

## Is collective consultation the “gold standard” for employee voice? by Mike Emmott, CIPD

**The concept of employee voice has emerged as a key driver of employee engagement and performance. Voice has moved up the management agenda and organisations are increasingly looking for help in making it effective. In this article, Mike Emmott, CIPD Employee Relations Adviser, responds to the Acas paper, ‘Voice and participation in the modern workplace’, by John Purcell and Mark Hall<sup>1</sup>.**

Ten years ago, the debate about employee voice was taking place mainly in terms of works councils and other machinery for collective consultation, prompted by the draft EU directive on employee information and consultation. We were talking about how far the decline of trade union membership had undermined workers’ ability to get their views across to management, and how to remedy the so-called “representation gap”. We were exploring the differences between union and non-union formats and the scope for developing “hybrid” forms of consultation. Voice as such remained largely an academic concept.

More recently, the MacLeod report has recognised voice as one of the four key drivers of employee engagement and the focus of attention has shifted more towards the individual employee. Voice is now seen as an important element in the leadership and management agenda. At the same time employers have begun to recognise more clearly the significant linkages between individual and collective methods of communication and consultation. It is increasingly accepted that *organisation climate* offers the key to engagement, and is in turn influenced by the level of trust in senior management.

The paper by John Purcell and Mark Hall on *Voice and participation in the modern workplace*, in the Acas futures series, explores where voice is going and what challenges it faces. Key strengths are that it is firmly grounded in evidence; it is sensitive to the role of trade unions; and it takes account of the development of non-union forms of employee representation. A question for many employers however, particularly in this post-MacLeod era, will be what help does it offer them in strengthening their arrangements for tapping into employee voice?

The paper recognises the remarkable growth in direct communication between employer and employees in recent years. It also records that nearly three out of four UK employees prefer such direct forms of communication, including team briefings, to indirect consultation through representative forums such as works councils. It quotes evidence that it is the combination of direct and indirect voice arrangements that has the most positive impact on organisational commitment.

But the authors’ major focus is on the role of consultative committees, and here they offer sound advice on how to make consultation work. Although they recognise that a lot of direct communication is going on, they don’t believe it affords a vehicle for effective employee voice. They argue that there are structural limits to how far workforce meetings provide an avenue for upward communication or any capacity to influence senior management. They also assert that employee surveys can never be an effective means for employees to express their views. They are somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is one in a series of papers looking at the future of employment relations. All papers in the series can be found at [www.acas.org.uk/future](http://www.acas.org.uk/future)

unimpressed by much of what goes on in UK workplaces in the name of employee voice (and indeed engagement).

There is an issue here that goes to the heart of what we mean by employee voice. In an important sense it is about involvement, but that begs the question of how to get employees involved. Is it about influence and, if so, just how much influence do employees need to have on management decisions in order to deliver performance benefits? It's not an unfair question but the answer is not immediately obvious. The collective dimension of the employment relationship has historically been analysed in terms of power. But this is not the issue it was in the workplace thirty years ago when trade union membership was at its height. We're not really talking now about employees looking to use their collective muscle to influence the direction of organisations. Nevertheless we do need to ask, is voice simply about enabling employees to have their say, or is it about having their views listened to and acted upon?

Purcell and Hall believe that, in order to be effective, employee voice needs to feed in to the *strategic* decision-making process. As they make clear, this requires a significant input of resource and commitment by both management and employee representatives. Most employees need a lot of training and support to be able to contribute at this level. It will help if they also have significant experience and understanding of the business and the wider context in which it operates. UK organisations have only limited experience of this kind of collective consultation to draw on and there is a real question about the appetite of employers and trade unions to make it happen. The paper calls for stronger legislation to support the development of effective consultation machinery.

In terms of getting engagement, it is employee *perceptions* that matter. Perceived organisation support builds employees' trust, and effective consultation machinery can play an important role in that process. Purcell believes that people will still rate a procedure as fair if they have had a voice, even if they know that what they said had little or no influence on the decisions made<sup>2</sup>. This suggests that effective voice has to be a function of workplace culture, and how managers behave from day to day. Purcell and Hall quote evidence that what employees want is a form of voice that will help them deal with problems, and a more cooperative style of engagement with management. This is a broader interpretation of voice, without which consultation processes are unlikely to deliver performance results.

Research confirms that the relationship between employees and senior management has an important influence on levels of employee engagement. Critical characteristics of a productive employment relationship are the extent to which employees trust management, believe that management respects them and feel fairly treated. These cultural issues cannot easily be reduced to tools and machinery but they are fundamental to getting voice right. Putting in place collective machinery will not necessarily improve relationships but managed in the right way it can help reinforce a positive workplace culture in which employees believe in the integrity of the communications process and have the confidence to respond.

In the end, relationships depend on both sides having trust and confidence in each other. The importance of trust for effective voice is underlined by recent CIPD research which finds that, for

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<sup>2</sup> 'Does successful employee engagement depend on management behaviour?' Warwick-Acas Lowry lecture, 2012 delivered by John Purcell

leaders to be trusted, they need to demonstrate ability, benevolence, integrity and predictability. Big organisations have to work particularly hard to build and retain trust<sup>3</sup>. Employees want openness rather than “spin” and they want their ideas to be heard without fear of punishment. Employers can achieve this in a number of ways, including for example by giving direct on-line access to the CEO, or by senior managers getting out onto the front line and sharing the experience of junior staff.

There is a bewildering variety of channels open to employers for conducting a dialogue with employees, from intranets, cascade, yammer, and blogs through team rooms, briefings and webinars to collective union and non-union relationships. The distinction between collective and individual voice is becoming blurred as we learn more about the interactions between them: the general message is, the more voice mechanisms, the better.

But if organisations want to move forward on employee voice, where should they start? That will depend on where they are, but good practice in managing and developing people offers a wide range of possible options. An engaging leadership style adopted at the top of an organisation can provide a powerful framework for involving employees; the concept of “partnership” may have limited political traction but is not dead and there are successful examples of employer and union coalitions in support of workplace productivity; employee surveys and focus groups are useful insofar as they engage with and support management decision-making.

The paper also flags up some challenges to organisations that are seeking to implement effective voice regimes:

- **What will be the impact on voice of social media?** On-line forums and tools are increasingly popular and can get employees actively involved in discussing workplace issues. Social media have the potential to change the nature of the employment relationship and the paper highlights the possibility that they could at some stage eclipse consultative committees. We have to ask (as an earlier Acas paper has already done) how far employers can or should seek to control these social network forms of direct communication<sup>4</sup>. One thing the spread of social media may do is further undermine a two-dimensional model of the workplace that ignores tensions within the management hierarchy, and puts managers and employees on opposing sides.
- **What does outsourcing mean for voice, including for example its impact on opportunities for employees to make suggestions or raise grievances?** The whole issue of collaborative working across organisation boundaries raises relatively unexplored issues about how to manage employee loyalties and two-way communication flows. Common sense suggests that, in practice, difficulties can be addressed by ad hoc means such as regular informal meetings, in a similar way to the solutions organisations adopt for breaking down internal

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<sup>3</sup>‘Where has all the trust gone?’ (CIPD 2012) <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research/where-trust-gone.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Workplaces and Social Networking: The Implications for Employment Relations’ Ref: 11/11 by Andrea Broughton, Tom Higgins, Ben Hicks and Annette Cox (The Institute for Employment Studies), Acas 2011, can be found on the Acas website at [www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers](http://www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers) or [www.acas.org.uk/future](http://www.acas.org.uk/future)

silos. But representational activities such as works councils will lack the focus of a single organisational structure.

It will always be hard to demonstrate unequivocally how effective employee voice is being in driving employee engagement and business performance, not least because of difficulties of definition and disentangling its impact from that of other factors. But that is no cause to be despondent about its prospects. The old management model of “command and control” is certainly not dead but organisations are increasingly exploring more consultative, even consensual models of decision-making. As the CEO of Coca Cola has said, a hierarchical approach, based on “let’s just lead from the front and if other people don’t like it, that’s their problem”, doesn’t work any more. Employee voice is essentially a vehicle for replacing an outmoded model of management with one that respects the changing nature of today’s workplaces.