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# **The roles and functions of shop stewards in workplace partnership: evidence from the Republic of Ireland**

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## ***Abstract***

**Purpose:** This article examines the roles and influence of shop stewards under workplace partnership regimes in five case study firms in the Republic of Ireland. It assesses the dynamics and potential longevity of partnership relationships.

**Design:** A framework is utilised which analyses the scope, breadth and depth of union influence in terms of the structure of partnership processes and the capacity of agency to affect relations between shop stewards, union members and plant management.

**Findings:** The findings show that while union representatives view partnership in a positive light, there remain problems as to the longevity of partnership owing to management control and a disconnection between national (government) and local (workplace) support mechanisms for partnership. The article concludes that social partnership is a process that remains anchored in a relationship of both antagonism and accommodation between capital and labour.

**Value:** Much of the extant literature tends to focus on the outcomes of partnership in terms of the gains or losses to either management and/or unions. In this article the focus is on the way the 'processes' of social partnership shape the behaviour and roles of workplace union representatives. A number of theoretical and policy implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Commentators make the point that there is no universal definition of partnership (Guest and Peccei, 2001:208; Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2002). Scholars seem divided as to what partnership means as a process, while practitioners tend to blend the processes of partnership with presumed outcomes (Jonestone et al, 2009). At an *ideological* level partnership arrangements can encompass both individual and representative processes of involvement (Dietz, 2004; Ackers, et al, 2005; Dundon et al, 2005). Attempts are also made to place partnership in its historical and spatial context by evidencing a link between periods of representative participation, such as industrial democracy and collective bargaining, as well as other periods that involve the coexistence of union consultation with an increased emphasis on direct employee involvement (Marchington et al, 2001). Thus partnership is often seen as something of its time and place, shaped by policy institutions as much by employer choice (Ackers and Payne, 1998). In *practical* terms, partnership is taken to symbolise a shift from adversarial industrial relations to problem-solving outcomes between unions, managers and workers (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2004; Dietz, 2004; Roche and Geary, 2006). Policy makers and key stakeholders - such as the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) in the UK, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the Irish Business and Employers Federation (IBEC) and the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPPI) in Ireland – have identified similar bundles of core principles: mutuality; dignity and respect; fairness; competitiveness; flexibility; and joint and direct communication and consultation. The new system of union-management is thus claimed to result in a win-win scenario for all parties involved (Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Ackers and Payne, 1998; Geary, 2008).

However, the premise that all benefit from partnership is hotly contested. Critics have long stressed that unions may ultimately lose power and influence under partnership as activists

become incorporated into the higher echelons of management (Kelly, 1996, 1998; Danford et al, 2005), or that the gains tend to exclusively favour management at the expense of workers' job security and pay levels (Kelly, 2004; Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2005). The 'advocates v critics' debate is more refined and nuanced than straightforward wins and losses (Samuel, 2007; Jonestone et al, 2009). Donaghey and Teague (2007), for example, show that owing to national social packs that exist in Ireland, unions have learnt to live with the paradox of declining influence while retaining bargaining power over macro-economic policy. Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009) found that partnership gains are constrained by clusters of contextual variables that impact union postures towards partnership. Oxenbridge and Brown (2002) signal the importance of the different roles of workplace union stewards under 'robust' and 'shallow' type partnerships. The point is that while much of the extant literature – both qualitatively and quantitatively – has advanced understanding about the contours and potential gains and losses of social partnership for unions, little empirical analysis has focussed on the resultant and more in-depth behaviours of local union activists charged with implementing and bringing to life these so-called mutual gains arrangements (Rubinstein, 2001).

This article contributes to the debates about the value of the 'processes' of social partnership for workplace union stewards and union members. It does so not by seeking to chart and measure the outcomes of partnership in terms of specific gains or losses. Rather, the paper focuses on examining the roles, postures and behaviours of shop stewards within well-established (robust) partnership enterprises. The paper begins by examining the literature on the possible value and longevity of partnership at workplace level. Section 3 then considers a framework to assess the roles and potential value for shop stewards engaged in workplace partnership, followed by a rationale for examining these issues in the Republic of Ireland in section 4. The paper then describes the research approach and the case study firms, followed by the findings and discussion and conclusion.

## **2. The Potential Value and Longevity of Workplace Social Partnership**

The value of partnership for trade unions has evoked differing viewpoints. Some assume that the value of partnership for trade unions is the same as for employers and workers. In Guest and Peccei's (2001) view, trade unions, employers and workers need to gain trust from the process for it to have sustainable value. Martinez-Lucio and Stuart (2004: 416) contend that unions can be motivated to engage in partnership through the potential it offers for transparency in decision-making. The extent of such involvement in partnership is viewed as contingent on developing a new role for unions and management in the regulation of employment. In contrast, others view the value of partnership as a potential opportunity for union revitalisation, with a renewed focus on equality, diversity and dignity in the workplace (Ackers and Payne, 1998; Heery, 2002).

Oxenbridge and Brown (2004) suggest that unions are motivated by possible alternatives and, more important for this paper, that the range of alternatives and the context in which they exist can influence the attitudes and postures of union activists. In simple terms, if faced with exclusion and continued marginalisation from managerial decision-making, unions adopt quite pragmatic and tactical behaviours to survive. In this regard Kelly (2004) points out that the value of partnership for unions relates to the distribution of power, gravitating between opposite ends of a continuum from moderation to militancy (Kelly, 1996:83-87). However, partnership rarely if ever involves the true distribution of power between 'equals'. Union can be coerced into accepting partnership when faced with an unpalatable alternative. Similarly, traditional forms of consultation and collective bargaining may be hollow and fail to deliver effective involvement in management decision-making (Charlwood and Terry, 2007). Kessler and Heron (2001) further refine the concept of power in terms of management setting the agenda for engagement. In essence, the argument is that despite the appearance of a clearly defined role

for union representatives, in reality there is little scope for meaningful consultation or bargaining when management refrains from dealing with core substantive issues in a joint manner. Thus partnership may engender a greater degree of managerial power and control when setting the 'agenda' for what can and cannot be discussed. The reasons for this may be varied, although as Walton and McKersie (1965:129) point out, "[a]genda items involving strictly economic values are much less likely to contain integrative possibilities than are items referring to rights and obligations of the parties".

On the issue of longevity, Kelly views moderate unionism as fragile because union survival and high membership rates are linked to union participation, which can be seriously diminished under social partnership. Under managerial sponsored partnerships in Ireland, for example, union roles and spheres of influences have been shown to be limited because management control the agenda (Dundon et al, 2006). Oxenbridge and Brown (2004:401) show that strong independent union organisation is important for more 'robust' relationships. In Ireland a number of parallels are evident (Roche and Geary, 2006; Geary, 2008; Teague and Donaghey, 2009). In particular, Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009) argue that the balance of mutuality may be skewed to management yet that does not necessarily diminish the value of partnership for workplace union stewards. Much more important is an understanding of the prevailing processes and contextual circumstances that impacts the capacity of shop stewards to influence management decision-making, including the extent to which partnership is vertically aligned from the top to the bottom of the organisational hierarchy (Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009:22).

The potential longevity of partnership is also related to the micro politics of the processes (Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2004:411). Significantly, each party assigns value to its involvement in the process and periodically evaluates the risk of participation (Munro, 2002; Haynes and Allen, 2000). If each party's expectations and motivations, in terms of costs and

benefits, do not correspond to their perceived utility then partnership becomes vulnerable to pressures exerted by one party, such as changes in production schedules dictated by line managers or wider commercial strategies imposed by senior managers (Haynes and Allen, 2000; Samuel, 2007). Part of the issue is that partnership can wither on the vine when key ‘champions’ (managers and union stewards) move to different roles in an organisation or leave the company altogether (Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2004; Munro, 2002).

From the above it can be noted that the processes of partnership can be crucial to an understanding of the potential longevity of workplace social relations that seek to promote and sustain mutual gains. Of central importance is an appreciation of multi-level factors: the role of power; the balance of mutuality; agenda-setting controls; union independence; and the value of partnership to the parties. Indeed, it quite possible that the value for workplace union representatives is connected to the capacity of partnership not only to meet their own needs, but perhaps to a lesser extent, that partnership is seen to also meet the needs of the other party. Evidently, some partnerships offer more value than others, and it is the intent of this paper to explore how and why the processes of partnership may engage workplace union activists to such a relationship. To advance this line of enquiry, the next section considers a framework for examining how union stewards engage with partnership at the workplace.

### **3. A framework for assessing the value of workplace partnership**

A three-fold framework to assess the roles of union stewards under partnership is drawn from the extant literature on voice and participation, including the ‘*level*’, ‘*scope*’ and ‘*depth*’ of partnership (Marchington et al. 1992; Marchington and Wilkinson 2005)<sup>1</sup>. First, the *level* of partnership is based at the workplace as the core unit of analysis. Issues of consideration

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<sup>1</sup> The framework used here has been adapted and would otherwise include four dimensions. The fourth dimension not included here is the ‘*form*’ of participation. The reason this is excluded is because the form is pre-defined as ‘indirect’, and direct employee involvement mechanisms were not part of the study.

here are the way partnership forums work in practice at enterprise level. These forums include union stewards, managers and other employee representatives, typically known in the Irish system as partnership reps or facilitators. Partnership facilitators may also be union stewards, depending on the practices at different sites, although a partnership rep/facilitator does not have the statutory legitimacy of a recognised union steward. The second dimension is the *scope* of issues considered through formal and informal partnership processes. Theoretically, scope can range from minor or trivial matters to contractual and more strategic issues. In many of the case study organisations, however, partnership is confined to what might be termed ‘softer’ HR matters, whereas the ‘harder’ or more contentious issues concerning pay and other distributive matters tend to be ring-fenced and dealt with separately (outside of partnership) through union-management negotiating structures. Therefore the interplay between partnership and how and when more conflictual matters are referred to union-management negotiation is also considered. The final and perhaps most significant dimension is the *depth* of partnership. Depth refers to the extent to which union stewards are able to influence management decisions by assessing their relative posturing towards the type of workplace partnership at each case study organisation.

According to Oxenbridge and Brown (2002) the more ‘robust’ partnership types tend to display deeper levels of participation, covering a wider scope of issues than those deemed to be ‘shallow’. Robust partnership relationships have been found in firms with higher levels of unionisation (Oxenbridge and Brown 2002:273). In contrast, firms that displayed a narrow scope were found in services and often used temporary employees. The scope and depth of partnership in a number of Irish case studies indicate comparable features (O’Donnell and O’Reardon, 2000; Roche and Geary, 2006; Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009). They include union consultation as distinct from negotiation, the frequency of meetings, the strength of union membership, input into higher level management decisions and the dynamics of informal dialogue. For example in the two Irish case studies reported by Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009), the more robust relationship differed in terms of the extent to which other HR-related policies and procedures were vertically



aligned with business strategy, generating a tighter synergy between complementary local practices and partnership.

In summary, then, the way partnership processes are played-out at the workplace level is an important dynamic in the configuration of union steward roles. Significantly, the dynamics of interaction can vary in terms of the scope, depth and breadth of union steward participation, resulting in weak and strong (or robust and shallow) relationships. These, in turn, are likely to affect the postures of union activists towards partnership and potentially the perceptions of union members, both to the union and to the company. Why this approach and the case of Ireland are likely to be a valuable addition to the literature is considered next.

#### **4. The Republic of Ireland as Context**

The Republic of Ireland offers a good example in which to examine the roles and behaviours of shop stewards in pre-existing and strong partnership relationships. The Irish system of industrial relations is essentially voluntarist, which utilised collective bargaining as the primary method of regulating the employment relationship. However unlike the UK, Ireland developed a centralised bargaining system in 1987, in which the principle actors (unions, employers, government and other community and voluntary bodies) negotiate national level pay and social welfare provisions. This ‘national social partnership’ model has been identified by international scholars as a key contributing factor in Ireland’s economic and employment growth in the years since 1990 (McKersie, 2006; Teague and Donaghey, 2009).

Throughout the 1990s public policy has actively sought to promote social partnership as an anchor to the country’s industrial relations system, with a total of seven national agreements since 1987, culminating in the most recent social pack, *Towards 2016*. The fourth national agreement in 1997, entitled *Partnership 2000*, was the first formal endorsement of the attempt to diffuse partnership to enterprise level. Its core objective was to improve the voluntary

arrangements at workplace level for ‘stakeholder involvement in the success, innovation and performance of the organisation’. In addition to the objective of promoting workplace partnership, a government-sponsored body was established in 2001 to help facilitate and promote partnership at workplace level, with its members reporting to *An Taoiseach’s* (Prime Minister’s) office: the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPD).

Despite the public policy push for the diffusion of enterprise-based partnership, the result is at best a moderate to low take-up in private sector workplaces in Ireland. The most extensive and representative workplace survey in Ireland reports that only 4.3 percent of firms have implemented partnership, with another 19.3 percent reporting they have informal partnership at the workplace level (Williams et al, 2004:56). Thus about one-quarter of organisations report some form of partnership arrangement, and most of these are confined to the public sector. Geary (2008) further scrutinises the same data set, and save for a few leading exemplars of partnership that had collapsed (Aer Rianta, Bausch and Lomb and the State broadcaster RTE), finds a broadly favourable picture for workplace partnership in terms of union influence and union member support. Geary (2008:536) explains that the roles and attitudes of both trade unionists and employers were crucial in promoting a more conducive and collaborative work regime. Such findings lend weight to the purpose of this paper. While survey data and sophisticated statistical modelling can explain important relationships and associations between variables underpinning partnership, the multiple case study approach adopted here seeks to explore the roles and attitudes of local union stewards in an attempt to make sense of the phenomenon they experience on a daily basis. It also complements the limited number of case study assessments of workplace partnership conducted in Ireland (Roche and Geary 2002b; Roche and Geary, 2006; Dundon et al, 2006).

## **5. Research Method and Case Study Organisations**

Five case studies in the present research have been chosen because they would appear to offer robust partnerships, at least at the surface level. In other words, the selection criteria was to identify organisations that displayed strong partnership relationship and to examine the roles, functions and attitudes of shop stewards in these so-called exemplars of good partnership practice. The cases include private-sector companies that had in place well-known and formalised partnership arrangements, collective bargaining and high union density levels. The cases were selected from reports claiming the virtues of effective workplace partnership published by the National Centre of Partnership and Performance (NCPP). The companies and unions had publically endorsed the concept of partnership and been heralded as flagship enterprises by the State-sponsored partnership body, the NCPP. The objective in selecting companies that appear to display the features of robust partnership was to be able to subject these exemplars to critical scrutiny. In other words, the study examines the roles and behaviours of shop stewards within a group of social settings that are generally considered to be the best examples of partnership from the private sector in Ireland.

In four of the five case studies union density is near 100 percent, and in the fifth it was reported to be over 75 percent. The partnership arrangements have been in operation from three to six years and collective bargaining dating back to when each company commenced operations in the Republic, ranging from eight to thirty years. Each case is a branch plant of a private sector multi-national organisation, and each reported an independent decision-making structure for the Irish site. The companies span a range of industry sectors including manufacturing, financial services and hospitality with employees from an associated range of occupational categories. The size of firm ranges from 85 to 1600 employees. The data was collected from interviews with managers, shop stewards and partnership representatives. Interviews were held with a total of 34 respondents that followed a semi-structured interview schedule. The research instruments were

designed to explore the value of the partnership processes across each of the case study firms. Summary details are given in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

## **6. Findings**

The data in this section are structured in two ways. First, the framework of *scope*, *breadth* and *depth* of involvement is used to assess the ability of shop stewards to influence decisions at enterprise level. Second, how the partnership processes shape the roles and relations of workplace shop stewards towards union members and with management is presented.

### ***Shop stewards' ability to influence decisions***

#### *Scope of partnership issues*

The scope of issues with which workplace representatives were involved spanned low level operational and some strategic matters, although the precise issue often depended on the concerns deemed important by the key actors. Of particular importance is how the formal structures of partnership differed across workplaces, which affected the ability of shop stewards to influence decisions. Some firms had clear divisions between 'partnership forums' on the one hand, and 'union-management negotiating bodies' on the other. Manufacturing Firms A and B had long established union-management negotiating committees that sat alongside but were separate to partnership forums. The other case studies had negotiating committees too, separate to partnership forums, although both partnership and negotiating committees tended to discuss a range of issues in a more iterative manner. In Financial Services D, for example, partnership

included both union stewards and non-union partnership representatives, yet the negotiating committee was a union-only channel.

The partnership forums were predicated on a representative principle of allowing different stakeholders a voice. In Manufacturing C and Hospitality E, management dominated the agenda-setting to a greater extent than at the other firms. The implication is a diminished role for union stewards in enabling issues to be raised. In three of the five cases, the partnership forums were sub-divided into ‘workplace’ (e.g. the whole plant) and ‘operational’ (e.g. function, department or team) groups (Manufacturing Firms A and C and Hospitality E). In the ‘workplace’ forums the process was based mostly on information-sharing from management down to shop stewards, including a wide range of communications covering information about commercial matters such as current sales, marketing, finance, company profits and revenue. Operational issues that fell under the remit of partnership often emerged after the issue had been considered by the workplace forum and designated sub-group established to consider the issue in greater detail and report back. Examples of this higher and lower order partnership process included new automation in Manufacturing A and C; shift rotas in Hospitality E; staffing levels and the recruitment methods for team members in Manufacturing C. In Financial Services D the partnership forum discussed employment security with new arrangements giving temporary staff the opportunity to attain permanent status. In Hospitality E the partnership forum agreed to new job sharing arrangements for staff.

Significantly, running alongside partnership committees and their attendant sub-forums were other union-management mechanisms that would discuss more contentious issues, such as changes to worker pension schemes, pay bargaining to agreed adjustments to nationally negotiated partnership rates and discipline codes. Some of the firms had a specific policy of discussing these types of issues outside of the partnership arrangements, while others did not. For example, Manufacturing A and C frequently discussed gainsharing plans in the partnership

forum, while similar pay- and bonus-related issues were deemed ‘industrial relations’ matters at Manufacturing B and Financial Services D, and subsequently defined as agenda items that would be inappropriate for partnership. Indeed, shortly after this research, partnership collapsed at Manufacturing B owing to a failure to agree on pension rights. Management insisted the company’s pension scheme came under the scope of the partnership forum, while the trade unions disagreed and argued the matter was the subject of collective negotiation, not consultation. The unions eventually withdrew from partnership and sought to resolve the issue through collective bargaining and third party mediation at the Labour Relations Commission (LRC). Problematically, managers and union stewards at Manufacturing B found it difficult to distinguish between partnership (integrative) and negotiating (distributive) matters.

In summary, the scope of issues upon which union and partnership representatives could participate varied widely, including minor but also quite substantial issues that affected the day-to-day working conditions of employees. At the same time, the boundaries between integrative problem-solving issues and those that were potentially more distributive in nature tended to mean conflicts would surface both inside and outside of the partnership forums.

### *Breadth of Union Participation*

In addition to the scope of issues is the related concept of breadth of involvement, and union stewards participated in both partnership and industrial relations fora. In addition to scope, breadth here also includes the frequency of dialogue and the extent to which it includes or excludes shop stewards. In all the case studies the data indicates a reasonably wide breadth of partnership involvement. In one respect this confirms that these organisations resembled robust-type relationship. Forums and committees would be attended and often chaired by a senior manager. In some instances shop stewards sat alongside non-union partnership representatives. For example, in Financial Services D the partnership forum included ‘staff-side’ reps; some of

whom were non-union employees while others were shop stewards, even though their role as a shop steward did not grant them an automatic seat at the partnership table. In Manufacturing A and C management provided employees and shop stewards with access to commercial information and summaries of the minutes of partnership meetings. Information was widely available and disseminated through the company's intranet, via emails and notice boards along corridors and in factory canteens.

Respondents reported that employees had greater access to information and management willingly disseminated messages as a result of partnership. In Financial Services D one shop steward commented that there is 'sometimes too much information that it can turn employees off' because of information overload. In all the firms, albeit to a different extent, informal 'word-of-mouth' sources were important. In Financial Services D it was the shop stewards who were responsible for reporting back partnership forum decisions to members. To some extent this legitimised and strengthened the union's role in members' eyes. It illustrated to employees that workplace partnership was a union-management process, even though the forum included non-union partnership reps. In the other firms dissemination was primarily a management function. Shop stewards at Manufacturing A stressed that it was important for management to share information as this separated out union roles from those of management.

### *Depth of Union Participation*

The third dimension of the framework considered earlier is perhaps of greater significance. The *depth* of union participation in partnership signals, above all else, the extent to which involvement is genuine and whether shop stewards have the capacity to contribute to organisational decision-making: decisions managers normally reserve for themselves. Significantly, depth was found to be very much interconnected not only with formal structures but also the informal processes of dialogue. To this end partnership reps had a different role to

that of union stewards. The latter were much more attuned to issues that had a potential distributive or conflictual outcome, whereas the partnership reps were reported as seeing matters as falling under the rubric of cooperative problem-solving. Shop stewards at Manufacturing Firms A and B and at Financial Services D remarked that union input helped to identify and ring-fence issues that required more careful negotiation and at times a harder bargaining stance. Interestingly, in Financial Services D, where the partnership reps were not union stewards (although some were union members), shop stewards were happy to champion such issues on behalf of these other employee representatives outside formal fora with managers, and willingly sat alongside them in partnership forums. This connection to union channels of dialogue between workplace stewards and managers served as a conduit to information-exchange and consultation owing to a high level of informal dialogue outside the formal partnership mechanisms. This often meant that management and unions would know that an issue would be raised beforehand. Respondents commented that such informal dialogue helped to speed-up decision-making. A shop steward in Manufacturing A remarked how informal dialogue was carried out:

*“It wouldn’t be that I would be constantly going into an office discussing something for an hour with somebody. It would be kind of a general conversation over lunch or breakfast or something like that”.*

However, the depth of involvement was often constrained by management. There was an understanding that reports would be presented on business matters, and union delegates felt much of this information was centrally controlled by senior or board members, not local managers. One shop steward in Manufacturing C remarked that information presented by management was felt to be an ‘effort in spin-doctoring from above’. Even so, shop stewards viewed the partnership process in a positive light, commenting they could raise problems and



worker concerns in an open and transparent manner. For example, in Hospitality E, the idea of new job sharing options for employees was raised by shop stewards at the request of several members, with a new policy agreed and implemented by management in a matter of weeks. In Manufacturing B, however, tensions were evident when shop stewards sought to highlight a particular membership grievance that management ruled was inappropriate for the partnership forum. Likewise, with other issues the union was often unwilling to discuss matters it felt were more relevant to collective bargaining fora. One of the shop steward's commented:

*“So in one sense you are trying to allow the management to hear the realities of what goes on without crossing that boundary because they could be the first to say well we can't discuss this here.”*

(Shop Steward, Manufacturing B)

The dynamics of these partnership processes varied in terms of depth of union involvement. It was certainly the case that management often controlled the agenda as to what was open for discussion, and how far the partnership process could contribute. At the same time union stewards were able to derail issues management sought to push through the partnership process when harder negotiation was considered the order of the day. To this end partnership is far from a mutual win-win concept. While partnership was considered an enlightening process of involvement, it also meant union stewards had to remain vigilant agents mediating the boundaries between the interests of management and those of their members. For most shop stewards the extent of their role in management decisions covered a broad range of operational and day-to-day work related matters. At times higher or more strategic issues were considered to some degree in all cases, often with a distinctive line drawn between partnership and other contentious issues that required collective negotiation. By clearly ring-fencing the latter, the

partnership process was able to deal with a range of issues in a broadly positive business-like manner. Importantly, informal communications and the willingness of key ‘champions’ of the process served as a significant conduit in promoting union legitimacy in workplace partnership.

A manager at Manufacturing B commented:

*“Really for the partnership to be successful you have to have the leadership and that has come from the very top. I would say if you took certain people out of the thing the partnership would fall apart.”*

A shop steward in Manufacturing B similarly commented on the role of ‘championing’ the process, which also highlighted some tensions for union stewards:

*“I championed partnership because I genuinely believe it is a good process ... But its very hard for a union to say we should all be sitting around the table and we should all be friends and we should all trust each other when you see your members suffering or if their work practices change and diminish. Its never going to replace the traditional bargaining, I hope”.*

One area that is left to consider is how these roles shapes relations between shop stewards and union members and those of the plant management, considered in the next section.

## *Partnership Roles and Relations of Shop Stewards*

Despite the differences between the companies in terms of sector, occupational mix and range of issues, respondents reported a number of broadly comparable behaviours when describing their relationships with management and union workers.

### *Shop steward roles and relations with management*

Shop stewards viewed their role in partnership as being part of a 'joint' problem-solving team that included themselves and managers. Together with partnership representatives, shop stewards remarked how they gained greater access to senior management and commented that managers appeared willing to listen to their concerns. Several respondents remarked that managers would spend more time explaining to shop stewards and partnership representatives why certain decisions had been made, which helped build trust, even when union stewards objected to management decisions. For example, the shop steward at Financial Services D remarked:

*“The whole thing of partnership is to listen .... Managers just can't come along and say we are closing this office. He has to show why he is doing it and answer questions on it.”*

In some instances (Manufacturing Firms A and C, and Financial Services D) it was reported that the way management approached issues helped reduce the workload of shop stewards. By management explaining decisions to shop stewards in a more open manner union member concerns were more easily clarified. This was also important as it assisted shop steward credibility by demonstrating to workers that their representative function involved access to

management decision-makers. For example, in Financial Services D, new management recruits were sanctioned by shop stewards for issuing what were described as ‘bland instructions without any explanation’. Senior managers did not hesitate to correct the newer managers into how the processes worked in the company, and thereby showed a public endorsement of the shop stewards’ role within the organisation. Indeed, supporting the process of partnership was subsequently included in new graduate management appraisal criteria. In this instance, shop stewards felt that such leverage ultimately shaped the behaviour of new managers recruited into the organisation.

The relations between shop stewards and management were evidently improved owing to issues being dealt with in a timely manner. As might be expected in private sector firms operating in competitive market environments, management stressed the importance of speed of decision-making. For union stewards a corollary was that they were able to discuss issues and resolve (minor) concerns at a lower hierarchical level, and often without the need for protected stages of consultation in the formal partnership forums. Evidently, timeliness was very much interconnected to the extent of informal relationships between managers and union stewards. For example, in Hospitality E, the union would meet with the general manager before formal meetings to assess commitment or possible objection to a particular issue. This allowed both management and unions to explore a range of possible solutions in greater depth: one example included the recruitment of casual staff during seasonal peak times.

Another reason management were keen on dealing with issues in a timely manner was it demonstrated to senior managers, in particular senior board members of a multinational corporation based in its home country, a high degree of competence and a ‘can-do-attitude’. In Financial Services D, for example, supervisors resolved minor grievances over tea-making facilities purposely to avoid the issue being raised in the partnership forum. Other issues included bonus payments (Manufacturing A), overtime working (Manufacturing C) recruitment

of staff (Hospitality E) and safety equipment and procedures (Manufacturing A). As one shop steward commented:

*“The role has changed a lot over the last ten years. It’s gone from sitting down and confronting problems to you are now dealing in a more relaxed environment. It isn’t as confrontational as it was.”*

(Shop Steward, Manufacturing A)

Further, a partnership representative in Manufacturing C explained:

*“I have no bother in actually saying to them this is wrong or that’s wrong. But I am very aware that partnership is a talking shop, which it is .... But against that I firmly believe if its taken in the right spirit you can improve things in a few days .... So in that sense we have to work very hard at it as well.”*

(Partnership Representative, Manufacturing C)

#### *Shop steward roles and relations with union members*

On several major issues shop stewards were not consulted at all or there existed tension as to whether certain issues should be discussed in the partnership forum or resolved through traditional collective bargaining. This was the concern over pension rights in Manufacturing Firm B, which was identified as the main issue that led to the complete collapse of partnership in that company. For shop stewards this signalled to workers in Manufacturing B that the union was prepared to take a stand, even though this diminished their representative capacity with

management in the partnership forum. It was reported this strengthened the relationship between workers and shop stewards. In contrast, in Financial Services D, union involvement was not part of a contractual change under the transfer of undertakings regulations when some staff moved to another employer. Management decided (unilaterally) to sell one part of the business and for commercially sensitive reasons announced its decision without involving the union. Consequently, it was reported by shop stewards that the respect for the union among members diminished. This single event exposed the inability of the union to counter the power of management to make unilateral decisions when it sees fit. In this situation, union stewards reported that when trust had been broken it was hard to rebuild positive relations with union members. The shop steward explained:

*“When decisions like that are made and you are not aware of them, the first thing that is going to be thrown at you by your members is ‘Where is your partnership now’. It’s very hard to explain”*

At times shop stewards were under pressure by workers to demonstrate that partnership worked. In some instances (Manufacturing Firms A, B and C, and Financial Services D), such pressures tended to materialised after a number of years of partnership, in which union members viewed partnership as little more than a ‘talking shop’. For example, in Manufacturing A, worker discontent increased over financial rewards. The issue was referred by the partnership forum to collective negotiation channels given the lack of progress under partnership. In this instance union members sacrificed pay rises for two years, with an explicit understanding of better pay when times improved. When financial performance and productivity improvements had been made and the issue of a pay increase was moved ‘out of partnership’, workers felt let-down by both the union and management. A shop steward at Manufacturing A commented:

*“The problem is that when you stick by partnership for a long time and they give you nothing of substance, your fellow workers feel let down”.*

A further fracturing in the relations between union stewards and union members under partnership was evidenced when union representatives were restricted in the time they could take off to fulfil their duties. In most incidents, management provided shop stewards with time off to carry out union activities. Shop stewards could meet with members informally and management viewed this as helping them to deal with potential problems. However in three cases (Manufacturing A and B, and Hospitality E), supervisors emphasised the normal workload requirements of the shop steward over ad hoc membership meetings prompted by growing concerns. The views of line managers fluctuated from support to indifference to occasional obstruction. According to a shop steward in Manufacturing Firm A, support for the steward's role in discussing matters directly with members was most evident when particular supervisors had a vested interest in the issue under consideration.

Perhaps the most dramatic weakening of union-member relations occurred when shop stewards appeared to police management policy. For example, in Manufacturing A, shop stewards agreed to ‘caution’ members about the amount of sick absence in the company. At the request of management, shop stewards informally talked to members and pointed out the possible consequences of excessive sick absence for the company. It was only in retrospect, remarked two shop stewards at Manufacturing A, how this looked to members. Workers started to question the efficacy of the shop steward role within partnership as the line between union and management was becoming blurred. In contrast, in Manufacturing B, shop stewards consciously refused to adopt a similar role in policing management policy, and instead favoured a more

combative stance in defence of workers pension rights. While the latter resulted in the demise of partnership, it strengthened the shop stewards' role with members.

Yet there were also signs of positive union-member relations as a result of wider and more transparent access to management information as a result of partnership. Examples include the ease shop stewards felt in raising concerns with management that were deemed important to members. These varied by case and by groups of union members with different issues. For example, in Financial Services D, shop stewards reported that members would be consulted and asked about any concerns prior to partnership forums, and this helped members view the mechanism as highly interactive. One shop steward reported:

*“a lot of things would be small enough in nature but there is lots of things that can be done .... they are more to do with the ethos and the way of life and making things easier for people rather than a knee jerk reaction to things..”*

Oxenbridge and Brown (2002, 2004) and Geary and Roche (2003) consider specifically the displayed activists thesis in terms of partnership incorporating union stewards into the higher echelons of management with a dissonance between union activists and member concerns. Across all case studies in this sample, union stewards seemed to have a reasonably solid relationship with members. At times a fracturing in this relationship occurred not necessarily because of partnership per se, but more because of the dynamics of labour-management relations more generally. Union stewards did not achieve massive gains for their members, yet they did consult and engage with members in a more interactive way because of partnership. In some instances the ability to demonstrate the union was independent of the company was considered more important than partnership, as in Manufacturing Firm B, when it was felt more advantageous for union members to withdraw from partnership and enter separate collective



negotiations along with third party (e.g. LRC) mediation. In other situations, union stewards had to cope with competing demands from members while also facing pressure from supervisory management to maintain a full work complement. Yet they managed to share information with members and on many occasions seek their views prior to decisions being made with management.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has examined the role of workplace shop stewards in what can be described as robust partnership relationships. The selection of cases which were deemed to be robust was purposeful as this allowed for a critical examination of what are supposed to be ‘good’ or ‘exemplar’ partnership processes at workplace level. These processes were subsequently examined in relations to the *scope*, *breadth* and *depth* of union involvement. This then enabled an assessment of the role of shop stewards with regards to management and specifically with union members. Since the research one of the cases, Manufacturing B, has abandoned partnership, primarily because partnership could not resolve a growing number of conflictual and distributive bargaining issues. In summary, workplace partnership is not a straightforward win-win concept in which all parties benefit from mutual gains and collaborative relations. Yet it is also found across these cases that there are some significant positive attributes of partnership that shop stewards favoured. Even acknowledging that partnership collapsed at Manufacturing Firm B, the evidence lends support to the view that enterprise level partnership is mediated by a series of factors, not least of which is the context of the organisation, the strength of unionisation and the existence of partnership ‘champions’ at a senior management and union level. Moreover, the debate about the processes of partnership and the way integrative problem-solving mechanisms are played-out on the ground is as important as the potential gains (advocates) and losses (critics) of partnership. From this a number of policy and theoretical implications can be noted.

First is the evident interplay between structure and agency in determining how partnership processes are played out at workplace level. When comparing the cases examined in this study on the basis of structure, three firms could be easily described as robust (Manufacturing A and C, and Financial Services D), one shallow (Hospitality E), and one collapsed (Manufacturing B). Shop steward roles and relations within the more robust partnerships exhibit high level of unionisation, which stems from long-standing union recognition and near 100 percent membership (two of which still maintain a closed shop agreement: see Table 1). With regard to the *scope* and *breadth* of the partnership process, union stewards were able to voice their members' concerns on a wide range of issues, from minor, operational to more substantive employment conditions. Across the case studies, shop stewards experienced an increased level of information-sharing, two-way communication and consultation with management. The result was a generally favourable posture towards partnership that helped legitimise and consolidate union involvement.

However, with regard to the *depth* of participation through partnership, then the picture is much more complicated. The deeper partnership relationships had a distinctive informal dimension coupled with an openness to ring-fence conflictual issues as more appropriate to collective negotiation. In this way, partnership may have dealt with lower level matters, but it was able to operate effectively on a whole range of issues that were of concern to union members. Interestingly, the informal roles of shop stewards were more developed in the robust cases, which also helped to nurture collective bargaining as a parallel channel for resolving differences. Indeed, very little informal partnership was found in Manufacturing B; the only firm where partnership subsequently collapsed.

A second implication concerns the independence of shop stewards and their role with union members. This included exercising a representative capacity with the workforce through the mechanisms of union-management negotiations as separate from partnership, holding their

own shop steward meetings and continuing to obtain time off to carry out union activities. The quality of the shop stewards relationship with management was reflected, to a large extent, in their relations with unionised workers. In part, a degree of independence from management was necessary to strengthen union-member relations. This was most apparent in situations where shop stewards could clearly distinguish issues that were appropriate for collective negotiation, and issues that could be considered in a more cooperative environment of social partnership. This signals a more complicated and uneven dynamic to the processes underpinning workplace partnership. Evidence reported here found that workers would become frustrated at a lack of progress through partnership, or concern that partnership was being used by management to push through more substantive changes. In Manufacturing A and Financial Services D, for instance, workers pressurised shop stewards to demand more tangible rewards from the company or criticised partnership for failing to deliver expected promises when financial performance had improved. Moreover, even when presented with positive union perceptions about partnership, the processes demonstrate that the employment relationship remains fraught with ambiguities and an undercurrent of antagonism. Thus the effects of partnership are more complicated and uneven than measurable gains or losses.

Finally, the longevity of partnership is likely to be tested further in the Republic of Ireland (and elsewhere) owing to a deepening economic recession. Over the last decade a growing reliance has been placed on national tripartite partnership agreements to map out economic adjustments. One consequence can be a diminution of the capacity of shop stewards to negotiate more substantive issues at workplace level given the dominance of softer consultation through partnership. In other words, enterprise-based structures may no longer be equipped to effectively respond to decentralised bargaining demands in a depressed economic climate. Related to this is whether a fragile political regime can maintain partnership at a national level. In Ireland unions recently had to abandoned national partnership talks over government-imposed tax increases and public sector pay cuts.

**Table 1: Case Study Context and Profile**

<b>Company/Sector</b>	<b>Manufacturing A</b>	<b>Manufacturing B</b>	<b>Manufacturing C</b>	<b>Financial Services D</b>	<b>Hospitality E</b>
Size	555	1600	85	600	480
Unions	SIPTU, AEEU and TEEU	SIPTU and TEEU	SIPTU and TEEU	SIPTU and MFS	
Union density	100% and closed shop agreement	100%	100% and closed shop agreement	94%	75%
Respondents interviewed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial Relations Manager x 1</li> <li>• HR Manager x 1</li> <li>• Plant Managers x 2</li> <li>• Partnership Facilitators x 2</li> <li>• Union Stewards x 5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR Manager x 1</li> <li>• Partnership Rep x 1</li> <li>• Line Manager x 1</li> <li>• Shop Stewards x 4</li> <li>• Partnership Facilitator x 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO x 1</li> <li>• Site Manager x 1</li> <li>• Shop Steward x 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee Relations Manager x 1</li> <li>• Operations Manager x 1</li> <li>• Shop Stewards x 5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR Manager x 1</li> <li>• Line Manager x 1</li> <li>• Shop Stewards x 2</li> </ul>
Indicative description of type of partnership relationship	Robust	Collapsed	Robust	Robust	Shallow

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