The Management of Voice in Non-Union Organisations: Managers perspectives

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Abstract

The last few years has seen an increased interest in the notion of employee voice. This has been stimulated by inter alia legal initiatives for union recognition, declining levels of union membership and the growth of alternative forms of employee representation. But employee voice is often seen only in collective terms and non-union systems for employee involvement tends to be ignored or simply dismissed as ineffective. This article examines the management of employee voice in non-union firms. The data comprises a sub-sample of case studies drawn from a larger CIPD funded project on management choice and employee voice. The data shows diversity in terms of management motives for employee voice and the practices adopted and suggests that it is too simple to dismiss voice in non-union organisations as ineffective and inconsequential.

INTRODUCTION

Employee voice is a term that is now widely used in the practitioner and academic literature on human resource management (HRM) and industrial relations (Benson 2000; Gollan, 2002; Dundon et al, 2004). In the high performance literature, voice is seen as a stimulant in the creation of organisational commitment (Lewin & Mitchell, 1992; Pfeffer, 1998). Indeed, publications on participation emphasise the importance of giving employees a feeling that they are making choices, in both union and non-union settings (Marchington et al, 2001). An alternative perspective views voice in terms of rights, linking this to notions of industrial citizenship — something that is also gaining currency given the regulatory push for employee voice through the European Union (Ackers et al, 2004).

But discussions of voice often tend to be seen in union-centred terms rather than examining a much broader involvement rubric (Benson, 2000; Gollan, 2003). Non-union workplaces are generally characterized as a black hole to use Guest's (2001) phrase of having no HRM and no IR. In this article we examine the management of employee voice and the practices used at nine non-union case study organisations. First we discuss the importance of employee voice, and suggest that there is a great deal more to say about non-union voice than to dismiss these as simply inferior to union-based systems of representation. This is followed by a brief review of potential managerial motives for employee voice. We then explain the research

methods in the third section. The findings are reported in the fourth section. This shows a range of schemes exist in different non-union settings, the diversity of managerial motives along with evident barriers to the management of employee voice. The conclusion argues that while non-union voice might well be less effective than union-based systems of representation, this view tends to oversimplify and polarise employee voice into simplistic union vs non-union boxes that is analytically self-defeating.

NON-UNIONISM AND EMPLOYEE VOICE

Non-union voice needs to be researched for three reasons. First it is neglected compared with union voice. Secondly, union voice is a minority phenomenon and as there are no prospects of a rapid return to this, the health of non union voice is critical to ordinary employees and public policy demands that we have other ideas for improving the representation gap, other than unionize. In a sense the real issue is not EWCs and the directive on information and consultation offering a way of unions to regain ground but what do they do for employees. Third, many of the sections which dominate the economy do not have a strong tradition of union voice, so union reflex is not a live issue.

Since this paper deals with voice within non-union organisations, it is necessary to define what non-union means. It does not mean there are no trade union members present in an organisation. Rather, the term non-union is concerned with a situation where trade union recognition is absent as a

means to determine either in whole or in part the terms and conditions of employment. In some situations non-union may not mean the complete absence of a trade union. Managers may choose to consult with a union with regard to certain sections of a workforce while avoiding union recognition for other workers. In other words, non-unionism depicts a situation where management do not deal with a trade union that collectively represents the interests of workers (Dundon & Rollinson, 2004).

Of course non-union firms differ in quite substantial ways. Some organisations may be non-unionised because management uses one or more strategies to avoid a trade union channel for employee involvement. In other organisations non-unionism may be a *fait accompli* simply because collective representation has never emerged or evolved. Guest and Hoque (1994) seek to map out the diversity of non-union types by charting a range of HR characteristics, including employee voice and involvement, reporting what they classify as 'good, bad, ugly and lucky' forms of non-unionism. The good non-union employer is derived from images of the so-called sophisticated and paternalistic -type employer, such as IBM or Marks and Spencer (M&S), providing an attractive employment package and extensive non-union employee voice mechanisms. The bad and ugly non-union firms are often dependent upon larger organisations for their work and operate in highly competitive markers. What can distinguish the bad from the ugly, is that in the latter management seek to exploit workers, whereas in the bad management offer poor wages and conditions without intended malice. If

there is such a thing as a lucky non-union firm, then remuneration tends to be below the market average with few employee benefits. It is considered lucky because the issue of union recognition has probably never emerged with any significance (see also Dundon & Rollinson, 2004; Gall, 2004).

TONY CHECK

However there are problems with these conceptual distinctions between forms of non-unionism. One issue is a tendency in much of the extant literature to view non-union firms in comparison with their unionised counterpart. This is problematic since unionised voice (either through collective bargaining, negotiation and/or partnership) represents an almost *prima facia* case for a more extensive and deeper voice channel than non-union employee involvement processes. Trade unions are independent of employers, provide a countervailing force to management decisions and symbolise a greater degree of objectivity than might appear in the non-union situation. Yet this also seems to reject out of hand the range of non-union voice schemes that exist in many organisations. Arguably, it is too easy to dismiss the non-union situation as a bleak house without fully unpicking and examining employer motivates for non-union voice, the type of mechanisms used and the needs of employees. A second problem is that in much of the non-union literature there is an implicit assumption that collective voice (either through unions or alternative collective employee representative structures) is somehow less attractive to workers employed by so-called 'good' non-union employers. The argument is that because employees earn

above the industry wage and have access to a variety of non-union employee involvement schemes then somehow there is little incentive to unionise. In part these difficulties are methodological. For instance, Guest and Hoque (1994) rely on the results of a single respondent survey to determine a diverse range of good, bad and ugly non-union employers, without examining or extent of reported practices or indeed asking workers whether they think their employer is good or bad (Blyton & Turnbull, 2004).

Union representation is often seen in 'ideal' terms and contrasted with ineffective non-union representation. There are a priori reasons to suggest this might well be the case but there is a danger of categorizing all non-union representation as ineffectual and union representation is very effective without investigating it empirically (Dundon & Rollinson, 2004).

In many respects employee voice is seen in terms of either collective participation '*or*' as an alternative to union representation. Many commentators write as if voice is only intended to undermine or compete with other 'true' representation structures. This follows the Ramsay (1977) view that employers are only interested in participation for defensive purposes. However, as Terry (2003:274) notes, the decline in unionisation does raise questions as to the efficacy of union-based systems for employee voice. In a similar vein Ackers et al (2004, 16) state how:

'It seems unreasonable and sociologically unproductive to rule out non-union forms, whether voluntary or state-regulated…before examining the evidence. After all, some non-union employers, notably the retailer John Lewis's, have developed strong formers of participation, while some unions have been weak, ineffectual or corrupt'.

THE MEANING OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

It is evident that there is considerably more to employee voice than either union participation or non-union forms of alternative representation (Dundon et al, 2004). In an issue of the Industrial Participation Association (IPA) Bulletin, Geoff Armstrong suggested that voice historically meant collective bargaining, and that this 'chosen method of joint regulation became a straitjacket inhibiting the very things we needed to be doing to win and keep customers'. He acknowledged that management was largely to blame for this. He notes the shift of emphasis to direct involvement methods that are felt to deliver higher organisational performance. In contrast, Margaret Prosser of the TGWU argues that 'the collective voice achieves what the lone voice could never do: it humanises and civilises the workplace' (Prosser, 2001). It is apparent, therefore, that there are competing visions of the term 'employee voice', and that quite different motives can underpin a desire for collective voice than for individual voice.

The term 'voice' was popularised by Freeman and Medoff (1984) who argued that it made good sense for both company and workforce to have a voice

mechanism. This had both a consensual and a conflictual meaning; 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'. Trade unions were seen as the best agents to provide voice as they were independent and could reduce 'exit', although the prevalence of the non-union firm and declining levels of trade union density have questioned the exclusiveness of the unionised voice channel. There also remains considerable ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of very different and diverse employee voice schemes, even more so in non-union situations. For example, some companies may adopt a partnership arrangement with their employees regardless of union recognition (Ackers et al, 2004). In other companies particular voice mechanisms may have been in existence for several years but always marginal to how managers actively tap into employee ideas (Marchington, 2005). 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 differently by scholars as well as practitioners.

The real research issues concern the conditions under which representation may or may not be effective and taking account of what we know of 'hollow shell' structures where union representation exists but has little influence (Charlwood 2003). It could also be hypothesised that even when non-unionised forms of employee voice are utilised to avoid unionisation, it is by no means evident that management control the outcomes of the mechanisms

used as workers can display a solidaristic tendency to protect group norms (Dundon & Rollinson, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODS

In this article we examine 7 non-union organisations in total. The non-union organisations are a sub-sample of a large group of case studies drawn from a research project on management choice and employee voice (Marchington et al, 2001). Several themes guided the fieldwork design, including the following:

a) Senior managers' understanding of the term 'employee voice'
b) The range and scope of employee voice mechanisms in each organisation
c) The ways in which different voice mechanisms have been used in each organisation
d) Changes in the use of employee voice over time, in particular in relation to legal and public policy interventions
e) The forces that may constrain or help to shape the choices made by senior managers, and how these have influenced voice in each organisation
f) The perceived impact of voice on attitudes and performance

Given the exploratory nature of the research, interviews were conducted with a number of managerial respondents at each organisation. These always included the person responsible for HR and where available one other senior manager (such as chief executive, managing director or senior site manager).

One particular emphasis was to incorporate non-personnel practitioners where possible. In most of the multinational and multi-site organisations, interviews were conducted at one location and both HR and other managerial functions were included. Our intention was not to determine the efficacy of voice vis-à-vis unionised systems, but to ascertain management motivations for employee voice, the range of non-union voice practices used, and to investigate the processes of managing non-union voice and any associated outcomes.

In the main research project 18 case studies were selected in order to provide coverage from a range on the basis of sectors of economic activity, size, single and multi-site and partnership and non-partnership voice arrangements. This coverage of different organisational types is also reflected in the non-union sub-sample of 7 case studies reported in this article. Background and contextual information on each of the non-union case study organisations is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

MANAGERIAL MOTIVES FOR NON-UNION VOICE

It was rare for these respondents to conceive of voice through the lens of employee representation, although as we will see in the next section, it was apparent that these firms utilised a number of non-union representative structures for employee voice. At Scotoil for example, collective (non-union) representation was central to the overall managerial strategy. Most of the

discussion about voice at Scotoil took place in the context of the company's systematic and well-developed consultation scheme. The HR Manager spoke in terms of how employee views are listen to, while another senior manager explained the objective for representative voice in terms of a flatter and more transparent system for employees to express their concerns:

> *'it is important for employees to recognise that they have a voice that isn't filtered through layers and layers of management.'*

At the majority of other case studies, however, respondents rationalised voice not so much as dialogue or two-way exchange of information, but rather as the transmission of ideas to managers in order to improve organisational performance. Employees were seen as valuable receptacles of knowledge and voice was about the generation of ideas that could help improve performance. Interestingly, not one managerial respondent mentioned 'grievances' as a form of employee voice in their initial definitions. When the issue of 'grievances' was discussed with respondents, this tended to be viewed as a procedural activity that had little to do with their understanding of the term employee voice. For most managers, the perceived links between voice and improved performance and employee behaviour was much more important. At HiFi Sounds, for example, a strong corporate culture was based on openness and informality, and the manager was clear that:

Feedback from 'colleagues' [the company's term for employees] is probably how I would understand the term [voice]. Comments on the business are vital to our success – which is why we value the suggestion scheme so highly.

At another service sector firm, Leisure Co, the Managing Director spoke from personal experience about the importance of voice:

The term has a resonance with me. I started off in the ranks myself and have always been very keen that employees have a view. After all, they are actually face-to-face with customers, not the Managing Director, so I rely very much on what they are able to filter up.

In the majority of these cases, managers suggested that choices were made because employees, to varying degrees, expected to have a say. This influence tended to be considered in the context of why voice existed, rather than the actual type or range of mechanisms used. One common pattern was that those managers who were responsible for managing a disperse and fragmented workforce felt employee expectations for voice influenced their choices. For example, employees at Consultancy Co worked for lengthy periods of time away from their main base. In this situation informal exchanges of information outside the office became an important voice channel, and to this end the company allocated around 2% of turnover to social activities outside of working time.

However, there is a big difference between employees expecting or even demanding a voice, and employers rationalising choices because they realise workers want more of a say or because certain managers have a personal attachment to the concept of voice. On the whole, managers decide whether or not workers have a voice in these firms, and it is managers rather than employees who decide what mechanisms to utilise. It is therefore important to unpick the types of voice arrangements used by these non-union firms.

NON-UNION VOICE IN PRACTICE

How these broader interpretations about non-union voice translate into actual practice is of course an entirely different part of the story, and a surprisingly wide range of practices was found among the sample of non-union organisations (see Table 2). What is significant here is not so much the existence of a greater or lesser number of schemes in any particular organisation, but the diversity of different techniques and the balance between direct and indirect forms of non-union voice.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Upward-problem solving

It is evident from the Table 2 that upward problem-solving is the dominant form of employee voice in these non-union organisations and indeed the most popular form of voice (for managers). In broad terms this refers to any

technique that managers use to tap into individual employee ideas and opinions, either through two-way communications channels or through specific systems that are set up for employees to express their voice. The key features of this category, however, are that the structures are management-initiated and operate directly between managers and employees. Upward-problem solving can cover a whole range of issues, it can take many forms, and it can be systematic and regular or it can be utilised on a one-off basis as the vehicle to deal with a specific initiative. The most frequently observed form of upward problem-solving is regular and formal two-way communications, which was found in all the case studies, followed by project teams. Attitude surveys, suggestion schemes and electronic means of two-way communications were also favoured by managers. The number of formal practices varied, with the average being five practices, which were found among organisations that tended to be larger and with multi-site operations, such as Compucom and Scotoil.

All the organisations used two-way communications of one sort or another, and most of the practices tended to be relatively similar. One of the more novel forms was the house magazine at Housing Association, which was compiled by the staff rather than management:

> *this is probably the main voice for the staff, but its quite light hearted and jokey. There are side-swipes at management from time to time,*

it's quite healthy. Occasionally, there are contributions from management, but the impetus comes from the staff to request things.

Manager: Housing Association

Just over half of the non-union sample use suggestion schemes. A noteworthy example comes from HiFi Sounds where, in line with the company's ethos, the top prize each quarter is a trip for two on the Orient Express. Other suggestions that are implemented receive up to £200 depending upon the 'bottom line impact', although management agrees that this is often hard to quantify. All suggestions are seen and replied to by the Chairman, and it is clear that the scheme is seen in the wider context of morale building and team spirit. To facilitate the process of making suggestions, all staff receive a small drinks allowance so that they can go out as a group to discuss ideas.

The use of employee and attitude surveys is now much more widespread in most organisations, and it is often seen as an example of 'good' HRM in that staff are being asked for their views on a regular basis (Marchington et al, 2001). Attitude surveys were less common than suggestions schemes or two-way communications among these non-union organisations. In the larger organisations, such as Scotoil, employee attitude surveys were part of a wider organisational (and in the latter case world-wide) benchmarking exercise. At Scotoil the employee survey is conducted globally with results fed back to staff and site management. These are then used to inform staff action points. Three particular examples of this identified concern with the reward policy,

staff development opportunities and diversity. As a result, each of these areas were then considered as an agenda item for discussion at the non-union consultative forum.

A significant majority of respondent organisations also reported the use of project teams as part of the voice channel. Some of these are central to the operation of the organisation, such as the matrix teams at Compucom and ConsultancyCo that are formed to deal with specific projects and are then disbanded once the job is completed. At Compucom, for example, team members are drawn from different functions within the company – such as finance, development and IT – and teams have autonomy in how to organise their work and how often to meet. At ConsultancyCo a development called 'Strategy Days' brings together different project team members who consider a range of matters, from new prospective clients to future performance objectives for the company. Separate teams report back their ideas and objectives to a plenary session that includes the owner and board of directors.

Non-union representative participation

The extent of joint consultation among this sub-sample of non-union organisations is both surprising and significant. These types of mechanisms could be used to undermine union-based systems of worker representation and potential union organisation, as noted in other studies (Dundon, 2003; Gall, 2004). However the articulation of alternative representative structures as a conscious anti-union approach was not apparent among this sample. No

doubt such voice mechanisms could be used in this way but there is little evidence of this being a direct strategy. It is of course possible that voice structures could have the effect of substituting collective efforts, even if this was not an intended objective at the outset. Perhaps more significant is that representative voice was diverse, taking a number of different but overlapping forms in practice that sometimes blur into one another and include a mix of non-union consultative forums, partnership schemes and European Works Councils (EWCs).

With the exception of Airflight and ConsultancyCo, non-union consultative forums of one sort or another were present in the remaining seven case studies. Furthermore, some of these schemes had been in existence for a lengthy period of time, such as at Compucom; while they signified a new voice channel in other organisations, such as at HiFi Sounds and LeisureCo. Of course the detail regarding the extent and depth of such voice mechanisms matter, and the evidence suggests that these were less central to managements' overall motives. For example at Compucom the non-union works council meets every two months and includes ten representatives elected by their peers. This was introduced in the mid-1990s, and at the time was the only mechanism available to obtain employee views. Respondents at Compucom expressed concern that matters available for consultation at the works council tended to gravitate around 'tea and toilet roll' type issues, with very little involvement around the more substantive employment issues. At Housing Association, non-union joint consultation has an historical

importance, even though it now appears marginal to the management of other non-union voice channels:

> *[the JCC is] a mechanism that has stood the test of time, but it has not been widely used by employees for making their voice heard.*

Leisure Co has a staff liaison committee that comprises employees who are actually working in the field, either on the rides or in the retail and catering units. It is a relatively informal and unstructured format that anyone can attend, so is not based on any elected representative format. It is held regularly, once a month or more during the season, but not with any predetermined frequency. The Managing Director felt that this was a particularly important form of voice at the site because:

> *A lot of good points that would normally have missed management's attention, such as the state of the car park for example, came to my notice and could be rectified. The HR Manager and I encourage people to attend and once they've got used to this, they become very talkative.*

Non-union representative structures were also evident at Scotoil. European Works Councils (EWC). The rationale for EWCs at this UK-owned firms was due to it having other sites throughout the rest of Europe rather than a desire to establish a representative-based system of voice *per se*. Indeed, management respondents tended to regard these employee voice

mechanisms as remote, more as something that was required rather than a process that was seen to add value. Management viewed EWCs as a less effective means of voice than locally-based mechanisms to inform and consult staff, largely because staff were not aware how much information was disseminated back from the council.

The European Employee Forum at Scotoil was structured and well developed. Each of the business units in the company has its own elected employee representative, for whom training has been provided both by the IPA and the Industrial Society. An independent report last year on involvement at the company concluded that 'consultation is genuine and that a final decision (on a particular issue) will be based on safety grounds, not cost, and that the commitment to get the right answer is evident both from management and the workforce.' The fact that this system is entirely non-union also makes it rather different from most EWCs.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF NON-UNION VOICE

Whilst many of the respondents talked in general terms about the processes of voice, quite a number also insisted that the outcomes of voice were particularly important. The words used varied between 'influence' and 'say', but broadly they coalesced around the notion of employees having some influence over practices that matter to them. 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. It is apparent

that non-union systems for employee voice, including representative participation, are considerably less extensive in terms of scope and depth than is the case for effective unionised systems of representation, such as collective bargaining. Nonetheless, there does seem more than just dismissing non-union voice processes as inferior to union-based participation. Some of the distinctive feature of these definitions seems to be that they all related to the potential for employee voice to impact upon outcomes, rather just describing the processes that are used in organisations. In some situations these outcomes are shallow and narrow in scope, but in others they are not. Many of the managers stressed the importance of informal mechanisms and processes - rather than just the formal structures - that are particularly important in the mix of associated outcomes of non-union voice.

One notable example comes from Housing Association. Here the Personnel Manager regarded voice as a form of 'democracy that exists in the organisation'. It is also viewed as a legitimate platform for employees to have a say about their own work and the organisation more broadly. Similarly, both the General Manager and the HR Specialist at ConsultancyCo felt that voice was meaningless unless it made an impact:

> *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.*
>
> General Manager: ConsultancyCo

However, given that isolating cause and effect is problematic, one way in which voice may impact employee behaviour and performance is an 'indirect' linkage. Although our respondents agreed that 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 climate. It is this better climate which was then seen to help identify the links between voice and impact. Many of the managers commented that voice contributed to improved performance because it generated a better environment in which to work. This indirect relationship between voice and impact has further support in that the mechanisms used were generally part of a much broader HR agenda. Several respondents commented that in practice voice tended be one of several HR practices –including training, induction, culture change or more open management styles. For example, at Housing Association, employee voice was part of a much wider 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*
>
> HR Manager, Housing Association

While respondents were reasonably confident in articulating positive impacts from employee voice, they also identified more pertinent barriers to effective employee engagement. These included: a lack of employee enthusiasm, an absence of necessary managerial skills, and issues concerning line managers. In a number of organisations we found that employees lacked enthusiasm to participate in voice mechanisms. At some of the larger and multi-site organisations, managers noted that while employees demanded a greater say this was not always borne out in practice. At Compucom, for example, employee seats on the works committee remained vacant owing to a lack of willing participants. Of course, much depends on managerial support for voice and the range of issues open to employees. As noted earlier, there was concern that the issues for consideration by the works committee at Compucom were confined to more trivial matters. It is possible, therefore, that a lack of employee interest in voice may be to do with the specific mechanisms in place at an organisation, rather than a generalised disinterest in voice *per se*.

Second, there was evidence that some managers lacked the necessary skills to implement and manage employee voice programmes, and this seems more problematic than a lack of employee enthusiasm. The view was expressed, mainly among larger and multi-site establishments, that voice needed to be built up gradually, as individuals sometimes lacked confidence and skills to make a contribution. Related to the issue of available skills and competencies

is the role played by middle managers. In several organisations support for employee voice from the top was critical, as was found in Scotoil, ConsultancyCo and Housing Association in particular. In the latter cases, employee voice was seen as 'natural' for the company, as synonymous with the name of the firm, and a long established part of its managerial philosophy. In other cases, however, middle managers acted as a blockage either through ignorance or a lack of specific 'people management' skills. For example:

> *Some managers put more time and effort into team briefings than others. Some of the managers are more task or technically orientated and their softer people skills are not as good*
>
> Personnel Manager, Compucom

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Given that the majority of British workers are now employed in organisations characterised by an absence of trade union representation, employee voice is worthy of further research, especially among non-union organisations. Indeed, it may be more productive in terms of advancing our knowledge and understanding <u>not</u> to start with the efficacy of union vs non-union structures. Arguably, our intellectual lens needs to be open rather then skewed by shunting such processes off into a pre-packaged box marked 'non-union and inadequate' in contrast to a box marked 'union and effective'. The limitation with the latter is these may symbolise ideal rather than real types. To this

end, our starting point was that there appears to be more about non-unionised processes for employee voice than simply rationalising such mechanisms as weaker or inferior to their union counterpart. While there is a *prima facie* case that union voice channels are both deeper and more objective than alternative non-union systems, the corollary is not that all union voice mechanisms are effective. Managerial motives for non-union voice is important and resonates with contemporary debates about efficiency as well as democracy. Moreover, voice structures set up to facilitate business improvements may also have consequences beyond those management had in mind at the outset. Indeed, now that considerably fewer workers have access to union representation, the question of non-union voice is an area that warrants even more investigation.

The data reported in this article does indicate a pattern in terms of the range of issues on which employees in non-union firms have a say. Employees do express their views and contribute to a range of issues that matter to them within their immediate work situation. Yet at the same time, it is management that allows such voice to occur. What is significant is that such processes also take on a life of their own and evolve over time. Thus management might control the voice agenda but not necessarily the dynamics of how such processes are mediated and translated into actual practice. Some of the voice structures identified among our sample were relevant only within a specific company context and history, such as long-established non-union representative committees. In other cases, similar schemes appeared to fall

into disuse or lose support among employees and managers. 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 package of HR initiatives, some of which were more integrated and devolved to line management level than others mechanisms.

However, unlike an earlier project which found middle managers and supervisors to be a major constraint on employee involvement (Marchington et al, 1992), there seems to have been a general cultural change over the last decade. Employees now expect to have a voice, and both middle and senior managers were more used to and empathetic with such expectations. The generation of 'cops' rather than coaches and 'giving orders' had much diminished and the departure of the old guard through restructuring and redundancy was a feature at several sites. Furthermore, it was also apparent that where such attitudes did exist, the use of new technology and electronic forms of employee voice allowed employers to more easily bypass middle managers.

While trade union influence and membership has diminished, this should not be confused with a lowering of employee expectations. Recent management initiatives, such as empowerment, have raised the expectations of many employees, and the managers we spoke with stressed that employees are now more confident in expressing their views. Added to this is the new citizenship agenda promoted by the EU and in particular new rights for

workers to have their say. As this new regulatory dynamic enters the heart of British working life and, in the case of voice, gains institutional forms, it is likely to raise employee expectations and to generate a greater taste for voice. The Information and Consultation Directive is clearly a potential vehicle for change in this area. For many non-union organisations this may be viewed as a threat in terms of potential union recognition claims for collective voice, or an opportunity to incorporate employees into the decision-making processes of an organisation. Arguably, employee voice (for both union and non-union workers) is part of a shared human rights agenda, predicated on diversity, equality of opportunity and procedural justice.

Table 1: Background data on all organisations

Organisation	N employees	Multi-national	Multi -Site	SME	Sector	Key Informants interviewed	Background/Market Context
Airflight	2,500		✓		Transport and communications	HR Director Head of Cabin Crew	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.
Compucom	220		✓	✓	Hi-tech engineering	Personnel Manager	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	HR Manager Senior Office Manager	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.
HiFi Sounds	350		✓	✓	Retail	HR & Training Manager Branch Manager	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	Personnel Manager Deputy Director	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	HR Manager Managing Director	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.
Scotoil	100,000	✓	✓		Oil and gas exploration	HR Manager 2 x Senior Business Unit Managers	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

Table 2: Voice Mechanisms in non-union firms

	Upward-Problem Solving					Representative Participation			
Organisation	Electronic Media	Two-way Commun-ications	Suggestion Schemes	Attitude Surveys	Project Teams	Non-Union Consultative Forums	Partner-ship Schemes	European Works Councils	**Distinctive Practices**
Airflight	✓	✓			✓				Devolved Voice
Compucom	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			Works Council
ConsultancyCo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				Strategy Days
HiFi Sounds		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Suggestion Scheme
Housing Association		✓	✓			✓			Non-union JCC
LeisureCo		✓				✓			Staff liaison cttee
Scotoil		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	Consultative Forum

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