

**Communication to stakeholders regarding the whistleblower scheme**

While implementing the technical aspect of the whistleblower scheme can be relatively straightforward, there are other aspects of optimising the benefits of the scheme that need to be addressed and are more difficult. It is therefore essential that there is appropriate communication with internal and external stakeholders during the implementation of the scheme.

**Key stakeholders in relation to the introduction of whistleblower schemes**

The company should first carefully consider which stakeholders should be aware of the whistleblower scheme. It is often necessary to think more broadly than at first seems sufficient.

Almost all stakeholders, both internal and external, are relevant. For companies in the EU, one of ​the reasons for a broad approach to communication is that a new directive has been adopted to be implemented in each country by New Year 2021–22.

It introduces a duty for companies to protect both internal and external stakeholders who act as whistleblowers in relation to suspected wrongdoing in the company.

The new directive covers, among others, employees, former employees, trainees, shareholders, volunteers, suppliers and customers who become aware of illegal behaviour in a work context. In addition, persons who assist in reporting wrongdoing and third parties associated with the whistleblower who may experience reprisals in a work-related context, such as colleagues or relatives of a whistleblower, are also legally protected.

In addition to the legal duty to communicate about the scheme, there are many other benefits to establishing proper communication about the whistleblower scheme.

**General aims of the communication**

The general aims of the communication should be to:

* build trust in the company and the scheme,
* emphasise the value and purpose of the scheme for increasing transparency,
* reduce risks and losses and prevent illegal activities sooner rather than later,
* promote the scheme as a reinforcer of the company's core values and code of conduct,
* welcome whistleblowers and stress that those who act in good faith are considered loyal and courageous.

**Communication with internal stakeholders:**

When it comes to internal stakeholders, including in particular a company's employees, it is clear that the reason why many employees are afraid to act as whistleblowers is because they fear reprisals or because they think ​that no real action will be taken in response to what they have reported. As a result, companies often miss out on important information they need to stop inappropriate or illegal behaviour in their business. Much of the communication with employees should therefore be aimed at building trust in the whistleblower scheme and the process around it and at building trust in the company as an ethically attractive place to work, where there is an opportunity to improve the culture, etc. by "blowing the whistle".

Before a company implements a whistleblower scheme, it often questions whether it will receive any relevant reports. Research shows that companies – at least when they implement effective communication about the scheme – usually do receive such reports. Companies thus optimise the possibility of receiving the right type of report rather than, for example, reports that should be made through other complaint channels within the company.

**Communication with external stakeholders:**

When it comes to external stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, partners and investors, two major benefits should be highlighted. Firstly, implementing a whistleblower scheme can show that the company is serious about business ethics and wants to be a company with integrity. This is valuable for a company's profile and something which investors in particular are increasingly interested in.

Secondly, the introduction of a whistleblower scheme can be an effective substitute for the actual presence of management in remote areas of the value chain, for example in international companies with global supply chains.

Here, external parties can be valuable as potential whistleblowers. Establishing a whistleblowing facility for external parties thus extends the company's reach and shows that it is seriously interested in knowing whether a customer or supplier suspects wrongdoing or illegality.

**Communication should include a number of elements**

Help stakeholders feel confident in reporting things:

* Allow anonymous reporting and communicate the follow-up and investigation process.
* Highlight security aspects of the scheme, including encryption of data and data protection, passwords, no traceability of the identity of whistleblowers, etc.
* Communicate that reports can be made anytime and anywhere through the platform of their choice.
* Communicate clearly that there will be no reprisals in relation to reports made in good faith, and that this would be illegal and could result in sanctions for the company.

The company should also carry out internal training of employees so that the company receives the right type of report. In this regard, employees should be provided with:

* an explanation of what counts as a whistleblower case, both legally and in terms of internal policies and guidelines, as opposed to matters that should be reported through other processes or channels,
* a description of the information that should be included in the report, and
* information that cases are diligently processed by the company and the external party appointed to handle the report,
* a description of what happens with reports once they have been received,
* communication of the timeframes within which a whistleblower can expect to receive acknowledgement of receipt and feedback,
* details of ​the persons or external players appointed to manage the reports.

Legal requirements:

* companies are required to communicate that a whistleblower may use external channels, such as contacting competent authorities, and still be protected as a whistleblower
* there is a duty to inform employees about the scheme in a whistleblower policy.

**There are a number of possible channels where information about the scheme is provided**

Communication with internal stakeholders:

* on the company's internet and intranet,
* in the company's Code of Conduct,
* in materials for induction of new employees and
* the organisation of proper training programmes and seminars,
* publication of a proper whistleblower policy.

Communication with external stakeholders:

* on the company’s website,
* in the company's Code of Conduct for suppliers, customer newsletters
* in communications regarding the company's CSR performance, investor updates and annual financial statements, etc.