

Catholic
Employment
Relations

2026 CER EMPLOYMENT LAW SYMPOSIUM



Wearing every hat

*Leadership in Employment Law - mastering
multifunctional roles as an employer*

2026 EMPLOYMENT LAW SYMPOSIUM

Date: 18 September 2026

Time: 09:30am - 04:00pm

09:30

Welcome and prayer

Registration desk opens at 09:00

09:45

The Strategist

Human flourishing, dignity, well-being and psychosocial safety in Catholic workplaces. Reflections on how ethical leadership and catholic social teaching can build healthy and fair human person centric workplaces.

10:30

Coffee Break & Networking

10:50

The Culture Shaper

Join us for a panel discussion on psychosocial risks in the workplace, exploring what they are, employers' legal and compliance obligations and the implications for duty of care. The session will combine legal insights with practical experience, covering common psychosocial hazards, regulatory trends, enforcement risks and emerging issues such as workplace conduct, organisational change, and AI.

12:00

Lunch Break & Networking

01:00

The Negotiator

Enterprise Bargaining on the front foot - lead bargaining strategically and confidently. Gain practical insights into current bargaining trends, industrial strategy and preparation, workforce communications, expectation management and the effective management of risk throughout the bargaining process.

02:05

The Investigator and Decision Maker

Strengthen your approach to complaints and misconduct by learning how to conduct fair, trauma-informed and legally defensible investigations, apply procedural fairness, and make disciplined decisions that minimise unfair dismissal and other employment law risks.

02:50

Afternoon tea & Networking

03:05

The Technologist

AI in employment decision-making. Leverage AI responsibly while managing legal and ethical exposure. Examine the use of AI, including bias and discrimination risks, requirements for transparency, the development of robust governance frameworks, and key emerging regulatory trends.

03:50

Wrap up & Farewell



Welcome & Address

9:30 - 9:45

Legal, cultural and psychological responsibilities are converging

Set the context for the day – discuss the current position of Catholic employers operating in an environment where legal, cultural and psychological responsibilities are converging.



Michael Easson AM
Executive Chairman
& Co-Founder
EG

Dr Michael Easson AM

Michael Easson AM is the Co-founding Director and Executive Chairman of EG, a leading funds management, property and technology group investing across all Australian real estate sectors. Michael has held numerous senior leadership and board roles including roles with ING Real Estate Australia, State Super, NRMA Insurance, Sydney Metro Transport, the State Rail Authority of NSW, and Macquarie Infrastructure Group, among others. He served on the NSW Secondary Schools Board and the Board of Senior Board Studies and once was an Adjunct Professor at the Australian Graduate School of Management, UNSW.

Michael was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1997 and is a Fellow of both the Australian Institute of Company Directors (FAICD) and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS).

The Strategist

9:45 - 10:30

The Modern Employer – leading through complexity, risk & change

This session examines the role of the responsible person in a Catholic organisation, focusing on the increasing complexity of governance responsibilities across compliance, risk, workplace culture and psychosocial safety. It highlights the obligation to ensure effective oversight of governance systems, organisational performance and legal compliance. Participants build an understanding of how governance decisions influence workplace culture, including the importance of maintaining safe, respectful and legally compliant environments. The session reinforces the need for responsible persons to exercise integrity, accountability and sound judgement in their decision-making.

Drawing on principles of Catholic social teaching, the session demonstrates how values-based leadership can support effective governance, while ensuring alignment with regulatory requirements and the proper operation of the school.

Human flourishing, dignity, well-being and psychosocial safety in Catholic workplaces. Reflections on how ethical leadership and catholic social teaching can build healthy and fair human person centric workplaces.



Dr Xavier Symons
Director
Plunkett Centre for
Ethics

Dr Xavier Symons

Xavier Symons is Director of the Plunkett Centre for Ethics at the Australian Catholic University. Previously he was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University. Xavier is a widely published bioethics researcher and is the author of *Why Conscience Matters: A Defence of Conscientious Objection in Healthcare*, which was published with Routledge in 2022. Earlier this year, Xavier wrote a section introduction to an edited collection of Pope Leo's speeches on education and artificial intelligence, entitled *Maps of Hope*.

Xavier is a member of the Health Ethics Advisory Panel for NSW Health and in his work at the Plunkett Centre advises large health and aged care organisations on ethics and governance matters.

10:50 - 12:00

Psychosocial Risk - where HR, WHS & legal intersect

Psychosocial risk has become one of the most significant people, safety and compliance challenges facing organisations. In this panel discussion, legal, compliance and workplace wellbeing experts explore the evolving obligations around psychosocial hazards, employer duty of care, and practical strategies for managing psychological health in the workplace.

Through real-world insights and audience discussion, attendees will gain a deeper understanding of how to identify, prevent and respond to psychosocial risks while creating safer, fairer and more resilient workplace cultures.

Key discussion topics will include:

- Understanding psychosocial risks and common workplace hazards
- Employer legal obligations and duty of care requirements
- Regulatory trends, enforcement, and emerging risks, including AI and workplace change
- Practical approaches to identifying, assessing, and managing psychosocial risks
- Balancing effective performance management with psychosocial risk and legal considerations.

The session will be facilitated by Mary Ryan, who will guide a structured conversation bringing together legal, compliance and operational perspectives. Nick Tindley will provide the legal and regulatory context, examining employer obligations, emerging risks and enforcement trends, while Kath Grant will explore compliance requirements, duty of care responsibilities and the practical implications for organisations. Offering a real-world perspective, Niny Panaust, Health and Wellbeing Manager at Sydney Catholic Schools, will share practical insights into how psychosocial risks present in complex workplaces and the challenges leaders face in managing them effectively.

The session will begin with an overview of the current legal framework and employer responsibilities, followed by a discussion of psychosocial risk in practice. The panel will then come together for a facilitated conversation exploring key issues such as performance management, psychological safety, workplace change and emerging risks, before opening the floor to audience questions and discussion.



Nick Tindley
Managing Principal
Catholic
Employment
Relations Ltd

Nick Tindley

Nick Tindley is a highly experienced employment and workplace relations lawyer with more than 20 years of expertise advising businesses across a broad range of employment law matters.

As Managing Principal at Catholic Employment Relations Ltd, he is known for delivering practical, strategic advice that helps organisations navigate complex workplace issues, manage risk and build strong, compliant workforces. Nick has held senior leadership roles with Citation Group and the National Retail Association. He is recognised for his client-focused approach, deep industry knowledge, and ability to develop effective solutions to complex workplace challenges.



Kath Grant
Senior Workplace
Relations Manager
*Catholic
Employment
Relations Ltd*

Kath Grant

Kath is an experienced Employment Relations Manager with a strong background in workplace relations, employee engagement and people management. Throughout her career, she has worked closely with organisations across a range of sectors, helping leaders navigate complex employment matters, manage workplace risk and build positive, high-performing workplace cultures.

More recently, Kath has worked within the Parramatta Diocese, giving her a deep understanding of the unique environment in which Catholic schools operate. This experience has provided her with valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities facing school leaders, including workforce management, employee relations, governance requirements, and fostering cultures that align with the mission and values of Catholic education.



Niny Panaust
Supervisor of
Health and
Wellbeing
*Sydney Catholic
Schools*

Niny Panaust

Niny Panaust is the Supervisor of Health and Wellbeing at Sydney Catholic Schools, where she leads a multidisciplinary team supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of staff across a large and complex education system.

With a background in occupational therapy and psychology, Niny has extensive experience in workplace health, injury management and organisational wellbeing across education, government, corporate and international settings.

At Sydney Catholic Schools, Niny's work focuses on the practical management of psychosocial risk, including prevention and early intervention, psychological health and safety, workers compensation and recovery at work, critical incident response, and supporting leaders to navigate complex staff wellbeing matters.



Mary Ryan
Head of
Professional
Learning and
Accreditation
*Catholic Schools
NSW*

Mary Ryan

Mary is the Head of Professional Learning and Accreditation at Catholic Schools NSW. She has an extensive career in both school and system leadership at the state and diocesan levels. Her current role includes responsibility for designing and curating synchronous and asynchronous professional learning for system and school leaders in Catholic education across NSW. She works closely with the NSW Education Standards Authority in educational policy and is a member of the NSW Education Standards Authority Teacher Education Forum. She chairs the Catholic Schools NSW Teacher Development Network, the Catholic Schools NSW Teacher Accreditation Advisory Group and the Catholic Schools NSW Teacher Workforce Working Group. Mary is Chair of the Board of St Scholastica's College Glebe Point.

Mary has held a range of roles in schools including K-6 classroom teacher, EALD and diverse learning, coordinator 1 and 2, Religious Education Coordinator and Assistant Principal. She was the Sydney Archdiocesan Parent Community Educator in Sydney Catholic Schools supporting the Executive Director, Regional Directors and Principals to work proactively and positively with parents, carers, families, and communities.

1:00 - 2:00

Enterprise Bargaining on the front foot – Lead bargaining strategically and confidently

Enterprise bargaining is no longer simply an industrial relations exercise. It is a critical leadership, governance and risk management responsibility that requires strategic planning, stakeholder engagement and informed decision-making. This session is designed to build participants' confidence and capability to lead bargaining processes effectively, while navigating an increasingly complex industrial relations environment.

Through targeted professional learning and practical case studies, participants will explore the key stages of enterprise bargaining, from preparation and workforce engagement through to negotiation, implementation and compliance. The session will clarify the roles and responsibilities of leaders involved in bargaining and demonstrate how structured governance frameworks can support sound decision-making, minimise risk and strengthen organisational outcomes.

Attendees will gain practical insights into developing a bargaining strategy, identifying priorities, managing stakeholder expectations, communicating effectively with employees and representatives, and responding to emerging challenges throughout the bargaining process. The session will also examine common risks, lessons learned from recent bargaining experiences, and approaches to achieving sustainable outcomes that balance organisational objectives with workforce needs.

By the end of the session, participants will be better equipped to approach enterprise bargaining proactively, manage risk with confidence, and lead negotiations in a way that supports compliance, workforce engagement and long-term organisational success.



Peter Smith
CEO & Authorised
Principal
Catholic
Employment
Relations Ltd

Peter Smith

Peter Smith is Chief Executive Officer and Authorised Principal of Catholic Employment Relations Limited, supporting dioceses and Catholic education authorities across Australia in employment law, industrial strategy and workplace governance.

Prior to joining the Catholic sector, Peter has supported senior industrial relations leadership and strategy in some of Australia's largest and most highly unionised public and private organisations. He has led enterprise bargaining, managed large-scale workforce change and advised executives on complex industrial and operational risk.

Peter partners with senior Catholic sector leaders across dioceses, education systems and Church agencies on strategic workforce governance, industrial relations, regulatory compliance and complex people risk. His work spans enterprise bargaining, workplace investigations, psychosocial risk management, executive decision-making and organisational accountability.

Admitted as a solicitor of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Peter combines executive judgement with deep industrial relations expertise and a practical understanding of the financial, regulatory and cultural pressures facing Catholic education today.

The Investigator & Decision Maker

2:05 - 2:50

Conducting fair & defensible investigations, while applying procedural fairness and disciplined decision-making

Investigations are not merely a legal or HR function - in a Catholic organisation, how you investigate, how you treat people through the process, and how you make decisions is itself an expression of institutional values and mission.

The session strengthens participants' approach to complaints and misconduct. It supports targeted professional learning in workplace investigations and procedural fairness.

It reinforces roles and responsibilities, including supervisory arrangements, application of codes of conduct, and the use of delegated authority in decision-making. The panel will discuss and emphasise clear, consistent and defensible governance decisions, supported by appropriate documentation, evidence handling and escalation.

Participants examine common investigation issues and develop practical capability to manage complaints fairly, consistently and in a way that supports compliant and effective governance.



Brett Thompson

Principal
Catholic
Employment
Relations Ltd

Brett Thompson

Brett Thompson is CERL Principal Lawyer, and advises organisations in the education and not-for-profit sectors on workplace relations, governance and compliance. He supports school leaders and responsible persons in employment law, investigations, industrial relations and regulatory obligations, helping organisations navigate complex governance and risk environments. Brett brings practical expertise in decision-making, risk management and governance frameworks, supporting compliant, accountable and values-aligned leadership in school systems.



Brigitte Fairbank

Executive Director,
People and
Workplace
CatholicCare
Sydney

Brigitte Fairbank

Brigitte is an accomplished People & Culture executive and trusted business leader with more than 30 years' experience leading industrial relations, workforce strategy, and organisational transformation across highly unionised, complex and regulated environments.

With experience spanning government, human services, aviation, banking, manufacturing, logistics and mining, she combines deep industrial relations expertise with strong commercial acumen, workforce planning, transformation, and cultural leadership. Recognised for building high-performing teams, leading through uncertainty, and fostering constructive stakeholder relationships, she delivers outcomes that balance employee wellbeing, compliance, operational performance and long-term organisational success.



Kath Grant

Senior Workplace
Relations Manager -
Catholic
Employment
Relations Ltd

Kath Grant

Kath Grant is an experienced Employment Relations Manager with a strong background in workplace relations, employee engagement, and people management. She works closely with organisations to navigate complex employment matters, manage workplace risk, and foster positive, productive workplace cultures. Kath is passionate about delivering practical, commercially focused advice and helping leaders balance compliance obligations with effective people management.

The Technologist

3:05 - 3:50

AI in employment decision-making - Managing the use of AI legally and ethically within a governance framework

AI is increasingly being used across the employment lifecycle, from recruitment, onboarding and workforce planning to performance management, employee communications, learning and development, workplace investigations and the automation of administrative work.

This session examines the legal, ethical and governance implications of using AI in the workplace. It considers emerging risks including staff wellbeing, privacy, data security, bias, discrimination, lack of transparency, inappropriate reliance on automated outputs and the changing responsibilities of employers and employees.

Participants will explore how a practical AI governance framework can help organisations identify appropriate uses of AI, establish clear accountability, maintain meaningful human oversight and introduce proportionate controls based on the level of risk.

The session will provide practical guidance for using AI responsibly and productively in employment settings, while ensuring its use remains lawful, transparent, fair and aligned with organisational values and sound governance practice.



James Field
Founder and CEO
CulturePathAI

James Field

James Field is a seasoned entrepreneur, lawyer and governance expert with over 30 years of experience in the legal, education, and technology sectors.

As the founder and former CEO of CompliSpace, James has spearheaded digital solutions that revolutionised regulatory and operational processes across diverse sectors, including K-12 education. James is now the founder of CulturePathAI, a firm that focuses solely on AI Governance and Leadership in K-12 schools. James is a lawyer, a Fellow of the Governance Institute of Australia and a member of its AI Governance Expert Advisory Panel.

Wrap up

3:50 - 4:00

Event MC, closing, thank speakers, reflection

Reinforce the days narrative – the challenges facing our leaders and how Catholic social teaching and ethical leadership can anchor us. Key takeaways and a practical reflection on what actions we can take.

Remember one idea, one change from our presentations and discussions today that can improve your organisation.



Joseph Watson
Director of Policy,
Regulation and AI
Strategy
*Catholic Schools
NSW*

Joseph Watson

Joseph Watson is the Director of Policy, Regulation and AI Strategy at Catholic Schools NSW, where he leads policy development, regulatory engagement, and strategic initiatives that support Catholic education across New South Wales. With a background in law, public policy, and government, Joseph brings extensive experience in education advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and strategic leadership. He is committed to advancing high-quality educational outcomes and helping Catholic schools navigate emerging opportunities and challenges, including the responsible use of artificial intelligence in education.

Catholic Employment Relations

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