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# The meanings and purpose of employee voice

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*Abstract In this paper we present and assess an analytical framework for examining the different 'meanings, purposes and practices' of employee voice. The data were collected from eighteen organizations in England, Scotland and Ireland. Managers defined voice very much in terms of the perceived contribution to efficiency and tended to downplay notions of rights; however, the linkages between voice and performance outcomes remain problematic. Overall, employee voice is best understood as a complex and uneven set of meanings and purposes with a dialectic shaped by external regulation, on the one hand, and internal management choice, on the other. The evidence suggests that the degree to which voice practices are embedded in an organization is much more important than reporting the extent of any particular individual or collective schemes for employee voice.*

## INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a growing interest in the notion of employee voice, both from those seeking higher levels of organisational performance and from those desiring better systems of employee representation. In public policy terms, the environment is more sympathetic to trade unions, more animated by notions of employee rights, and supported by new legal regulations (Ewing 2003). The election of New Labour in 1997, and their return in 2001, appears to mark another major turning point for employment policy (Ackers et al, 2004). While the current government remains committed to labour flexibility, it has been prepared both to regulate independently on behalf of employees and to commit the UK to European Social Policy; in particular the new EU Directive for Employee Information and Consultation rights (Hall et al, 2002). As a consequence, we have seen a period of legal re-regulation, which can be best divided between those policies that directly affect employee voice and those that indirectly alter the environment in which employee voice operates.

Both EU Directives on European Works Councils and Employee Information and Consultation, along with the UK government's statutory trade union recognition procedures, have the potential to directly shape employers' approaches to employee voice. EWCs have given a new transnational impetus to consultation in British-based multinationals. The TUC's newfound interest in consultation (rather than just collective bargaining) and the preparedness of trade unions to work alongside non-union representatives on EWCs, has given consultation a new lease of life. A decade ago, joint consultation appeared to be declining along with collective bargaining, eclipsed by direct communications and upward problem-solving and this led some to be concerned about a representation gap (Towers 1997; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2000). For large, unionised employers, EWCs have added another level to an already established system of representative participation. For some non-unionised firms, EWCs have offered new opportunities for employee voice, as will the transposition agreement endorsed by the CBI and TUC regarding the new EU Directive on Employee Information and Consultation (DTI, 2003; Ackers et al, 2004). Also, statutory trade union recognition raises the prospects of employers having to accept, perhaps reluctantly, trade union recognition for collective bargaining purposes where it is desired by a majority of their employees (Gill & Krieger, 1999). There are already signs of employers trying to pre-empt the possibility of a particular (perhaps militant) trade union being imposed on them by offering voluntary recognition for a selected single union. Equally, the EU Directive on Information and Consultation will require employers, in undertakings with 50 or more employees, to put in place procedures for employee voice over the next few years. The scope of such consultation will cover matters pertaining to the economic situation of the undertaking, developments relating to employment (especially any threats to employment), and substantial changes in work organisation or in contractual relations (Hall et al, 2002). In these cases, the legislation is likely to be the start of the story rather than the end, as employers exercise new choices and strategies shaped by the new regulatory environment.

In this article we examine the meanings and purpose of employee voice against this changing regulatory backdrop. We first consider the meanings of voice and its various characteristics to produce an analytical framework against which to examine the case study organisations. We also discuss the research instruments utilised in our study and outline the key characteristics of sample organisations. In the following section we discuss the purpose of voice, as articulated by the respondents in our sample. We then move on to examine the various mechanisms used and assess the extent to which these are embedded in each organisation (see also Cox et al, 2003). The penultimate section goes on to assess respondents' views on the perceived outcomes of various employee voice schemes. Finally, in the concluding section, we comment on the utility of the framework presented for analysis and future prospects for employee voice.

## **THE MEANING OF VOICE**

Voice is a term that has been more widely used in the practitioner and academic literature on HRM and industrial relations in recent years (Beardwell 1998, Sako 1998, Benson 2000; Roche, 2000). It is also noteworthy that a book based on the WERS surveys (Millward et al, 2000) devoted a complete chapter to the question of whether or not employees have 'lost their voice'. In an issue of the Industrial Participation Association (IPA) Bulletin, Geoff Armstrong of the CIPD suggested that voice historically meant collective bargaining, and that this 'chosen method of joint regulation became a straitjacket inhibiting the very things needed to win and keep customers'. He acknowledged that management was largely to blame for this, while suggesting that the shift to direct involvement reflected a desire to improve organisational performance. In contrast, Margaret Prosser of the TGWU argues that 'collective voice achieves what the lone voice could never do: it humanises and civilises the workplace, arguing that collective representation is the foundation of a partnership relationship that brings positive benefits for business' (Prosser, 2001). It has also been argued that the way employees are treated through the provision of opportunities for voice may have a more significant impact on commitment than the way employees are paid (Blinder, 1990:21). It is apparent, therefore, that there are competing meanings to the term 'employee voice', and that quite different purposes can underpin a desire for collective voice than for individual voice.

The best known use of the word voice goes back to Hirschman's classic study (1970) of African Railways. However, he conceptualised voice as an option for customers in a context of how organisations respond to decline, and since then the term has been used with different applications. Freeman and Medoff (1984) argued that it made good sense for both employer and employee to have a voice mechanism. This had both a consensual and a conflictual image; on the one hand, participation could lead to a beneficial impact on quality and productivity, whilst on the other it could deflect problems which otherwise might explode. For Freeman and Medoff (1984), trade unions were seen as the best agents to provide such voice as they remain independent of the employer that adds a degree of voice legitimacy. As Benson (2000: 453) notes, 'for some commentators independent unions are the only source of genuine voice'. In this context, much of the industrial relations literature views the articulation of grievances, either on an individual or collective basis, as the sole component of voice (Gollan 2001).

Some of the US human resource literature has broadened the notion of voice away from a single channel of worker representation, towards one that views it as capable of being articulated through a variety of channels. Thus, voice is defined more broadly by McCabe and Lewin (1992) as consisting of two elements. First is the expression of complaints or grievances in a work

context by employees to management. The second is the participation of employees in the decision-making processes of the organisation. Lewin and Mitchell (1992) further distinguish between mandated voice (e.g. co-determination and legislation) and voluntary voice (e.g. collective bargaining and grievance procedures). Boroff and Lewin's (1997) analysis of survey responses from a non-union firm contradict the ideas of Hirschman and the findings of Freeman and Medoff. Analysing data from workers who indicated they had been subject to unfair treatment at work, they reported that employee voice via grievance filing was positively related to intent to leave their organisations, whereas loyalty was negatively related to grievance filing. In short, loyal employees who experienced unfair treatment were more likely to respond by suffering in silence.

Millward et al (2000) saw voice as comprising three different channels: via trade union membership, recognition and representation; via indirect or representative participation mechanisms such as joint consultation; and via direct employee involvement. Over the course of the WERS surveys, trade unions have become a less prominent voice channel with declining membership levels. Joint consultation and collective bargaining has also declined in extensiveness over the last twenty years. The third strand, direct employee involvement, whether this is communications or upward problem-solving techniques, has grown enormously in terms of coverage over this period. In addressing the question of whether or not employees have lost their voice, they conclude that 'the answer must be "no" – but with important qualifications' (Millward et al, 2000:135). They concluded that 'the combined presence of a recognised trade union and union representation on a formal consultative committee was the only formulation to be independently associated with employees' perceptions of fair treatment by their managers' (Millward et al, 2000:137).

One problem however is that the extensiveness of voice is only part of the story (Marchington, 2004). The reported frequencies of certain voice schemes assume a static and unambiguous definition of what a particular mechanism actually means in practice. For example, some companies may adopt a partnership arrangement with trade unions, even though it has always existed and been called something else (Marchington et al, 2001; Oxenbridge & Brown, 2002). Similarly, other techniques may have been in existence for several years but always marginal to how managers actively tap into employee ideas. Given that the subject of voice has attracted interest from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, it is hardly surprising that its meaning has also been interpreted in quite different ways, both by academics and practitioners. In this article we have subdivided the meanings of voice into four principal strands of thought. These are outlined in Table 1 and represent the main analytical framework on which to assess voice in each of the case study organisations.

**Table 1: The meaning and articulation of employee voice**

<b>Voice as:</b>	<b>Purpose and articulation of voice</b>	<b>Mechanisms and practices for voice</b>	<b>Range of outcomes</b>
Articulation of individual dissatisfaction	To rectify a problem with management or prevent deterioration in relations	Complaint to line manager Grievance procedure Speak-up programme	Exit - loyalty
Expression of collective organisation	To provide a countervailing source of power to management	Union recognition Collective bargaining Industrial action	Partnership – Derecognition
Contribution to management decision-making	To seek improvements in work organisation, quality and productivity	Upward problem-solving groups Quality circles Suggestion schemes Attitude surveys Self-managed teams	Identity and commitment – Disillusionment and apathy Improved performance
Demonstration of mutuality and co-operative relations	To achieve long-term viability for organisation and its employees	Partnership agreements Joint consultative committees Works councils	Significant influence over management decisions - Marginalisation and sweetheart deals

Firstly, voice can be taken as an articulation of *individual dissatisfaction*. In this situation, its aim is to address a specific problem or issue with management, finding expression in a grievance procedure or speak up programme. This would fit with Hirschman's view of voice described earlier. A second strand is the expression of *collective organisation* where voice provides a countervailing source of power to management, through unionisation and collective bargaining in particular. This is very much the Freeman and Medoff perspective. Thirdly, there is voice as a form of *contribution to management decision-making*. Here the purpose is concerned with improvements in work organisation and efficiency more generally, perhaps through quality circles or team working. This perspective on voice is evident in the high involvement/high commitment literature (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998). Fourthly, voice can be seen as a form of *mutuality*, with partnership seen as delivering long-term viability for the organisation and its employees. The partnership model outlined by Guest and Peccei (2001) fits with this perspective. However, the precise meaning of the term 'employee voice' is open to question, and the rationale for its application can vary on economic, moral and pragmatic grounds. It can take a variety of forms in practice, and the effect of combining a number of mechanisms is unclear. The extent to which traditional methods of providing a voice for employees (such as collective bargaining and grievance procedures) have been superseded by, or combined with, more consensual methods (such as joint consultation, team working or problem-solving groups) is an issue that confronts many organisations. This also suggests that the depth of different

voice arrangements, and the aims and purpose of employer choices for employee voice, remain elusive in much of the extant literature. This article seeks to address these issues in relation to the potential configuration of voice meanings and purposes outlined above.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The research presented in this article was collected from 18 organisations. The organisations selected reflected differences in size (small, medium and large), structure (single and multi-site), ownership (foreign and domestic owned), representative systems (union and non-union) as well as different sectors of economic activity. These included financial services, carpet manufacturing, transport (road haulage and aviation), retail outlets, telecommunications, hi-tech engineering, consultancy services, chemicals, call centre operations and a not-for-profit organisation. Background and contextual information on all the case studies provided in Table 2.

Given the analytical framework to assess the differences in employee voice presented in Table 1 above, several research themes informed the design of the fieldwork. The list of research themes is provided in appendix 1. These included, among others: managerial interpretations of the term employee voice; the combination of voice mechanisms used in each organisation; changes in the use of employee voice over time, in particular in relation to legal and public policy interventions; the forces that may constrain or help to shape managerial choices over employee voice; the perceived impact of voice on attitudes and performance; and any unusual or interesting practices that allow employees to have a say.

During this phase of the research interviews were conducted with managerial respondents only. These always included the person responsible for HR and other senior managers (such as chief executive, managing director and/or senior site manager). The precise number of interviews varied depending on factors such as organisational size, single or multi-site structures, logistics of access, time and availability of respondents. One particular emphasis was to include non-personnel practitioners where possible in order to allow different perspectives on the meanings, purpose and practices of employee voice to be assessed. In most of the multinational and multi-site organisations, interviews were conducted at one location and both HR and other managerial functions were included. As an example, at Scotchem and Scotoil, three senior managers were interviewed, including the HR manager, senior operations director and business unit leaders. In one of the SMEs the owner-manager and managing director both participated. At the local school, the head teacher and chair of the school governors were interviewed, and at Aqua this involved the chief executive and the HR director along with several of his team. In total 37 key informants were interviewed across the 18 cases, including HR as well as other senior managers

**Table 2: Background data on all organisations**

Organisation	N employees	Sector	Background/Market Context
Airflight	2,500	Transport and communications	Airflight was established about ten years ago, and grown substantially through a series of company acquisitions. It de-recognised the TGWU and recognised BALPA for pilots.
Aqua	1,700	Water	Aqua is a regional water company with over 100 sites that has experienced significant change. Numbers employed have declined by about 25% over the past 5 years, although Aqua has retained a stable market share. There are four recognised trade unions with 67% membership (GMB, TGWU, AEEU and the largest, UNISON).
Bet.com	120	Call centre betting	Bet.com was founded in the 1960s and is now a call centre for sport betting. The company has experienced significant decline in market share and workforce size, having employed over 3000 people at its peak in the late 1970s. USDAW is the recognised trade union with about 72% membership.
City School	60	Education	The school is based in London. There are about 650 students aged between 3-11, and the workforce is evenly divided between teaching and support staff. The management team comprises of the head teacher, a deputy and one senior teacher, and the Chair of Governors is closely involved in the running of the school. Three trade unions are recognised (NUT, NAHT and UNISON).
Compucom	220	Hi-tech engineering	Compucom was founded in 1982 and manufactures CCTV technologies. It has a small niche market for digital security and surveillance systems. The workforce is spread across 5 continents, with about 90 people employed at the technical hub and head office in Manchester. In 1997 about 60 people were made redundant when all manufacturing operations re-located to Malta.
ConsultancyCo	290	Computer and security consultancy	ConsultancyCo specialises in computer software and security consultancy services. One owner founded the company in 1992, and it has grown on average by 30% a year and has sites in London, Edinburgh, Dublin and a head office in Manchester. About 70% of the workforce are consultants with the remaining 30% support staff.
Easymove Transport	50	Road haulage	Easymove is a family run road haulage firm with a site in Northern England. The bulk of staff have a long employment tenure, and the company recognises URTU for bargaining and representation. Financial turnover has doubled during the last three years.
Eiretel	98,000	IT/ Tele-communications	Eiretel is a Canadian owned computer software and telecommunications company with employees in 150 countries. The site visited is in the Republic of Ireland, which employs about 800 people, mainly professional and technical engineers. At the time of the research Eiretel announced a global redundancy programme of 1500 jobs. SIPTU is the only recognised trade union for 110 manual operators.
HiFi Sounds	350	Retail	The company operates in the hi-fi retail market with 43 outlets, a head office and warehouse. Commercial growth has been through finding a niche market for discounted products with shops on the fringe of high street shopping locations.
Housing Association	300	House letting	Housing Association is a 'not-for-profit' housing association established over 100 years ago to manage a company housing estate for a large paternalist employer. It has grown since the 1980s from a workforce of 150 to 300 and now provides a wider range of services, including some sheltered housing and care homes.

Leisure Co	50 permanent 400 casual	Theme park	Leisure Co is over 10-years old and has had a relatively stable market share during that time, employing mainly non-unionised seasonal workers, with the bulk of the workforce (about 400) recruited during the summer months.
Midbank	4000	Financial services	Midbank is over 100 years old and has expanded its services and market over the last decade. Despite significant organisational change and restructuring over the last decade, the workforce numbers have remained relatively stable. There is a partnership agreement with UNIFI.
Retail Bank	30,000	Financial services	Retail Bank has its origins in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century, operating in the financial services market. Over the last 5 years market share has increased with new services and a focus on selling. A trade union is recognised for bargaining purposes, with about 30% membership.
Scotchem	750	Chemical manufacturing	Scotchem is one of the leading firms in its market and has had a stable workforce for some time. The TGWU, AEEU and MSF are recognised, and union density is about 60% overall, but higher amongst manual employees. Scotchem is part of a large European owned multinational company which has a large degree of autonomy in how it manages employment relations
Scotoil	100,000	Oil and gas exploration	Scotoil employ over people in 100 countries, and in the UK the company has a high market share for its product. The site visited employs about 3000 staff, with around 1,200 working on oil platforms. Scotoil, like Scotchem, is part of a large multinational company which has a large degree of autonomy in how it manages employment relations
Southern Shoe	11,500	Retail and manufacturing	The company employs about 3,500 in manufacturing and 8,000 in retail, mostly part-time. The company has been reorganised over the last decade with manufacturing sites closed in the UK and acquisitions made in Germany and Slovakia, along with satellite operations in Portugal and sub-contracting in India and Vietnam. There is high market competition for low cost production. The focus of this study is on manufacturing.
Weave Co	2,500	Carpet manufacturing	Weave Co is a family-owned carpet manufacturer with a two hundred-year history. Following a bad spell in the early 1990s the company has now expanded its operations globally, with around 50% of the workforce UK-based. There is 80% trade union membership.
Whisky Co	200	Distillers	Whisky Co operates across seven sites, with a growing share of the export (mainly US) market. With a merger and the restructuring process the TGWU was de-recognised with the GMB as the single union recognised. The company is keen on the creation of a new culture that incorporates employee voice.

In addition to the informant interviews, access to documentary material (such as employee attitude surveys, mission statements, corporate information and personnel policies) was made available in several organisations. However, it is critical to note our analysis of these organisations is not based on a single snapshot of their practices. In all but four of these organisations we have had contact through other projects over a sustained period of time. Seven of the cases formed part of our study for the Employment Department in the early 1990s (Marchington et al, 1992). A further seven have been the subject of other research, either during the last decade or in parallel with other studies – for example, for the UMIST Future of Work project (Marchington et al, 2004) and research funded by the European Regional Development Fund (Carrol et al, 1999; Dundon et al, 1999). This provided a degree of knowledge about the organisational context prior to the fieldwork, as well as an understanding of the major employment relations issues at these sites from several respondents, such as shop stewards and employees.

#### **THE PURPOSE AND ARTICULATION OF EMPLOYEE VOICE**

The term employee voice provided a useful way to examine both its purpose and practice and to allow for analysis that traversed old boundaries such as union and non-union, individual and collective. During interviews, managers' views ranged freely between disparate techniques such as partnership with trade unions and informal and individualistic interactions with employees. On many occasions more than one meaning to the term 'employee voice' emerged, especially between different management functions.

In relation to the framework for analysis presented in Table 1, a number of issues emerged from the data. First, the purpose of voice as the articulation of **individual dissatisfaction** overlapped with notions of **employee contribution** through communication channels. Second, the articulation of voice as **collective organisation** was rather less central than other (individualistic) definitions of voice. When we asked for specific examples, it was noticeable that a wide range of collective voice mechanisms was in use and these tended to overlap in relation to the purposes presented in Table 1 earlier. At several organisations collective forms of employee voice not only represented a countervailing force to managerial power but also, simultaneously, the demonstration of **mutuality** in the relationship. It is significant that collective voice was not just restricted to unionised establishments, but was apparent at quite a number of organisations that operated with staff associations (such as Housing Association) or non-union consultative forums (as at Scotoil and Compucom). Third, the purpose of voice as **contributing to managerial decision-making** was the most popular

interpretation from these managerial respondents, and this again overlapped with both individual and collective forms of employee voice. This multiple voice purpose was summed-up by the HR Manager at Eiretel:

*Voice is about corporate communications and the strategy is designed in such a way that all employees can represent their views to management, rather than it just being the other way around.*

In Table 1, we noted the range of outcomes associated with different voice processes, and quite a number of respondents insisted that the outcomes of voice were particularly important in relation to the purpose and objectives of the mechanisms adopted. The words used varied between 'influence' and 'say', but broadly they coalesced around the notion of employees having some contribution that helped improve policies and practices. We are not seeking to convey the impression that this represents a situation in which changes are led by employees or that their voice is actually 'heard' by managers. Nevertheless, it was apparent that they all related to the potential for employee voice to impact upon outcomes rather than just describing the processes used. Many of the managers stressed the importance of informal mechanisms and processes that demonstrate the purposes for employee voice as rather more dynamic than just formal or static. The General Manager at ConsultancyCo suggested that:

*Voice is about having opinions and observations heard. How voice is realised, recognised and acted upon is what matters. There is no "real" voice if it is not listened to.*

### **THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF EMPLOYEE VOICE PRACTICES**

Given that seven of the case studies took part in a similar project 10 years ago, there was an opportunity to examine both the depth and changing patterns of voice over time. Two findings stood out from this analysis. First, some of the employee involvement mechanisms found in 1992 had now been recast or fused into more all-embracing upward problem-solving voice mechanisms. There was evidence of less ad hoc choices and that schemes had been more clearly integrated, particularly in terms of employee voice contributing to managerial decision-making. A range of mechanisms, such as suggestion schemes, attitude surveys and project teams no longer appeared to be confined to trivial or less significant matters. The second development is with regard to the form of collective voice. Significantly, the role of trade unions in relation to direct involvement had changed markedly. In many of the unionised cases, joint consultation collective bargaining existed alongside systems for non-unionised employee representation, and shop stewards appeared more willing to participate in such

dual representative channels than a decade ago. There was also some evidence of derecognition as well as new union recognition agreements, although overall senior managers saw value in working with trade unions and appeared to share information with union representatives at earlier stages in the process.

All the organisations employed downward communications in one form or another, with about one-third making use of electronic media to increase the ease by which employees could respond to management or convey their own opinions to senior managers. Not surprisingly, this was more common in the service sector where white-collar workers (and particularly professionals) formed the bulk of staff. At Eiretel, for example, the US Vice President would regularly send electronic messages to all staff, a practice that has been copied by other senior managers. The system is used to allow staff to post questions about technical or human resource issues direct to senior managers. Whilst in theory these have to be answered, there was some scepticism about the degree to which the whole process was stage-managed that led to a rather superficial interpretation of these voice arrangements.

Two-way communications was common at all the case study sites. Most of these were relatively standard in format, but it is worth providing a few examples to show how these were operationalised in practice. At the school, daily ten-minute meetings before teaching commenced allowed the Head to brief staff on important issues for the day, such as absenteeism and staff cover. For many this is now part and parcel of their daily work routine. Yet a quite different interpretation of a very similar mechanism was evident at the transport firm. Here, the Managing Director arranged meetings every few months on a Sunday morning at a local pub. All drivers were invited, and although they were not paid to attend, the company provided bacon sandwiches and a beer kitty. Middle managers were barred from these meetings, which were attended by the Finance Director and the MD. The turnout at these meetings was reported as quite high. The Managing Director felt that this method represented the best way for him to get information across to staff as well as keep in touch with employee opinion; commenting that that the sessions 'were quite lively!'

The use of employee attitude surveys is now much more widespread than a decade ago in most organisations (Cully et al, 1998; Cox et al, 2003), and it is often seen as an example of 'good' HRM in that staff are asked for their views on a regular basis. About half the organisations in our sample made use of such attitude surveys as a central tenet of employee voice. Some of these operated at the sites we investigated as part of world-wide benchmarking exercises for the companies as a whole, with the results being fed back from corporate headquarters to lower management and staff on the shop floor or in the office. In

these circumstances the degree to which such practices were embedded was questionable. Both employees and managers felt they lacked ownership of the results, other than as a benchmarking tool through which senior management sought to secure measures of performance improvement.

The vast majority of the case studies reported the use of project teams in one form or another. Some of these were central to the operation of the organisation. At Compucom and ConsultancyCo, for example, matrix teams dealt with specific projects and were later disbanded once the job was completed. In other organisations team members were drawn from different functions within the company - such as finance, development and IT – with a degree of autonomy in how to organise their work and how often to meet. Strategy days were also held at a number of organisations in order to involve staff – to a greater or lesser extent – in defining and articulating performance objectives.

About two-thirds of the organisations had some form of joint consultation operating either at site level or beyond the workplace, compared with about one-quarter for the WERS 1998 sample. JCCs were more common in larger, multi-site workplaces, and about half the unionised workplaces had JCCs compared with all but one of the non-union firms. At some companies, these had been in existence for a long time, and they followed the fairly standard pattern of regular monthly or quarterly meetings between a number of senior managers and the shop stewards. The activity levels of these meetings varied. At Scotchem shop floor meetings with union representatives tended to focus on trivial matters such as ‘showers, lockers and overtime levels’. Yet they also acted as a ‘safety valve’ and were supplemented with additional meetings, incorporating all the unions. These appeared to be more embedded in that they were integral to other aspects of the partnership agenda that sought to influence more longer-term issues, as the Manufacturing Director at Scotchem explained:

*This is an opportunity to share the slightly longer-term outlook with these guys following the senior management meeting. I talk with them about the manufacturing plan for the next month and what the issues are. It gives the senior stewards a chance to express one or two of their concerns about the future.*

Several organisations utilised non-union voice channels alongside the union framework or included non-union representatives at the same meeting as shop stewards. At Midbank, for example, despite a range of mechanisms to consult with unions – such as the Joint

Partnership Meeting – a Staff Council was established with representatives elected by all staff, whether union or non-union:

*The staff council is just a consultation forum. It's just giving them information, it's not a negotiating forum or anything.*

Significantly, the coexistence of union and non-union forms of employee voice was more than an isolated example, although the precise purposes for non-union voice was often uneven and complication. Joint consultation – in one form or another - was widespread at organisations that did not recognise unions for collective bargaining purposes. However the extent of these schemes varied between the case studies. At Housing Association, for example, although a joint consultative forum was set up over 20 years ago, its role as a voice channel was limited. The Deputy Director regarded it as:

*A mechanism that has stood the test of time, but it has not been widely used by employees for making their voice heard.*

Seven of the eighteen case studies had some form of partnership arrangement in place, although not all actually termed it as partnership in the conventional sense. The most extensive and wide-ranging partnership agreement was between Midbank and UNIFI. The key principles of the agreement relate to 'mutuality and inclusiveness, an acceptance that both parties have distinctive but complementary roles', and an acknowledgement that difficult and contentious issues have to be confronted jointly. A partnership agreement also operated at Whisky Co under the title 'Working Together'. This used phraseology that is well-known in these sorts of agreements – mutuality, joint commitment to organisational performance, acknowledgement of separate interests – but it also emphasised the importance of high commitment HRM policies. A section from the agreement noted that:

*The culture (of 'Working Together' in partnership) promotes employee development, participation, flexibility, performance and reward within a framework of excellent communications. The agreement will be the basis of our joint ability to add value to the company's business performance through the creation of an ethical and inclusive environment of opportunity.*

Collective representation, either through negotiations about wages and conditions or through representatives pursuing individual employee grievances, existed at about two-thirds of cases, mostly among larger and multi-site organisations. Significantly, collective

representation offers an alternative purpose to the forms that have been discussed so far, the vast majority of which are initiated by managers and are more susceptible to potential managerial influence and control. Whilst most other forms of voice that have been considered are often articulated in relation to how employees can contribute – ultimately – to improved organisational performance, collective representation challenges the current individualist and direct interpretations of employee voice.

The purpose of collective voice varied substantially among the organisations and this depended on, *inter alia*, the level of union membership, the type of unions and managerial attitudes towards collective representation. Among the sample organisations, levels of membership varied from very high to relatively insignificant, collective bargaining took place at different levels across the larger organisations, and the number of unions that were recognised varied from one to four. It is noteworthy that employers who recognised unions regarded them as a positive force in expressing employee concerns. Furthermore, these managerial respondents were prepared to disclose information to representatives much earlier than had been the case a few years ago.

The final form of voice that we considered was European Works Councils, which are a relatively new voice structure for most workers. EWCs were present in only four of the case studies (Eiretel, Scotoil, Southern Shoe and Whisky Co). The EWC at Whisky Co came about because the firm is part of a much larger European-owned multinational, at Eiretel through its part in a large American-owned firm, and those at Scotoil and Southern Shoe due to these UK-owned firms having other sites throughout the rest of Europe. While the frequency of meetings and support from management and employee representatives was generally positive, the depth to which these forums appeared embedded was often unclear and ambiguous. Eiretel provided two employee representatives for the EWC, although the information from the forum was often considered to be too 'distant' for it to be meaningful for employees at plant level. In other organisations it was felt that the agenda was rather narrow and minimalist, in line with a perception that the company had been forced to accept a EWC rather than willingly introduce and develop this. In a similar vein, the EWC at Southern Shoe had only recently been introduced and had yet to find a clear focus.

#### **THE RANGE OF (PERCEIVED) OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYEE VOICE**

Given that isolating cause and effect is problematic, one way in which voice may be seen to impact on employee behaviour and performance is the 'indirect' linkage between the practices used and outcomes. Although our respondents acknowledged it was difficult to quantify the impact of voice, there was widespread agreement that employee voice acted as

the gateway to a more open and constructive employment relations climate. It is this better climate which can then be seen to help identify a relationship between voice and impact. When considering any specific rationale for why employers bother with voice, then the evidence was less clear. In several of the organisations the expected outcomes such as depicted in Table 1 (e.g. commitment, loyalty or influence over managerial decision-making) are difficult to identify in any precise way. However, what did emerge is a combination of complementary practices, primarily related to the improvement of management decision making. In short, the distinctions drawn in Table 1 between the 'purposes, practices and outcomes' of voice are not easy to make, although they are useful heuristically. Not only do these categories overlap in practice, but also employers can and do articulate more than one purpose for a particular voice strategy. Initially, their concerns may be to eliminate dissatisfaction but a longer-term intention is also to improve business performance. Further, the views of the different actors differed both within and across the organisations we studied, suggesting that the choices for voice and the meanings ascribed to a set of mechanisms are rather more complicated and dynamic in reality. Many of the managers commented that voice contributed to improved performance because it generated a better environment in which to work. The Chief Executive of Aqua summed-up this view:

*We are spending plenty of money on [staff] engagement at the moment. We do it because we believe this adds value and what you tend to get is a slightly chaotic challenging world in which people are prepared to say what they think. I think I can prove the impact of voice. It can be seen in terms of performance and the way the business sparkles. The way that people answer letters, deal with customers over the telephone, their feelings of ownership and pride.*

This leads us to suggest that there is a potential 'intermediary relationship' between voice and impact as opposed to a causal link with improved organisational performance *per se*. Significantly, several respondents commented that in practice voice tended to be part of a much broader HR agenda – including training, induction, culture change or more open management styles. For example, at Housing Association, employee voice was part of a deeper paternalistic and ethical managerial approach of 'treating employees in a decent way':

*I don't think we set out to say we will use employees to create a profitable or successful organisation, I think it comes from another angle ... we don't bushwhack them and catch them off guard. It's not the kind of atmosphere we want to generate at all ... If you treat your workforce decently and honestly you will reap the benefits.*

Here voice can be seen as helping to reduce exit and supporting a culture that promoted loyalty (see Table 1). At Scotchem, it was felt that a greater willingness by employees to challenge decisions in a constructive way had an (unanticipated) educative impact that improved relations. There was clearer evidence of the importance of partnership and mutuality outcomes we discussed earlier and outline in Table 1. In one case (Scotchem) unions had been involved with management in the early stages of decision-making which helped promote a greater sense of awareness among shopfloor employees to organisational change. In this way, the union acted as a conduit for voice and even appeared to help overcome the 'arms length adversarialism' associated with indirect collective voice channels. In this particular case partnership included monthly meetings between management and individual unions; regular meetings with the stewards and Managing Director on long-term business plans; and a Communications Group of 40 trained communicators, including the three senior stewards as well as employees. There was also an Employee Relations Workshop (ERW) that included management, union stewards and non-union employee representatives. Thus while the union remained central to the partnership at Scotchem, there also existed other overlapping dimensions that helped embed the range of voice mechanisms that can be attributable to improved relationship outcomes. In the Managing Director's words:

*Some of the shop stewards are very good at trying to pull these things together in a cohesive way and identify what the main issue is.*

In two-thirds of the case studies, managers reported some improvement in employee behaviour as a result of employee voice, albeit to varying degrees. One interesting finding from our sample related to the 'scope' and 'range' of issues on which employees are able to contribute. For instance, team briefings and top down communications are often associated with more trivial matters, yet we found that voice impacted on a broader set of issues including customer relations, organisational strategies, new services and products to clients, as well as internal work systems. At ConsultancyCo, a voice mechanism called 'strategy days' allowed workers 'a say' over the future direction of the company. Directors first outlined company objectives, market issues and prospective clients to the whole workforce, before employees spent the day in small groups discussing these issues and feeding back ideas to a plenary session that agreed an 'action plan'. At Scotchem, the Employee Relations Workshop mentioned above was one attempt to bring together employee representatives and senior managers to work on issues to do with the process of managing employment relations, including the measurement of staff satisfaction that reflected and reinforced new relationships that helped improve attitudes and behaviours.

Whilst any attempt to unpack voice or draw causal links to enhanced performance is difficult, there does seem to be some evidence to suggest that the range of issues employees contribute towards are more far-reaching and embedded than a decade ago. At the same time, however, the pattern for employee voice remains somewhat uneven and fragmented. The precise meanings ascribed to very similar techniques differed from one organisation to another, and among different respondents. For example, at Aqua the feeling was that the way people were managed as a total package reflected was reflected in more positive attitudes toward market conditions. This was rationalised in relation to other authorities or PLCs:

*We have been able to cope with more fundamental changes than many organisations. The other companies have tried to emulate where we have got to and try to harmonise with our position. We have achieved our goals in the shortest time.*

At Weaveco the model of partnership provides an example of where management actively constructed a collective voice strategy which was less reliant on the trade unions. In this respect, the purpose of collectivised voice may be seen as an attempt to engage with employees beyond union channels through a discourse of teamworking and partnership or, as some might suspect, as a 'Trojan Horse' pattern of union marginalisation. For example, Weaveco has replaced its traditional quarterly, union-centred JCC with monthly site and departmental meetings. For the HR Manager, communication rather than negotiation or consultation was a key purpose:

*[Negotiation] isn't the brief .... I'm confident that the information we were imparting there (the old JCC) did not get back to the departments. I think we have a better communication channel, which is probably the biggest improvement we've made.*

The outcome of mutuality is also evidenced in the EWCs which were not part of the employment relations scene in 1992. The Southern Shoe EWC illustrates how the dynamics of partnership change with market conditions, management policy and external regulation as much as from changes inside the organisations. In 1992, Southern Shoe already had a form of partnership (though not in name) via close relations with its manufacturing union, a company council and factory joint consultation. By 2001 the partnership arrangements had changed with the virtual disappearance of UK manufacturing. Arguably, an old logic of collective consultation has diminished in favour of a new and emerging voice framework

covering a global workforce. For example, a new Company Assembly has changed from a large annual set-piece event, with all the Directors facing workforce representatives, to a series of small group consultations. The Personnel Director further explained that business, production and operational issues now tend to dominate these collective group forums:

*We've always consulted with the unions, always. But I think at times the consultation would take place right at the end of the process. Whereas now it happens very much at the beginning and involvement [is] throughout....it is now more about making shoes at a good price, at a good quality and getting them out*

On the whole, improved performance indicators are perhaps the most difficult to define let alone evaluate. Several studies, such as those by Huselid (1995), Patterson et al (1997), and Guest (1997), suggest that the most appropriate indicators of improved performance include low levels of absenteeism, productivity improvements and better staff retention rates. However, not all of the organisations maintained adequate absence, productivity or retention statistics that allowed independent assessments of the links between voice and performance. As a result we have to rely upon managerial impressions of the relationship between voice and performance, and it is possible that causation may flow in the opposite direction. In short, superior organisational performance may provide the space and resource to experiment with employee voice.

With these limitations in mind, several respondents expressed their belief that there was a potential link between voice and performance outcomes. For example, at ConsultancyCo, a voice mechanism called 'strategy days' provided employees with an input to the future strategic plan of the organisation. At these 'strategy days', small groups of employees would discuss matters that ranged from market changes to prospective clients, and report back their ideas to a plenary session that agreed an 'action plan'. At HiFi Sounds, management encouraged employees to make suggestions on a whole host of matters, from shop opening times and customer care initiatives through to actually having an input into the recruitment of new staff. Another example from Bet.com is indicative of the potential significance of employee voice feeding into organisational performance. Following briefings sessions between employees and management, call centre operatives made detailed suggestions to improve the procedures for taking bets from customers over the phone. The end result saved the organisation thousands of pounds, as employees discovered that some customers were able to place bets after results were known. The Customer Service Manager at Bet.com comments:

*Our people have had some major new ideas that evolve from the customer contact they have which has impressed [the owners] no end. Because of some sloppy procedures at [head office] it was possible for customers to get bets on after the event ... We've introduced a procedure that prevents that, and that came as a result of one of our team meetings and some inventive thinking by the agents.*

This link between voice and performance was articulated by the HR Manager at Scotchem, who felt that it would be impossible to gain significant improvements without a large element of employee involvement. He was keen to achieve a situation where people wanted to do much more than just come to work, and felt that such an environment directly contributed to low levels of absence and staff turnover. Interestingly, he suggested that a major advantage of voice was that 'it greased the wheels of industry'. In that sense the link between voice and performance has a resonance with other 'indirect' benefits such as a more co-operative environment. The Manufacturing Director at Scotchem also felt there were very clear, tangible benefits that had actually emerged from employee voice schemes:

*quite dramatic and remarkable improvements in quality and productivity, as well as in cost structures at the new plants ... I can see huge differences not just because of the technology, but in the way that people gain advantage from the benefits of the technology and apply it in order to improve performance.*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

With the passing of the EU Information and Consultation Directive the issue of further regulation in the area of employee voice is likely to be an on-going concern. This will impact directly and indirectly on the nature, meaning and purpose of employee voice. Even without the growing uncertainty concerning the future direction of partnership, there remains a rising tide of legal regulation and more sympathetic, if qualified, support for trade union and representative forms of employee voice. The analytical framework and evidence presented in this article provides new insights into these debates; first in relation to the way employers articulate employee voice in the light of regulation; and second, in relation to the linkages between employee voice and organisational performance

Regarding the first issue - the way employers articulate their choices for employee voice – is the question of how 'deep' the mechanisms are embedded in an organisation (Cox et al, 2003; Marchington, 2004). Evidently, relying on the frequency of a particular set of voice practices alone is a very narrow way to evaluate the meanings ascribed to what is a complex and uneven process of employee engagement. It is also limited in assessing any potential

outcomes of voice. In this respect, the evidence in this article indicates a more systematic alliance of disparate voice mechanisms than was evident ten years ago (Marchington et al, 1992; Wilkinson et al, 2004). Two-way communications are now rather less about trivia and more about issues to do with operational outcomes. There is a longstanding academic view that effective worker participation in industry is doomed to fail because of the 'arms-length adversarial' system of industrial relations (Hyman 1995). From this perspective, neither workplace union representatives (focused on job controls and distributive bargaining) nor line managers (concerned to protect management prerogative) are interested in a positive-sum sharing of power that makes for effective employee participation. We found some evidence that this double blockage is becoming less significant as employers realign the purpose and practice of different employee voice mechanisms. In some cases the depth of collective bargaining (in both distributive and integrative terms) incorporated a broader set of strategic policies. A new generation of line managers, union representatives and employees appear more at ease with a set of inclusive (direct and indirect) rather than exclusive (direct versus indirect) voice practices. Managers seem more confident in organising direct exchanges of opinion with employees, while union representatives and employees expect them to do so.

The framework presented in Table 1 has its limitations but it is also a useful analytical tool to assess the purpose and meaning of employee voice. On the one hand, the meanings of voice did not always fit neatly into the categories depicted in Table 1. For example, partnership arrangements were equally important in promoting cooperative relations as much as employee contributions. Similarly, according to respondents, formal grievance procedures were not as important as might have been expected. Yet at the same time, the opportunities for employees to express a concern on areas of dissatisfaction did emerge through several formal and informal mechanisms, such as speak-up programmes, attitude surveys and a variety of individual communication channels. On the other hand, the framework does capture a more dynamic and less static conceptualisation for employee voice. The analysis ties together a variety of voice mechanisms that are often grouped in separate boxes (e.g. involvement or bargaining) when management is evidently thinking across the range of techniques. For example, the articulation of collective representation is not simply a matter of trade union recognition, as employers justified collective forms of voice according a variety of objectives, some of which may or may not mean union marginalisation and/or incorporation (Dundon, 2003). It can also mean, given that trade union membership and bargaining coverage remains low, that employers now expect unions to be more in tune with business objectives. For example, employers now offer places to non-union representatives on committees that used to be the preserve of unions. At the same time, trade unions seem to be prepared to engage in dialogue at an enterprise level in order to take advantage of even

the most management-led interpretations of partnership, with potential advantages to their members.

Regarding the second issue – the linkages between voice and performance outcomes – the evidence remains problematic for several reasons. First, there is the problem of benchmarking, of assessing the date at which to start making ‘before and after’ comparisons. For example, should this be the date at which the new voice mechanisms (say, a project team) is actually introduced into the organisation, or should it be some earlier or later date? This point is ultimately related to the extent to which voice schemes are embedded in a given organisation. For example, the claim that a suggestion scheme saves money may not take into account the fact that such ideas previously have been channelled through a different and even more well-established route. A second reason to be cautious about the voice-performance link is that it is virtually impossible to isolate the impact of just one aspect of management practice (e.g. giving employees a voice) from other contextual factors that can influence behaviour at work. For example, labour turnover is likely to be influenced by the availability of other jobs, by relative pay levels and by the presence, absence or depth of voice practices. Many organisations did not measure performance with sufficient precision, nor did they keep absence or labour turnover figures systematically enough to enable valid estimates of any linkage to be made. Consequently, we are largely dependent upon managerial assessments of the perceived impact of voice on behaviour and individual performance at work. Finally, there is the issue of evaluation and on whose terms. Should assessments be made in terms of merely having a voice (i.e. the process) or in terms of how things may be changed due to voice (i.e. the outcomes)? If it is the latter, then who gains? It remains the case that it is usually managers who decide what voice mechanisms to adopt, at what level and over what range of issues. None of the organisations in this study claimed to evaluate the impact of voice initiatives as a whole, but when it did take place it was for commercial reasons rather than a result of wanting to give employees more of a say. Broadly speaking, employee voice operated primarily as a loose and imprecise notion that was seen to contribute to competitive advantage, but also as part of a general and broader bundle of HR practices. In this respect, the final column in the framework presented in Table 1 (e.g. the range of voice outcomes) remains more conceptual than empirically grounded. These issues require further research on how workers interpret and influence the range of employee voice mechanisms used at enterprise level.

What is significant from the analytical framework presented here is that managers remain strategic policy actors, whatever the state of legislation or public policy prescriptions. They play a key part in adapting and interpreting legislation, corporate initiatives, consultancy

panaceas and benchmark schemes to the workplace. This is important in the context of statutory regulation intent on extending employee voice. So far, however, the debate has been conducted in rather simplistic and polarised terms. On the one hand, exponents of laissez-faire approaches regard all state activity as heavy-handed and deadening in its effect on management creativity, whereas it is argued that, left to their own devices, organisations will see the obvious advantages of innovation. On the other hand, some exponents of employment regulation see it in equally simplistic terms as an institutional blueprint that can simply be imposed on organisations with predictable and desirable consequences. Arguably, the data and analytical framework presented in this article would suggest that employee voice is best understood as a complex and uneven set of meanings, purposes and a policy dialectic between external regulation on the one hand, and internal management choice on the other.

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