Chapter 9

Employee Voice

What the Chapter Covers

This chapter covers the topic of employee voice, and the material is presented in the following order:

- employee voice is defined, together with an explanation of the concepts of employee involvement and employee participation
- the purpose of employee voice and a more recent related idea, employee engagement, is discussed from the point of view of the main employment relations actors
- a framework to evaluate the extent of voice in practice is then presented
- the main legal developments in the area of employee voice are considered, in particular EU influences
- the chapter closes by explaining some of the outcomes and benefits arising from employee voice and employee engagement, together with a critique of the voice-performance link

There are three important themes that run through the chapter. The first concerns the distinction between voice in union and non-union organisations. Here it is explained that it is not that non-union voice is somehow inherently weaker or shallower than its unionised counterpart, but that voice in each situation has to be considered in relation to the mechanisms and context in which it is used, together with an analysis of its depth and scope. Second, employee engagement is considered. It is argued that engagement is something more than voice, involvement or commitment, and these ideas are described and questioned at stages throughout the chapter. Finally, each of the three employment relations perspectives (legal, industrial relations and social exchange) examined in chapter 1 of the textbook are related to the different perspectives on employee voice.
**New Concepts Introduced in Chapter**

**Autonomous teamwork:** employees working in groups who meet the criteria of: working alongside each another; have responsibility for their job tasks; deciding how their tasks are to be accomplished; appointing their own team leader from among the members of the group.

**Collective bargaining:** a process in which the representatives of recognised trade unions and employers negotiate, consult and communicate to agree the procedural and substantive terms and conditions of employment.

**Depth of employee voice:** the extent to which employees (or their representatives) share in decision-making outcomes with management.

**Direct voice:** where contact is between individuals or small groups of employees and their immediate manager.

**Double-breasting voice** The practice of simultaneously recognising a trade union at one company location, while also implementing a non-union voice regime at another company plant.

**Dual-voice channel:** the combination of union and non-union employee voice practices in a single workplace or organisation.

**Employee disengagement** The result of a poor employment relations climate, mistrust in management, and possible worker resistance.

**Employee engagement** A state of mind where people employ themselves physically, emotionally and cognitively in their job role towards organisational goals.

**Employee involvement:** the soliciting of employee views, opinions and ideas to harness the talents and cooperation of employees, but without the sharing of power in an eventual decision-making outcome.

**Employment regulation:** a set of rules and procedures governing the conduct of employment relations and the establishment of workers’ rights that are determined by customs and/or legislation.

**European Social Policy:** a set of regulations that provide rights for workers which are comparable across EU Member States, and which embraces rights on working hours, employee voice, redundancy, health and safety, maternity and paternity leave.

**European Works Council (EWC):** an employee forum/committee for the purposes of sharing information and consulting with management on matters of interest in a European community-scale company.

**Financial participation:** mechanisms that allow employees to share in the financial success of their organisation.
Form of employee voice: the type of method used, which can be direct and/or indirect in nature.

Indirect voice: where contact is between management and an employee intermediary, such as a shop steward or other employee representative, who acts as the agent for a larger group of workers

Joint consultation: a voice process that can be direct or indirect and one in which management and employees (or their representatives) discuss and consider each others’ views prior to management making a final decision.

Level of employee voice: the hierarchical level in an organisation at which a voice mechanism takes place.

One-way communication: a direct form of voice where information is disseminated from management to employees

Participation: the sharing of power between employees (or their representatives) and management, in the making of joint decisions

Partnership: a concept that is normally taken to imply cooperation (usually between management and trade unions) based on the satisfaction of mutual as well as separate interests

Representation gap: the difference between how much influence employees say they have over management decisions, and how much influence they say they would like to have.

Scope of employee voice: the range of issues or matters on which employees (or their representatives) have a say.

Trigger mechanism (in ICE regulations): this sets-out the initiation process to enact the legal rights for employees to be informed and consulted.

Two-way communication: a direct form of voice in which information is exchanged between management and employees

Upward-problem solving: voice mechanisms that allow employees (either individually or in small groups) to suggest solutions to management about work and/or quality issues.

Voice outcomes: the potential organisational benefits arising from employees having a voice, which includes productivity, employee engagement and satisfaction, and lower labour costs.
Teaching Materials in Textbook

Pause for Reflection Exercises: Hints for Completing

Exercise on p277: The meanings managers attribute to voice
If you have difficulty answering this question, briefly refer back to chapter 4 and think about how management conceptualise their ‘right to manage’ and a unitarist view of the employment relationship. Table 9.1 in the chapter will point you in the direction of different purposes for voice, including those of managers.

Exercise on p286: Collective bargaining as indirect employee voice
In terms of voice, remember that collective bargaining does have some very different functions and purposes to that of other voice mechanisms, such as involvement. It may help to recap the explanation about the forms of employee voice on page 281, and the text on collective bargaining in the chapter on page 285-86.

Exercise on p288: Advantages and disadvantages of partnership for managers and unions
There is no right or wrong answer. Some unions and some managers will perceive of partnership as having very different advantages and disadvantages. One tip is to relate your analysis to a particular union or company setting, such as whether union membership is strong or weak. Also ask yourself what advantages and disadvantages there might be with indirect forms of voice, and how appropriate these may or may not be under a partnership arrangement.

Exercise 4 on p243: Employee voice as union avoidance
This issue can be contentious in much of the literature about employee voice and non-union employment relations. It might help to consider the concepts of social exchange or the psychological contract on this matter, and ask whether non-union voice can be explained in any of these ways.

Exercise on p296: Defining information and consultation
This is a relatively straightforward exercise in one sense, but is also potentially more contentious in another way. It is straightforward because you have been asked to compare two sets of definitions (one given on page 294, and the other one pages 295-96 respectively) and comment on any discrepancy between them. However, the implications are more contentious because the discrepancy may require a legal judgement to obtain a definitive answer.

Exercise on p301: Application of Employee Engagement Dimensions
Think about jobs you have done or jobs in which you think the employees will be engaged. Would someone need to feel engaged at all levels and along all dimensions to be truly engaged?
Critical Discussion Questions: Hints for Completing
The Critical Discussion Questions are to help you think more creatively and critically about key ideas and debates in employment relations.

Critical Discussion Question, p289: Employee voice as union avoidance
You might want to think about managerial intent, their ideologies and the styles of management. The point is these can be tricky concepts to pin-down precisely. Managers may or may not intentionally seek to avoid unions through certain voice schemes. Also think about ‘evidence’ for your ideas (e.g. WERS data).

Critical Discussion Question, p303: Critique of Employee Engagement
This may form a debate with groups supporting and other groups opposing the statement. Research evidence and the synthesis of an argument in defending a particular position is more important than searching for a specific right or wrong answer. Even if employees desire to be engaged, are they?

Exhibits
There are two exhibits given within in the text of the chapter: Exhibit 9.1 (page 294) provides summary information from the ICE 2004 Regulations and Exhibit 9.2 (pages 297-299) shows the detail of a non-union employee information and consultation forum at Hewlett Packard.

Supplementary Case Studies
In addition to Case 9.1 in the Chapter, there are two supplementary case studies: case study 9.2 is relatively short, while Case 9.3 is lengthy and requires about one hour’s study and preparation after completing chapter 9. Either case may be used as a tutorial exercise during class, or an assessment task that requires a group presentation and report. In both cases, the questions draw your attention to the theory, practice and context of employee voice.
Case Study 9.2: The dynamics of informal voice at CompuFix

CompuFix started trading in 1997. It was set up initially by three friends all with a background in computer technology. It now employs 72 people and specialises in remanufacturing and disposing of outdated computer equipment. Although employing only 72 people, the company has a global market presence and has contracts with some of the world’s leading computer technology companies. Most of the employees are highly qualified technicians, and their technical expertise is the company’s core asset. Employee voice at CompuFix is regarded as critical to commercial success, and the Managing Director claims to be an advocate of employee participation.

However, employee voice is not through formal mechanisms. Employees are expected to show a high level of responsibility in their work, and to this end are provided with considerable discretion in how they carry out their tasks. The MD explains that he expects employees to come up with new ideas to improve product efficiency, and work targets and appraisals are set with these objectives in mind. Quality and product-innovation meetings take place daily, involving technical specialists and teams of employees. In addition, the MD holds regular breakfast meetings with the objective of involving people in discussions about the business. The whole philosophy is aimed at getting people to make suggestions on how to do things better. There are also three or four social events each year, such as golf outings. The idea is that social bonding outside the workplace helps to support a more friendly climate. During such outings employees are given the opportunity to discuss any issues with the MD or other senior managers of the company.

Overall, the aim is to provide employees with a voice, because the company wants employees to feel engaged and committed to their work. The MD believes this is better achieved by an informal and open culture than through more formalised voice mechanisms.

Questions
1. Imagine you have been asked by the MD of CompuFix for a brief report on the 2004 ICE Regulations. What are the key issues you would highlight from these regulations for CompuFix?
2. Can you envisage any difficulties for CompuFix in trying to maintain an informal approach to employee voice?
3. Would you describe the voice arrangements at CompuFix as constituting a form of employee participation or employee involvement, and why?
Case Study 9.3: Multiple Levels of Collective Voice at Waterford Wedgwood

Background and Context
Waterford was established in 1783 to manufacture handcrafted glassware, and Waterford Wedgwood (WW) was created in 1986 with the merger of Waterford Crystal and Wedgwood. With a combined history of over 600 years of heritage, tradition and craftsmanship, Waterford Wedgwood today is regarded as one of the world’s leading luxury goods manufacturers, and has world-class brands that include Waterford Crystal, Wedgwood Designs, Rosenthal and All-Clad. It is now a multi-national organisation with enterprises in 80 countries, and employs over 9000 people worldwide. The employee voice arrangements described in this case are particular to one of its manufacturing plants that employ around 1400 people.

WW has been highly unionised since its inception, with almost 100 percent of its manual and process operatives being trade union members. The company recognises the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU) for collective bargaining, and three shop stewards are permanently released from work duties on a full-time basis to represent union members. It would be fair to say that the union at the plant is generally regarded as militant; for example, there is a history of conflictual relations with strikes, stoppages and go-slow at various times in the organisation’s history. Nonetheless, both company management and union officials describe employment relations at the plant as ‘healthy, strong and robust’. The high union membership at the plant can be taken as an indication of the strength and legitimacy of the T&GWU in representing the interests of workers with management.

Company Rationalisation
WW has undergone significant change and rationalisation, many of the antecedents of which originated in the mid-1980s. At that time the company faced economic recession, and was plagued by a lack of technological innovation, conflictual industrial relations and a falling share of the high quality glass and crystal market. In response, the company attempted to consolidate its position by disposing of unrelated companies within the WW group. In addition, changes were introduced at the manufacturing plant which is the subject of this case study, many of which put considerable strain on the employment relations climate. For instance, around three hundred redundancies were implemented and new technologies were introduced to replace traditional craft occupations. Wage freezes and pay cuts followed, and given the external market pressures faced by the company, productivity savings and changes to work practices were introduced. Initially, the trade union opposed the scale of the rationalisation programme and embarked on a 14-week strike in the early 1990s. Both management and unions eventually reached agreement with some comprise on both sides.

Some of these changes involved acceptance by the union of a more market-driven approach to product manufacture, included in which was an internal ‘make or buy’ strategy. This effectively meant that workers at the plant had to tender for contracts to make WW products in competition with external suppliers; many of whom had manufacturing facilities in less developed countries paying considerably lower wages. The criteria for the successful acquisition of a contract is based on the quality of the product, as well as its price, and trade union stewards are now part of a process that submits commercial tenders to company management. To date, all tenders have been awarded internally, although this has involved wage cuts and new attendance patterns to ensure production and delivery targets. Additional change also included the introduction of direct forms of employee voice,
such as staff briefings and quality initiatives. However, these have not replaced existing collective voice mechanisms, but operate in tandem.

**Multiple Forms of Employee Voice**
Collective employee participation through a single union-channel has been the long-established method for employee voice at WW. However, new and more individualised voice mechanisms were introduced in the 1990s following company rationalisation. Consequently, both direct and indirect mechanisms now coexist in the plant.

The T&GWU representatives at WW service four collective voice structures, as follows:

- **The Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC).** This meets on a weekly basis and sometimes daily, depending on the significance of a particular issue. The negotiating committee includes union representatives, a full-time union official and the senior company directors of the plant. The scope of issues includes almost anything, from new products, production schedules to employees’ wages and terms and conditions.

- **The Senior Monitoring Group (MG).** The MG meets on a weekly basis and includes senior union representatives at the plant, together with company directors. The purpose is to consult over a wide range of issues, including commercially sensitive information. The MG is not a decision-making forum and its role is to evaluate and monitor progress on any change management issues. In practical terms, the MG is used by both management and union as a sounding board prior to the joint negotiating committee, and this is believed to facilitate an open and constructive dialogue with no surprises for either side.

- **Task Groups (TGs).** There are number of TGs that include union representatives and management who meet on a regular basis, to consider production schedules, shipping quantities, quality issues or costs. Task groups cannot make decisions, but often make recommendations to either functional or senior management, depending on the issue. Matters can be referred from a TG to the MG or JNC for consideration.

- **Sectional Consultative Committees (SCCs).** These committees are lower level indirect voice mechanisms that operate below the senior and strategic forums described above. Sectional Committees are relevant to specific departments or sections of the plant, such as glass blowing, cutters or packers. In effect, these are interdependent systems of collective representation at shop floor level that include supervisors, team leaders and local shop stewards.

Alongside the collective voice mechanisms there are several direct employee involvement schemes, including:

- **Electronic Message Boards.** These are located at different parts of the plant and convey commercial and other information to employees.

- **Section Briefings.** These take place on a monthly basis and involve immediate supervisors in informing staff about work tasks and company information.

- **Company Newsletter.** This is produced monthly and includes commercial, welfare and social information for employees.

- **Workforce Meetings.** On average, these are held three times per year at the plant. Senior managers convey information about the global group to employees, with meetings organised in smaller groups on a consecutive basis over the next few days.
The Dynamics of Employee Voice at WW
The impact of these voice mechanisms is regarded as beneficial by both management and union. Managers believe that voice acts as conduit for the implementation of change, while union representatives are prepared to accept and support change when they have had an input into the change programme. Although this particular plant has a long history of conflictual relations, it is now regarded by both parties as an entirely different company to the one that existed pre-1990. Workers readily admit that they are now in tune with vagaries of the market place, understand management strategies more fully and, above all, welcome the opportunity to have a say during briefings session with their supervisors. Indeed, workers now question management when there are signs of slackness in orders, and union representatives report that they have some influence over the direction the company is taking. This has been attributed to the access to information which was previously guarded by management by excluding the union. It is believed that this flow of information has equipped union stewards to question management plans more accurately and constructively. Ironically, senior managers now value the intervention by the trade union in devising and strengthening change issues.

Managers at WW are clear that they make and take responsibility for decisions. At the same time however, the union role has been one of questioning, influencing and shaping management action; witness the following quotes:

*It’s not our job to run the plant. That’s management’s job. We give out when things get screwed-up. And if they give out that a strike or disagreement could shut the place down, then shut it down. You have to stop somewhere, management can’t take it all.* (Union Convenor)

*We negotiate change to an extent but the final decision rests with management. We know we will have fall-outs and no one is fooling each other.* (Employee Relations Manager)

Union and management explained that what is important is the way employee voice operates, and a high priority is placed on training, education and empathy in order to manage divergent and even conflictting interests. Particular schemes include retraining redundant craft workers who moved into process operative positions. Moreover, in the hope of minimising the effects of redundancy, workers were provided with training to develop their employability skills, so that they might be more attractive in the external labour market.

Of course, making people redundant and retraining workers in the hope that they might find jobs elsewhere was an extremely unpalatable exercise, no matter how much involvement and participation occurred. The commercial success of the company may have been vastly improved by the hard changes, yet many workers can feel disillusioned and insecure, and tend to wonder if they might be the next ones to be made redundant. There is also a concern that obtaining agreement through the multiple levels of participation can be long-winded. Managers are clear that agreements made through the voice channels tend to be more robust and achievable than those implemented by unilateral managerial prerogative. At the same time however, there is an unease that the external market does not wait for robust decision-making; rather, it demands rapid and flexible responses with immediate results. Such external pressures can at times put a strain on the collective voice channels.

**Summary**
Overall, WW has undergone significant change. Many of these changes have been painful and implementation has not always been smooth or straightforward. Nevertheless, and despite the pain, there is a durability to the representative system for employee voice that has stood the test of time, through both good and bad periods for the organisation.
Questions
1. Referring back to chapter 1, what do you think this case study tells you about the unitarist perspective on employment relations?
2. Given that union-centred forms of employee voice have been in decline over the last two decades, is there any merit in such collective voice channels from the information in this case?
3. In relation to the three collective bargaining functions described in chapter 9 (economic, governmental and decision-making), which of these do you think is most prominent at WW?
4. How would you evaluate the depth, scope, level and form of employee voice at WW?
Useful Sources of Additional Material

Books and Journal Articles


Bacon, N. and P. Samuel (2009) ‘Partnership agreement adoption and survival in the British private and public sectors’, Work, Employment and Society, Vol 23 (2), pp.231-248 One of the few pieces of research that charts the growth and more importantly the survival of formal partnership agreements in different economic sectors of British industry.


(indirect) non-union forms of employee representation, both theoretically and empirically.


Ramsay H. (1977) ‘Cycles of control: worker participation in sociological and historical perspective’. Sociology, Vol II, pp.481-506. While trends and developments in employee voice have moved on considerably since Ramsay’s paper in 1977, this is still one of the more influential conceptual writings on the topic. It takes issue with the view prevalent at the time; that participation has evolved during different phases of capitalism. Instead, Ramsay argues that worker participation is introduced by management when their authority is under threat.

Sisson, K. (2002) ‘The Information and Consultation Directive: unnecessary “regulation” or an opportunity to promote “partnership”?’, Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations, No: 67, Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU), Warwick University, Coventry. A thoughtful paper that presents a case that European regulation in the area of employee voice represent an opportunity for companies to develop more sustainable and lasting relationships with employees.


Web-based Materials

For those who enjoy exploring study materials on the internet, given below are a number of potentially useful websites that give further information on the topics and issues covered in the chapter 9.

http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/employment-matters/rights/info-con
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) web site, with specific information relating to the 2004 ICE Regulations, among others.

http://www.etui.org/
The European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) web site, with facility to search and browse publications and information relating to European Works Councils (EWC).

http://www.ipa-involve.com/
The Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) web site with a range of useful material (research report, company case studies, and recent initiatives to do with employee voice and partnership).

http://www.theworkfoundation.com/
The Work Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation that includes all sides of industry with the aim of improving economic performance and the quality of working life. The site includes access to a range of related research publications on voice, participation and partnership.

http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/empengmt.htm
CIPD factsheet on what employee engagement is and a consideration of possible links to organisational performance

http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/employment-matters/strategies/employee-engagement
The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) web site, with specific information relating to the promotion of ‘employee engagement’, including links to related government reports and advice about the alleged business benefits of effective employee engagement.
Multiple Choice Questions

Try the following multiple choice questions to test your knowledge of chapter 9. You should note that each question has only one correct answer, and this is one of the four alternatives (a), (b), (c) or (d) listed below the question. When you have answered the questions move to the grid at the end of the chapter to see the correct answers.

This activity contains 14 questions.

1. An employee voice mechanism that is wide in terms of its scope is said to be one that:
   a) has few restrictions on the strategic issues on which employees (or their representatives) can make an input
   b) has very little influence over management decisions
   c) is an exclusive trade union channel of representation
   d) includes both individual and collective voice techniques.

2. Which of the following is NOT a reason that tends to be cited for implementing employee voice mechanisms in an organisation?
   a) to legalise trade union negotiation
   b) to counterbalance managerial power
   c) to improve productivity and company performance
   d) to allow grievances to be expressed

3. The depth of employee voice is a way of evaluating:
   a) the issues on which employees (or their representatives) are involved
   b) the amount of influence employees (or their representatives) have over management decisions
   c) equal numbers of employee and management representatives on a works council
   d) all of the above

4. According to your text which of the following is true?
   a) employee involvement is about management soliciting employee views and ideas
   b) employee voice incorporates a whole range of process and structures that allow employees to have a say on matters that affect them in employment
   c) worker participation has a strong element of power-sharing in the making of decisions
   d) all of the above
5. The 2004 Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Regulations are concerned with:
   a) providing legal regulations for the operation and conduct of European Works Councils
   b) providing legal rights to workers who wish to receive information from management and be consulted about business and contractual matters
   c) providing guidance to managers about how best to inform and consult workers and union representatives
   d) providing statutory rules about the matters to which trade unions can bargain and negotiate on behalf of their members

6. Double-breasting voice is a concept that refers to which of the following:
   a) the simultaneous use of information and consultation mechanism in a firm
   b) employee financial share ownership and collective bargaining negotiation
   c) recognising a trade union at one company location while also using non-union voice arrangements at another plant of the same company
   d) all of the above

7. Pseudo-participation is a term used in the literature to describe:
   a) a form of involvement which is narrow in scope and shallow in depth
   b) a type of participation that involves only trade unions
   c) a quality circle
   d) a voice mechanism that is too difficult to define precisely

8. Freeman & Medoff (1984) state that voice is likely to lead to which of the following outcomes:
   a) conflict behaviour and industrial action
   b) improved sales
   c) reduction in employee turnover
   d) future employee engagement

9. Which of the following is NOT one of four dimensions of the framework given in your text to evaluate employee voice?
   a) area
   b) level
   c) scope
   d) depth
10. According to Chapter 9, which of the following group of dimensions can be used to assess employee engagement?

a) Commitment, cognitive ability, and loyalty
b) Trust, physical effort, and job satisfaction
c) Physical effort, cognitive ability, and emotional feelings
d) Discretionary effort, emotional enthusiasm, and pay satisfaction.

11. The WERS surveys show that over the last decade:

a) almost all direct forms of employee voice have increased
b) indirect voice mechanisms have roughly halved
c) non-union voice channels have increased
d) all of the above

12. Which of the following best describes a partnership approach to involvement and consultation?

a) it is based on a unitarist understanding of the employment relationship
b) it recognises that the parties have both mutual and separate interests that they need to express and articulate
c) it describes employee voice through a works council
d) all of the above

13. It is important to unravel the all-embracing concept of ‘employee voice’ because?

a) it is essential to better business performance
b) different terms can be used to try and explain the same type of process
c) trade unions don’t like the term employee voice
d) for better business ethics

14. According to your text which of the following is true?

a) employee voice will always lead to improvements in organisational performance in all situations
b) it is practically impossible to isolate the impact of employee voice processes from other factors that may influence performance
c) on balance, most managers devise voice schemes that will allow workers a genuine say on strategic company matters
d) employee voice is one of the main properties in social exchange theory
### Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

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