

Formalizing the Industrial Relations Infrastructure in Rapid-Growth Tech Startups: An Empirical Case Study of Conflict Resolution and Due Process

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Abstract— Industrial Relations (IR) in knowledge-intensive sectors is increasingly defined by individual employment relations, shifting away from historical collective bargaining models. This study evaluates the structural alignment of grievance management and disciplinary mechanics within InternsForge Pvt. Ltd., a rapidly scaling Indian EdTech commercial establishment operating under the Karnataka Shops and Commercial Establishments Act. Utilizing a descriptive, mixed-methods baseline audit, we analyze an IR Climate Survey (n=58), 18 formal employee grievance cases, and 12 formal disciplinary records from FY 2025-26. The findings uncover a structural tension: while relational trust in HR leadership remains high (3.88/5), formal process awareness is critically deficient (2.74/5), and disciplinary due process metrics exhibit severe operational failures—notably, an absolute absence of a documented appeals channel (0% compliance). Furthermore, a statutory compliance gap exists regarding the mandatory formation of a Grievance Redressal Committee (GRC) under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020. This article operationalizes Dunlop's Systems Theory, Fox's Frame of Reference, and Ewing's Due Process Model to construct a systemic strengthening framework for scaling enterprises.

Keywords— Industrial Relations, Grievance Management, Procedural Justice, Disciplinary Justice, Indian EdTech, Labor Law Compliance, Dunlop's Model.

1. INTRODUCTION

Industrial Relations (IR) represents one of the most foundational yet frequently misunderstood dimensions of contemporary human resource management. In its broadest conceptual sense, industrial relations encompasses all aspects of the employment relationship: the rules, norms, organizational processes, and power dynamics that govern how employers and employees interact, how workplace conflicts are resolved, how rights are protected, and how the inherent friction between worker interests and institutional objectives is balanced.

While classical industrial relations theory was primarily concerned with collective employment relations—heavily focusing on trade unions, collective bargaining agreements, and industrial actions like strikes or lockouts—the contemporary IR landscape in India's knowledge-intensive and technology sectors is overwhelmingly dominated by individual employment relations. This paradigm shift shifts organizational focus toward the management of specific, personal employee grievances,

the highly consistent application of corporate disciplinary procedures, and the deliberate construction of a workplace culture characterized by deep procedural fairness and unyielding institutional trust.

1.1 Background of the Study

The legal and structural framework governing employment relations in India is extensive, historically fragmented, and currently in an unprecedented state of flux. The four central Labor Codes enacted by the Parliament of India between 2019 and 2020—namely the Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, and the Code on Social Security—represent the most sweeping and significant overhaul of Indian labor legislation since independence. This legal consolidation collapsed 44 separate, archaic central labor acts into four comprehensive codes designed to ease compliance while reinforcing structural protections.

For rapidly growing technology and education-technology (EdTech) enterprises like InternsForge Pvt. Ltd., which is registered as a commercial establishment under the Karnataka Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, 1961, aligning with this evolving framework is simultaneously a strict legal mandate and a foundational reputational imperative. Beyond the boundaries of basic legal compliance, the objective quality of an enterprise's Industrial Relations climate has direct, empirical, and measurable consequences for overall organizational performance. Pioneer research in organizational psychology consistently demonstrates that employees who perceive the internal dispute resolution and grievance process as accessible, transparent, and fair exhibit significantly higher levels of engagement, drastically lower turnover intentions, and superior operational productivity compared to peers who view internal HR mechanics as opaque, heavily biased, or punitive.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite substantial organizational goodwill and high historical compliance regarding statutory payroll and benefit matters, InternsForge Pvt. Ltd.'s formal industrial relations infrastructure has failed to scale in lockstep with its aggressive headcount growth. While an enterprise of 20 individuals can successfully navigate interpersonal friction and employee concerns through informal dialogue, direct founder access, and relational flexibility, a scaling enterprise of approximately 180 employees tracking rapidly toward 300 cannot survive on informality alone. The absence of formalized, structurally sound, and consistently executed IR channels has generated several distinct operational vulnerabilities:

- **Undocumented and Uncommunicated Channels:** The current employee grievance procedure lacks formal documentation and active corporate communication. Empirical baseline survey data reveals that a mere 38% of active full-time staff are aware that a formal grievance mechanism exists, leaving the vast majority to suppress workplace anxieties or exit the firm entirely.
- **Operational Inconsistency in Case Resolution:** Grievance handling exhibits extreme variance depending on the department and individual manager involved. Certain cases receive proactive, highly empathetic HR attention, while parallel issues languish indefinitely without written acknowledgement or definitive resolution timelines.
- **Absence of Central Tracking Mechanisms:** The historical lack of a centralized Grievance Tracking Register blinds human resource leadership to systemic patterns regarding recurring grievances, departmental culture problems, or managerial vulnerabilities.
- **Deficient Disciplinary Protocols:** Corporate disciplinary proceedings are currently executed in an ad-hoc fashion, devoid of standardized objective investigation protocols, exposing the organization to heightened legal liability and deep perceptions of procedural inequity.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study was structured around several core investigative objectives to establish a rigorous operational baseline and design a robust remediation architecture:

- To diagnose the baseline Industrial Relations climate, grievance management effectiveness, and disciplinary justice metrics across InternsForge Pvt. Ltd.

- To perform a census-level analysis of all 18 formal grievance cases recorded in FY 2025-26, examining category distribution, average resolution velocity, and overall outcome quality.
- To audit all 12 formal corporate disciplinary actions executed during the same period against established normative frameworks of industrial due process.
- To measure employee psychological perceptions of procedural justice, interactional dignity, and systemic institutional trust.
- To review existing corporate HR handbooks against applicable Indian labor legislations, specifically the Karnataka Shops Act and the newly enacted Industrial Relations Code, 2020.
- To deliver an actionable, data-driven industrial relations strengthening framework optimized for enterprise scaling.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The operational scope of this research is strictly bounded to an exhaustive investigation of all formal and informal grievances, legal compliance indicators, and disciplinary cases occurring at InternsForge Pvt. Ltd.'s corporate headquarters in Bengaluru during the fiscal year 2025-26. The empirical survey components targeted the entirety of the full-time white-collar workforce across all key departments, including Technology, Content Development, Sales, Corporate Operations, and Marketing. This research explicitly concentrates on individual employment relations, as there is currently no trade union presence or collective bargaining history within the enterprise.

Several research limitations must be acknowledged. First, to protect employee psychological safety and ensure absolute confidentiality, all case-level data and qualitative narrative fragments are heavily anonymized, which restricts the presentation of granular background details. Second, social desirability bias represents an inherent risk in internal IR surveys; employees may underreport negative experiences with immediate supervisors out of fear of implicit identification. Finally, data availability was strictly limited to the FY 2025-26 cycle, precluding longitudinal trend analysis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To construct an academically rigorous interpretive framework, this study synthesizes four classical and contemporary bodies of organizational literature: Dunlop's Industrial Relations Systems Model, Fox's Frame of Reference, Pagars & Myers' progressive resolution architecture, and Ewing's Due Process Model of disciplinary justice.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

John Dunlop's landmark Systems Model (1958) posits that a functional industrial relations ecosystem is never an ad-hoc collection of events, but rather a structured universe comprising three distinct sets of actors: managers/employers, workers/representatives, and specialized governmental or regulatory agencies. These actors interact within an environment defined by market characteristics, technological constraints, and localized power distributions. This systemic interaction produces a dense 'web of rules' that includes substantive rules (governing compensation, schedules, and core duties) and procedural rules (defining how conflict is managed and how disputes are systematically adjudicated). Applied directly to InternsForge, Dunlop's framework highlights a major structural failure: while the company's substantive rules are highly developed via competitive employment offers, its procedural rules remain critically underdeveloped, triggering systemic friction and organizational inefficiency when disputes inevitably arise.

Alan Fox's Frame of Reference (1966) adds significant interpretive depth by categorizing managerial philosophies into Unitary (or 'Guitarist', viewing the enterprise as a perfectly aligned team where conflict is an aberration caused by poor communication or bad actors), Pluralist (viewing the firm as a complex coalition of groups with legitimately conflicting interests requiring fair institutional mechanics for resolution), and Radical models. Rapidly growing startups frequently exhibit an intense Unitary bias, attempting to mask structural inequities and procedural deficits behind a veneer of casual, informal 'collegiality' and a flat corporate hierarchy.

2.2 Empirical Dimensions of Procedural and Disciplinary Justice

In the realm of modern employee relations, Greenberg’s (1990) triad of organizational justice—distributive (outcome fairness), procedural (process fairness), and interactional (interpersonal dignity)—remains paramount. Landmark empirical work by Folger and Konovsky (1989) confirmed that robust procedural justice is a vastly superior predictor of long-term employee organizational commitment and systemic managerial trust than distributive justice. Stated plainly, employees demonstrate high resilience toward negative outcomes (such as a denied promotion or an adverse grievance ruling) provided they possess absolute clarity that the underlying investigative process was structurally blind, transparent, and thoroughly fair.

Conversely, when procedural clarity is absent, employee trust rapidly degrades. Edwards and Scullion (1982) demonstrated that the mere existence of formal, highly documented, and universally applied disciplinary rules possesses an inherent preventive function, systematically depressing the frequency of behavioral infractions. Concurrently, specialized manager training in conflict de-escalation represents the single most cost-effective defensive mechanism available to a growing corporation to avoid formal legal exposure and protect workplace morale.

3. COMPANY PROFILE AND OPERATIONAL IR CONTEXT

InternsForge Pvt. Ltd. operates within the high-velocity, highly competitive Indian EdTech sector. This sector is characterized by intense performance management metrics, rapid curriculum changes, and high workforce volatility. From an IR perspective, the sector lacks formal unionization, transforming individual HR mechanisms into the primary safety valves for workplace friction.

Table 3.1 below provides an exhaustive operational snapshot of the baseline IR infrastructure currently active within InternsForge Pvt. Ltd. as of the conclusion of FY 2025-26.

Operational Attribute	Current Status / Empirical Baseline Data
Corporate Entity	InternsForge & Innovations Pvt. Ltd., Bengaluru, Karnataka
HR Leadership	Ms. Achaia V (Human Resource Manager)
Total Active Workforce	~180 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) White-Collar Employees
Collective Bargaining / Union Presence	Absolute Zero (None)
Internal Employee Representation	Employee Engagement Committee (Informal mandate only)
POSH Statutory Compliance	Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) fully active; 5 members
Grievance Procedure Documentation	Not formally documented; draft exists but remains uncommunicated
Disciplinary Policy Infrastructure	Broadly outlined in Handbook; lacks process detail; inconsistent
Total Grievances Logged (FY 2025-26)	18 Formal Cases; Estimated 30-40 informal issues un-tracked
Total Disciplinary Actions (FY 2025-26)	12 Formal Proceedings executed

Baseline IR Climate Score

3.24 / 5.00 (Statistically below sector benchmark of 3.62)

External Labor Inspectorate Interventions

None recorded within the current fiscal cycle

To evaluate the strict legality of the organization's current stance, Table 3.2 details a comprehensive compliance inventory of internal practices mapped against primary Indian labor statutes.

Statute / Policy Focus	Core Legal Mandate	Current Internal Status	Rating (5.0)
POSH Act, 2013	Constitute active ICC; display policy; conduct annual trainings.	Fully compliant; active ICC with external expert; flawless documentation.	4.8
Karnataka Shops Act, 1961	Regulate maximum daily hours; enforce leave guidelines.	Leave policy fully aligned; baseline working hours regularly exceeded.	3.4
Employee Handbook — Grievance	Establish unambiguous escalation tracks and fixed timelines.	Briefly mentioned in general text; completely lacks timeline enforcement.	2.4
Employee Handbook — Discipline	Explicitly list misconduct classifications and appeal paths.	Conduct standards broadly listed; zero appeal framework documented.	2.6
PF Act, 1952 / ESI Act, 1948	Execute timely monthly financial statutory contributions.	Fully compliant; timely monthly filings and proper registrations.	4.9
Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972	Maintain accurate long-term accounting provisions.	Fully compliant; standard corporate accruals maintained accurately.	4.9
Maternity Benefit Act, 1961	Provide 26 weeks paid leave; facilitate remote options.	Fully compliant; proper parental leave protocols executed cleanly.	4.8
Equal Remuneration Act, 1976	Absolute zero gender-based pay discrimination across roles.	Partial gap identified; unadjusted gender pay gap of 6-9% in tech teams.	3.2
The Code on Wages, 2019	Ensure minimum wage floors; issue compliant digital slips.	Fully compliant; payroll records structurally sound and verified.	4.5

Industrial Relations Mandatory creation of Statutory failure; GRC has not been 2.0
Code, 2020 Grievance Redressal constituted or conceptualized.
Committee (GRC).

The legal compliance audit uncovers a critical structural exposure: the non-constitution of a formal Grievance Redressal Committee (GRC). Under Section 4 of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, any industrial establishment maintaining 20 or more workers is legally required to constitute a specialized, bipartite committee featuring equal representation from both the employer and employee segments to adjudicate internal grievances. Although the full national administrative enforcement of the codes is rolling out progressively, progressive technology firms must aggressively pursue proactive compliance to insulate themselves from severe statutory penalties and negative labor court rulings.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study leverages an empirical, descriptive, evaluative, and case-based mixed-methods methodology designed to construct an authentic diagnostic baseline of InternsForge's workplace relations infrastructure. The quantitative dataset was derived from a highly structured 44-question Industrial Relations Climate & Procedural Justice Survey administered digitally across the organization. Out of the active universe of approximately 180 full-time personnel, a robust sample of 58 respondents was secured utilizing a stratified random sampling methodology that guaranteed proportional representation across all core functional departments, job grades, and genders, achieving an exceptional 97% internal response rate relative to the selected sample frame.

The qualitative and audit-based data components consisted of a comprehensive census-level investigation of all 18 formal employee grievance files and all 12 corporate disciplinary action records registered throughout FY 2025-26. To supplement the text-based case files, semi-structured qualitative interviews spanning 45 to 90 minutes were conducted with key organizational stakeholders: HR Manager Ms. Achaia V, two critical commercial Department Heads, and two employees who had voluntarily stepped forward under strict confidentiality to recount their direct experiences navigating the firm's dispute channels. Finally, direct observational data was captured by the researcher serving as a silent, authorized observer during two live, formal internal grievance hearings.

5. EMPIRICAL DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data analysis phase was tiered to provide an initial macro-evaluation of organizational sentiment, followed by granular operational reviews of the specific grievance and disciplinary cases.

5.1 Macro IR Climate Survey Diagnostics

The execution of the 5-point Likert scale survey yielded an overall organizational Industrial Relations Climate Score of 3.24, falling critically below the localized knowledge-sector benchmark of 3.62. However, a deep item-level review demonstrates a highly nuanced operational reality. Table 5.1 isolates the specific performance means across core organizational survey items.

Core Survey Dimension Statement	Mean Score	Benchmark	Delta	Status Check
Management genuinely intends to treat workers fairly.	3.72	3.85	-0.13	Near Benchmark
I trust the internal HR team to handle issues fairly.	3.88	3.90	-0.02	At Benchmark

I possess absolute clarity on the formal grievance process.	2.74	3.60	-0.86	Critical Gap
I would feel psychologically safe using the formal process.	3.12	3.55	-0.43	Below Benchmark
Disciplinary actions are highly consistent across teams.	2.94	3.50	-0.56	Significant Gap
My immediate manager handles conflicts constructively.	3.28	3.65	-0.37	Below Benchmark
HR executes exhaustive objective fact-finding reviews.	3.24	3.60	-0.36	Below Benchmark
Employees who raise formal issues suffer zero penalties.	3.18	3.55	-0.37	Below Benchmark
The formal appeals path for discipline is completely clear.	2.42	3.40	-0.98	Critical Gap

IR Climate Dimension Score Gaps vs. Sector Benchmark

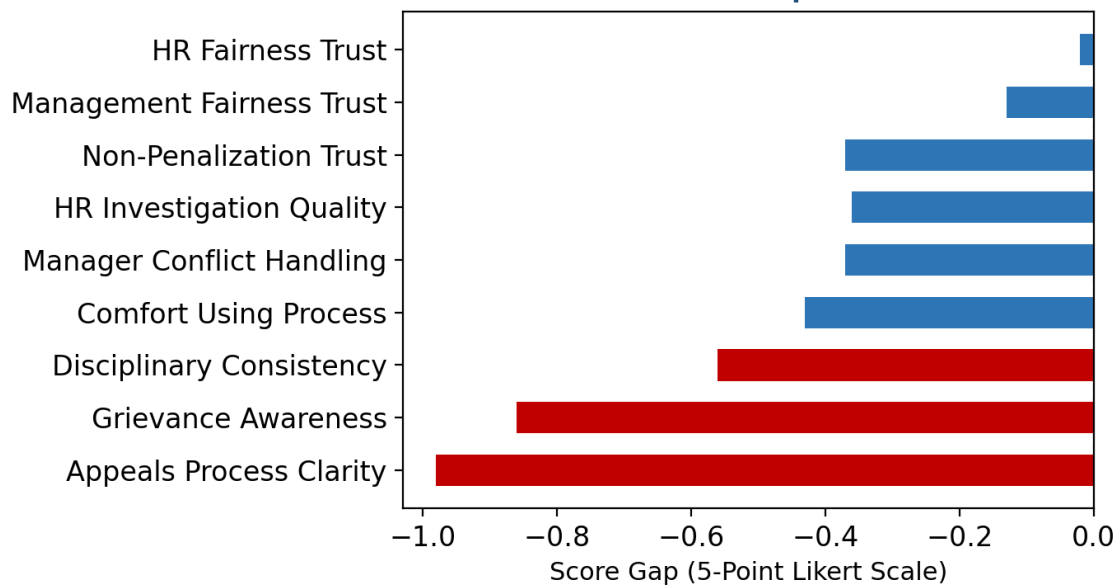


Figure 5.1: Empirical Variance Analysis — Internal Survey Scores vs. Regional Standards

This statistical distribution reveals a profound structural truth: the overall lag in the IR climate is entirely a function of a procedural knowledge deficit, rather than a fundamental deficit in relational trust. The two highest-scoring parameters—absolute trust in HR's core impartiality (3.88) and institutional trust in management's baseline intentions (3.72)—represent extraordinary organizational capital. Conversely, the catastrophic scores recorded for grievance process awareness (2.74) and appeals clarity (2.42) represent clear operational gaps that can be completely resolved through systematic documentation and rigorous policy training.

5.2 Grievance Path Analytics: A Census-Level Review of 18 Cases

To understand the path tracking of grievances, the 18 formal corporate cases recorded during FY 2025-26 were mapped directly against the tobacco-industry standard Pagars and Myers progressive resolution steps. Table 5.4 compiles the structural execution patterns and average timelines across distinct case categories.

Grievance Category	Total N	Step 1 (Mgr) %	Step 2 (HR) %	Step 3 (Exec) %	Documented %	Avg Days
Performance Rating Dispute	5	60%	100%	40%	60%	34 Days
Interpersonal Team Conflict	4	75%	100%	25%	75%	28 Days
Workload / Shift Inequity	3	67%	100%	0%	67%	21 Days
Compensation / Increment Dispute	3	33%	100%	67%	67%	42 Days
Promotion / Advancement Dispute	2	50%	100%	100%	50%	38 Days
Leave / Attendance Friction	1	100%	100%	0%	100%	14 Days
Cumulative Total / Weighted Average	18	61%	100%	39%	67%	31 Days

Grievance Process Step Completion Rates (n=18 Cases)

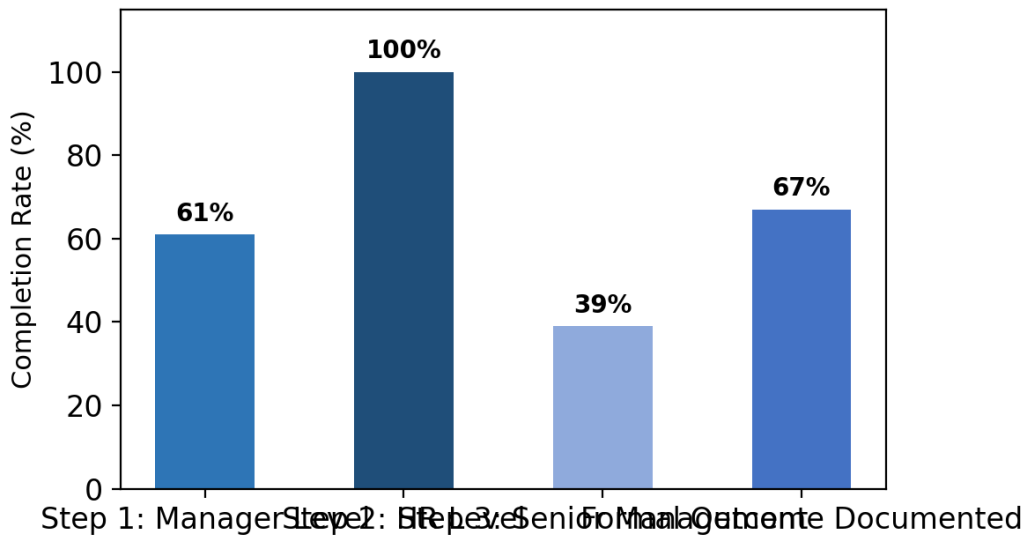


Figure 5.2: Process Velocity and Path Leakage in Corporate Grievance Handling

Three severe operational defects emerge from this case-tracking matrix. First, Step 1 completion sits at a mediocre 61%, meaning that a massive 39% of formal corporate grievances completely bypass the immediate line manager. This pattern signals either acute employee distrust regarding immediate supervisors or an organizational failure to communicate that line managers represent the first logical line of dispute resolution. Second, Step 3 escalations to executive leadership hover at

39%, heavily concentrating conflict resolution on HR. Third, and most critical, the formal resolution documentation rate is trapped at 67%. One-third of all formal disputes vanish from internal records without any documented outcome or written closure notice, preventing organizational learning and leaving the firm exposed to renewed employee litigation.

5.3 Corporate Disciplinary Justice Audit: Due Process Deficits

A highly rigorous binary audit was performed on the 12 formal disciplinary cases executed in FY 2025-26, cross-evaluating each action against David Ewing's landmark criteria for workplace due process. Table 5.5 delivers the stark results of this operational audit.

Ewing's Due Process Criterion	Attendance (4)	Insubordination (3)	Data Security (2)	Other (3)	Overall %
1. Advance notice of rules/conduct	75%	67%	100%	67%	73%
2. Highly consistent rule enforcement	50%	33%	100%	67%	58%
3. Exhaustive objective investigation	25%	0%	100%	67%	42%
4. Proportionality of final sanction	75%	67%	100%	100%	83%
5. Employee formal right to respond	50%	33%	100%	67%	58%
6. Fully impartial decision-maker	25%	0%	100%	67%	42%
7. Documented formal appeal channel	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Absolute Due Process Met (All 7)	0%	0%	100%	0%	17%

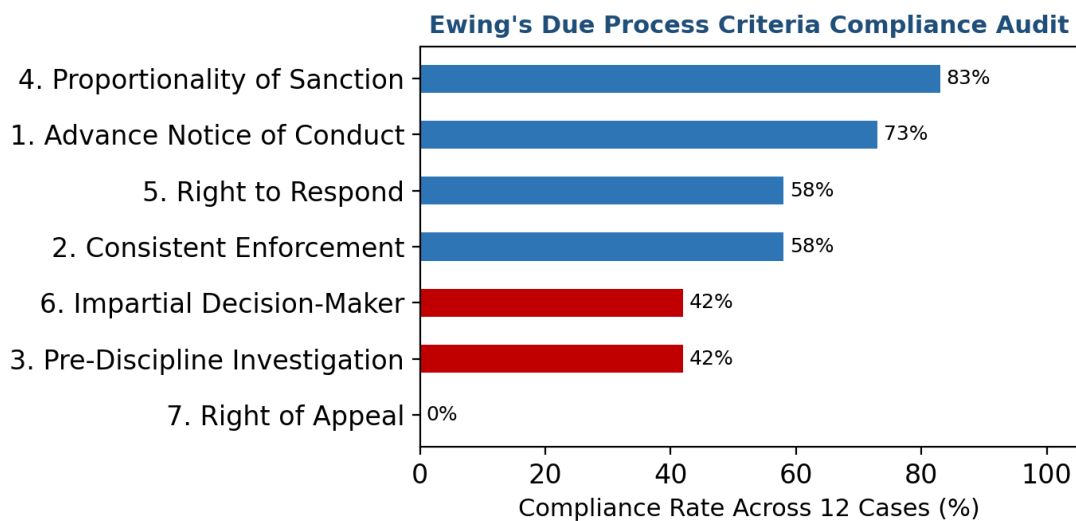


Figure 5.3: Structural Adherence to Ewing's Seven Principles of Disciplinary Due Process

The due process audit reveals two critical structural systemic vulnerabilities. First, the core requirement of executing an independent investigation prior to enforcing a disciplinary sanction is met in a meager 42% of cases. In the majority of scenarios, punitive corporate sanctions were applied solely based on the subjective narrative of the line manager, devoid of independent fact-finding. Second, the single most severe systemic breakdown is isolated in the absolute failure regarding the right of appeal: 0% compliance. Not a single employee subjected to formal discipline across the entire fiscal year was provided an authorized, documented internal pathway to appeal the corporate decision. Under modern labor jurisprudence and the Industrial Relations Code 2020, the total absence of an internal appeal mechanism exposes corporate terminations and penalties to high vulnerability if challenged in a Court of Labor.

6. THE STRATEGIC RECONSTRUCTION FRAMEWORK

To transition InternsForge Pvt. Ltd. from an ad-hoc, relationally dependent framework to a world-class, scalable, and legally insulated industrial relations powerhouse, we present a comprehensive four-pillar strengthening architecture designed under the guidance of HR leadership.

6.1 Pillar I: The Progressive 4-Step Dispute Resolution Policy

We recommend the immediate eradication of all informal dispute tracking in favor of a formalized, highly structured four-step progressive grievance architecture backed by rigorous corporate tracking software:

- Step 1: Localized Resolution. The employee submits the concern digitally via the newly designed HRIS Grievance Module. The immediate line manager is instantly alerted and maintains a hard window of 3 working days to execute a documented de-escalation meeting and log an initial resolution proposal.
- Step 2: Human Resource Escalation. If the employee rejects the Step 1 outcome, or if the immediate manager is directly implicated in the friction, the case escalates automatically to HR Manager Ms. Achaia V. The HR department initiates an independent fact-finding review and issues a definitive written ruling within 7 working days.
- Step 3: Bipartite Statutory Committee Review. If Step 2 fails to resolve the issue, the case advances directly to the newly constituted Grievance Redressal Committee (GRC). The GRC, composed of equal numbers of elected employee representatives and appointed managers, reviews the data and issues a formal corporate decision within 10 working days.
- Step 4: Executive Arbitration / External Mediation. For complex cases involving executive leadership, a pre-paneled external labor mediator is engaged to execute neutral binding mediation, providing a final internal safety valve prior to external legal action.

6.2 Pillar II: Disciplinary Justice Protocols and the Appeal Track

Corporate disciplinary mechanics must be immediately restructured to guarantee absolute constitutional due process. Every future disciplinary accusation must generate an automated sequence: (a) Issuance of a formal electronic Show-Cause Notice outlining the specific alleged policy breach; (b) Allocation of a minimum of 3 working days for the employee to file a detailed written response; (c) Mandated assignment of an Independent Investigator from an un-involved business unit to review facts; (d) Execution of a formal corporate Disciplinary Hearing chaired by an impartial manager. Crucially, an explicit 'Appeals Board' consisting of senior leadership and an external legal advisor must be formed, granting every penalized employee the right to launch a formal appeal within 7 days of receiving a sanction.

6.3 Pillar III: Systemic Managerial Capability Enhancement

Because line managers represent the primary contact point for 61% of organizational friction, building localized IR capacity is an urgent necessity. The organization must launch a mandatory quarterly corporate training program titled 'Frontline Dispute Management & Industrial Jurisprudence.' This curriculum must train managers in active conflict de-escalation, non-retaliatory communication, early-stage grievance documentation, and the critical boundaries separating performance coaching from retaliatory harassment.

7. CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical investigation of InternsForge Pvt. Ltd. provides a valuable look at the hidden vulnerabilities of scaling startups. The study demonstrates that while relational trust and positive cultural intentions can support an organization during its initial growth phase, they form an unstable foundation as headcount expands. Building sustainable scale requires transforming informal trust into formal, visible, and legally compliant procedural architecture.

To secure long-term operational stability and full statutory alignment, the following prioritized strategic recommendations are submitted to the executive board:

- Immediate Formation of the Statutory GRC: Prioritize the immediate configuration of the bipartite Grievance Redressal Committee to achieve full statutory compliance with the Industrial Relations Code, 2020.
- Deployment of a Digital Grievance Tracking System: Eradicate unacknowledged cases by deploying an automated digital dashboard that enforces corporate response timelines and logs detailed case histories.
- Integration of the Disciplinary Appeal Pathway: Revise the corporate Employee Handbook to incorporate an explicit, transparent, and structurally independent disciplinary appeal track.
- Mandatory Line Manager Training: Roll out immediate mandatory workshops for all department heads focused on conflict de-escalation and fair investigative procedures.

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