

29 Mar 2021

Employee voice

Learn about employee voice, its purposes and use, and the benefits it can bring to an organisation and its workforce. We also look at whistleblowing and creating a speak-up culture

Introduction

Employee voice is the means by which people communicate their views to their employer and influence matters that affect them at work. It helps to build open and trusting relationships between employers and their people which can lead to organisational success. For employers, effective voice contributes to innovation, productivity and organisational improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development.

This factsheet explores what employee voice means and its different perspectives and purposes in an organisation. It looks at the changing nature of voice and influence in the employment relationship, and mechanisms for representative participation. It also examines whistleblowing and how employers can create an environment in which individuals feel safe to speak up.

Explore [our stance on employee voice](#) in more detail, along with actions for government and recommendations for employers.

What is employee voice?

There is no single understanding of employee voice. In our [Talking about voice](#) reports, we use Dromey's definition: 'the ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these to influence decisions at work'. To enable a genuine [two-way communication](#) between employers and their people, it's important that managers listen to and act on employee voice. With calls for greater transparency in organisations following numerous public scandals, voice is crucial in keeping organisations honest. It's also fundamental to ensuring job quality in the context of changing working practices. [Valuing people](#) is a core behaviour in our new Profession Map as ensuring individuals' views are heard is key for people professionals.

Employees can have their say through individual and collective channels, by speaking directly to management or indirectly through representatives. Voice can be formally expressed, for example through suggestion schemes and attitude surveys, as well as informally such as in team meetings or through intranets and online platforms. Effective voice is unlikely to result from any one single initiative and should involve complementary channels and be supported by leaders.

According to management literature, there are two main purposes of voice:

- **Organisational voice** refers to the positive benefits that voice can bring to an organisation, for example, higher innovation. Some voice mechanisms, such as suggestion schemes, allow the organisation to benefit from employees' ideas.
- **Individual voice** argues that voice is a fundamental right. It allows employees to be involved in decision-making and to express their concerns.

Our [survey on voice](#) showed that employees' satisfaction with their involvement in decision-making is significantly and positively linked to their overall job satisfaction. This suggests that voice is an important part of employee wellbeing. Understanding the human nature aspects of voice, and outcomes for workers such as wellbeing and fulfilment, can create shared value for organisations and their people, and build sustainable [organisational cultures](#).

It's also important to consider employee silence, when individuals choose not to speak up on matters of importance to them despite having something to say. Our survey also found that about a quarter reported high levels of silence. Higher levels were found more in the voluntary and public sectors compared to the private sector.

Inclusion and diversity concerns should be a core element of voice initiatives. People may be motivated by different factors to become involved, and the perspectives of minority groups can be underrepresented in conventional voice mechanisms. Hearing diverse viewpoints may not be easy but can help to unlock people's potential while balancing power between the organisation and its employees.

There's more on new ways of thinking about voice in the workplace on our [Future of employee voice](#) topic page.

Representative participation

Representative participation refers to schemes in which employee representatives meet managers on a regular basis, whether in scheduled committees, or through more ad hoc arrangements. The essential feature is that participation is not directly between individual employees and their managers but is mediated through representatives. Approaches include:

- **Collective representation** – negotiations between senior managers and employee representatives (usually but not exclusively union representatives) leading to joint regulation of pay and other conditions of employment. These can be periodic in the case of pay, but continuous or ad hoc in the case of other matters, such as grievances.
- **Partnership schemes** – employee representatives and managers emphasise mutual gains and tackling issues in a spirit of co-operation, rather than through adversarial relationships. This includes a high commitment to information sharing.
- **Joint consultation** – for discussing issues that are deemed to be of common interest or of key importance at non-union as well as unionised workplaces. Joint Consultation Committees (JCCs) may exist in organisations to address issues that are not covered by collective bargaining. JCCs consist of management and non-management representatives. In unionised organisations, the trade unions typically provide the employee representatives, but JCCs also run with non-union employee representatives.
- **Employee forums** – groups of non-union or mixed groups of union/non-union employees meeting with management for consultation and information sharing.
- **European Works Councils (EWCs)** – employees of large multinational companies operating across Europe have a right to ask for a EWC to be set up. It's a body that brings together senior managers and employee representatives to discuss transnational issues.

The changing nature of voice and influence in the workplace

Since the early 1980s, there's been a decline in trade union representation across various European countries, including the UK. While a significant minority of the workforce still have their terms and conditions determined by collective bargaining, overall there's less reliance on collective agreements as a means of influencing the employment relationship. Our [survey](#) found that only 17% of respondents mentioned trade unions as a channel for voice. The most common channel was one-to-one meetings with a line manager. This reflects a general shift away from indirect and representative voice, and towards direct and individual channels.

With the rise of work fragmentation and flexibility, the [Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices](#) commissioned by the UK government in 2017 highlighted the imbalance of power in the employment relationship, and the importance of effective worker voice for

creating good work. Key trends such as remote working, increasing workforce diversity and alternative work arrangements are creating new challenges for individuals' ability to have a say over their work conditions.

Our report [Power dynamics in work and employment relationships](#) explores the complexities of power in the employment relationship and how employees can best shape their working lives.

Direct participation

Direct participation is employees' ability to influence decision-making themselves (that is, not through representatives). It can take different forms, such as control over the way job tasks are carried out, or influence over wider organisational decisions. The [Skills and Employment Survey 2017](#) found that formal ways of organisational participation (for example, consultative meetings held by management) declined between 2012 and 2017, but the proportion of employees reporting high influence over decisions that affect their work increased.

The Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations (known as the ICE Regs) apply to UK organisations with 50 or more employees. They give employees rights to request their employer makes arrangements to inform and consult them about issues in the organisation. Our [guide](#), produced in collaboration with the Involvement and Participation Association, outlines recent changes to the regulations and highlights effective ways of setting up and running employee forums.

Corporate governance

The UK government's [corporate governance reform](#) requires listed companies to ensure that employees' interests are better represented at board level. One of the recommended options is to include an employee representative on the board. This is normal practice across Europe, but there's no one-size-fits-all approach. In our [response](#) to the government, we and the High Pay Centre welcomed raising awareness of employees' interests at board level, but acknowledge that there's no single solution to creating meaningful employee voice. Read more on [corporate governance](#).

Social technology

Technology is offering new ways for people to have a voice at work. Some employers have set up protected enterprise social networks as a platform for workers to express their views. These virtual networks allow workers some control over issues discussed, as well as informal networking with colleagues. They allow real-time conversations between staff and management, but there's lack of evidence on how they can be used most effectively.

Whistleblowing and creating a 'speak up' culture

Whistleblowing is increasingly recognised as an effective means for workers to communicate important messages to employers. It occurs when an individual raises concerns, usually to their employer or a regulator, about a workplace danger or illegality that affects others. The disclosure may be about the alleged wrongful conduct of the employer, a colleague, client, or any third party. Typically, the whistleblower is not directly, personally affected by the danger or illegality. Personal complaints such as harassment or discrimination are not usually treated as whistleblowing and should be handled according to the organisation's grievance policy.

In the UK, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 is a key law which protects those who 'blow the whistle' in the public interest. Examples include financial malpractice, criminal offences, risks to health and safety, failure to comply with a legal obligation, a miscarriage of justice and environmental damage. Workers who make a 'protected disclosure' can make a claim to an employment tribunal if they're treated badly or dismissed.

Employers should have a standalone 'speak up' policy that's supported by top managers and promoted effectively to the workforce. It should make clear to all staff what to do if they come across malpractice in the workplace, and encourage individuals to inform someone who is in an appropriate position in the organisation to act on the disclosure.

The policy should make clear that:

- The employer attaches great importance to identifying and remedying wrongdoing in the organisation. It should include specific examples of dangers, illegality or unacceptable behaviour.
- Staff should inform their line manager immediately if they become aware that any of the specified actions are happening, have happened or are likely to happen.
- In more serious cases, or if the allegation is about the actions of their line manager, an individual should feel able to raise it with a more senior manager, bypassing lower levels of management.
- Individuals can ask for their concerns to be treated in confidence and the employer will respect those wishes.
- Individuals won't be penalised for informing managers about any of the specified actions.

It's preferable to deal with whistleblowing separately rather than as an extension to, or

part of, an existing grievance procedure, while cross-referencing procedures on discipline and grievance. This is partly because the level of risk to the organisation and to the worker will generally be significantly greater in whistleblowing cases than in other matters.

A climate of open communication, supported by a clear procedure for dealing with concerns, will help reduce the risk of accusations of misconduct and illegalities, and ensure that concerns are dealt with speedily and effectively.

CIPD members can find more on the UK legal aspects, including the rules about the uncapped compensation, as well as recent and proposed changes to the law, in our [Whistleblowing law Q&As](#). They can also use our [whistleblowing advice helpline](#).

Outcomes and influencing factors of workplace voice

Research shows that effective worker voice can lead to positive outcomes for both individuals and organisations. Participating in decisions is important for people's [wellbeing](#) and [motivation](#), as it provides a way to improve work experience and overall job quality. Employers can benefit from higher productivity and innovation, and reduced workplace conflict and absenteeism.

Psychological safety, or individuals' feelings about taking risks and sharing thoughts with others in the workplace, provides a bedrock for voice. Employees are unlikely to speak up if they believe the costs of doing so outweigh the benefits – for example, if they feel that their position in the organisation would be threatened. Power dynamics influence people's willingness to speak up, particularly on information which challenges the status quo or could be judged negatively by a more senior colleague.

Strong leadership also brings higher levels of both organisational and individual voice. Quality of leadership is particularly important for individual voice which is less likely to be effective when leadership is seen as weak. It's therefore important that all people managers in the organisation understand the value of employee voice and are trained to facilitate open conversations and demonstrate empathetic listening.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[Acas - Building productivity: employee voice](#)

[Involvement and Participation Association](#)

[GOV.UK – Whistleblowing](#)

[Protect \(formerly known as Public Concern at Work\)](#)

Books and reports

DROMEY, J. (2015) *ICE and Voice 10 years on*. London: IPA.

INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS. (2017) *Encouraging a speak up culture*. IBE Good Practice Guide. London: IBE.

JOHNSTONE, S. and ACKERS, P. (2015) *Finding a voice at work? New perspectives on employment relations*. Oxford: OUP.

RUCK, K. (ed) (2019) *Exploring internal communication: towards informed employee voice*. 4th ed. London: Routledge.

WILKINSON, A., DONAGHEY, J and DUNDON, T. (eds) (2014) *Handbook of research on employee voice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Journal articles

CAROLLO, L., GUERCI, M. and PARISI, N. (2019). There's a price to pay in order not to have a price: whistleblowing and the employment relationship. *Work, Employment and Society*. pp1-11. Reviewed in [In a Nutshell](#), issue 93.

ISHAM, R. (2020) [Are whistleblowers adequately protected?](#) *People Management* (online). 15 January.

LI, C., LIANG, J. and FARH, J-L. (2020) Speaking up when water is murky: an uncertainty-based model linking perceived organizational politics to employee voice. *Journal of Management*. Vol 46, Issue 3, March. Reviewed in [In a Nutshell](#), issue 95.

REITZ, M. and HIGGINS, J. (2019) [Helping silenced staff find their voice at work](#). *People Management* (online). 30 July.

CIPD members can use our [online journals](#) to find articles from over 300 journal titles relevant to HR.

Members and *People Management* subscribers can see articles on the [People Management](#) website.

This factsheet was last updated by Rebecca Peters.