On the other hand, the fact that your company has Work Shield would seem likely to encourage reporting. Would you address both sides?*

Mr. Pope: One of our strong suits is we can onboard any client in less than 10 days. We can have up to 22,000 live clients to 10 live clients and everywhere in-between. No matter the size, part of our onboarding specialty is making sure the employee knows that the employer partnered with Work Shield to make sure every voice is heard and to make sure that every incident is dealt with and looked into and resolved, and ensure that there is a clear path to resolution because at the end of the day the employees are the number one asset and they want to make sure they do not become the number one liability.

When the employer says, "You are our number one asset and we want you to feel safe, we want you to have a great place to work and by the way just like if you go to the airport if you see something say something, if you hear something say something. We want to encourage you to report to Work Shield." When that happens and you have this executive leadership from the top down, all of a sudden, employees are saying you are bringing in a third party to hear all of our drama. Nobody wants to report to the company, they want to report to someone else and have someone else come in and do the investigation. I think that is why we have over 270 plus clients that trust Work Shield and are what we call Work Shield Certified employers.

CEOCFO: *How do you get to the bottom of a complaint?*

Mr. Pope: It is communication, empathy, and listening intently. Everybody has a right to be heard, every voice has a right to be heard whether you are the accused or the person filing the incident or even a witness to it. The easiest way to get to the bottom of it is when we do the investigation it is about listening. People want to talk and tell their story and oftentimes people get in the way of really understanding what is happening because they want to talk too much and if we all just sit down and listen and that is what we are good at with our investigators, they know what questions to ask and they listen.

People will tell you exactly what happened because they want to feel like they are being heard. People are eager to tell their story and when

things happen, they want to go right to the front of the line and say let me tell you what happened. When you are dealing with these issues it is very sensitive, they could be fearful or anxious. The fact that we as a company on average every single incident is resolved in less than five days from the time it is reported and you do not have to live from 25 to 30 days in fear or anxiety. How we get to the bottom of this comes down listening and asking the right questions and then being quiet when they start talking.

CEOCFO: *Are you recommending a solution? Are you providing a solution that the company has agreed beforehand to accept? How does the resolution come about?*

Mr. Pope: We always partner with our employers and clients to ensure a clear path to resolution. Our clients always have the ultimate authority to decide how to resolve every issue but by the fact that we have Work Shield Certified attorneys and investigators doing the issues, they know how to resolve these.

On the other side of that, the employer directly understands it is always their decision to determine what the best solution is so we often provide our client partners and the contact of each company that we work with, our recommendations based on the facts and issues. That is one thing I think employers love about Work Shield is because they have the ultimate authority to decide how to resolve an issue but what they like about it is they are removed from the complete investigation, so it comes in from an unbiased third-party or objective third-party that says here are the facts and issues and based on this, this is what we would recommend.

CEOCFO: *Might the recommendation be different depending on type of company, industry, geography?*

Mr. Pope: Absolutely!

CEOCFO: *How do you put all those factors into place; how does someone learn to be an investigator for you?*

Mr. Pope: First it is about understanding our client and their culture and that comes down with experience and understanding different industries. We have restaurant clients and those are completely different from professional services. We have construction clients and those are completely different from our banking and financial institution clients. We have CBD based clients and public entity clients all the way to blue collar, grey collar, and white-collar clients. Every culture is going to be different and it is really about just like we listen and understand the individuals that we talk to related to an incident, we also listen and understand our clients and their culture and business objectives.

How we find our investigators is we actually partner with a law firm that does all of our investigations. Why? Because they are there for us and have been doing this. We found a great partner that is a part of Work Shield to do these investigations because they have been doing them forever and they know how to get to it. They also go through our Work Shield Certified professional, they come through our training module to say this is not a typical attorney investigation, this is different. This is about listening, asking the right questions, empathy, intently listening and making sure every voice is heard so that they feel when they lay

down the phone or hit the red button at the end of the call, that they feel better about telling their story.

CEOCFO: *How have you worked with your clients through COVID?*

Mr. Pope: We have 100% retention and I think a lot of that comes down to our service and adaptability. We have had restaurant clients in COVID that went from 1400 employees down to 20. They came to us and said they just did this and we said that is ok that we were still going to be here. They were worried about what they were going to do with their agreement and our total response was we are your partner, we are all adapting, do not worry about it. Guess what that did? They came back and said that is our true partner.

We had other clients that said they are going to a remote workforce just like everybody else did. What was interesting is a lot of people thought that because they were remote, there are probably not going to be as many incidents. It was the actual opposite. Incidents continued to occur because when COVID started it was just going to be two weeks and then it was only going to be three months, so everybody started having virtual happy hours that started at 5:30 and then all the sudden they now start at 3:00. People get a little loose in the tongue, they are behind a computer and at-home and feel more comfortable so they are more apt to say things that maybe they would not say straight-faced to a person or at the water cooler or at the office. They become more relaxed with how they interact with people. Therefore, we actually had an uptick of incidents during COVID.

This goes to show that no matter where you are, whether it is on a Zoom call, a Google Hangouts, it does not matter; harassment and discrimination knows no boundaries. Whether it is physical in the office or over the computer or internet, it is always there. It is about adapting to those situations as well and making sure the clients are protected and the employees have a voice that is heard and they are protected and the culture stays the same or it is one of a safe place environment that everybody wants to go to that consists of integrity, trust and protection.

CEOCFO: *How are you reaching out; how is the world finding out about Work Shield?*

Mr. Pope: The best advertising is word-of-mouth. We have clients that after they experience Work Shield, they love it and tell their friends that are in HR, or other CEOs and CFOs. We partner with the right distribution and obviously have a salesforce but we also have a distribution model that is effective. It is about the thought leaders in this space. There are a lot of people and companies that are popping up. We have been around for three years, so when the Me-Too movement started, our tagline was, "Be heard at Work Shield." Now everybody wants to be sure every voice is heard. That is awesome because we have been there, but you have a lot of people approaching these types of issues through *DE&I* (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion). They are coming in saying, "Hey let's be consultants." It is the old law firm, old consultant trick of, letting us come in and we will charge you an astronomical amount of money to give you advice and then you have to pay to go implement that advice and it becomes this hamster wheel.

You also have companies that are hiring *DE&I* professionals but not giving them the resources or tools to actually implement effective change and it is more of a check-the-box aspect. This is why people and companies are saying enough of this. Yes, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is a major priority, but how do we get to the root problem? The root problem is you have to get to the toxicity of the root problem. To get to the root problem you have to make sure every employee's voice is heard no matter what. When you take into consideration who you are going to partner with that not only listens to that voice but can actually make sure that every single incident that is raised and every voice that is heard, there is a clear path. That is how you get to the root of creating a more diverse and inclusive culture.

I often say *DE&I* is like making sure that everybody is invited to the party. Inclusion is making sure everyone is on the dance floor. Equality is making sure everyone's favorite music is listened to. I think the diversity part of inviting everyone to the party, I think we are good at that as a society and we are getting even better. We can always improve through talent, acquisition, and I am hiring the right people and making sure people are raised through the ranks and have the right jobs and opportunities. The inclusion and equality part, inclusion has to occur by making sure every voice is heard. It is a three-step process. Where Work Shield is, because we make an inclusive culture, only then can you have an equal culture.

