




# TALKING ABOUT VOICE

Insights from  
case studies

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

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## Case studies

# Talking about voice: insights from case studies

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This project was developed and run by the [Centre for People, Work and Organisational Practice](#) (CPWOP) at Nottingham Business School. CPWOP works with organisations and policy-makers to understand and improve how people are managed within organisations, particularly in the face of the critical challenges facing the economy and society.

# 1 Introduction

Creating opportunities for people to have effective voice at work is a fundamental aspect of ensuring job quality. But this is also important for organisational effectiveness. Having a means for eliciting ideas and operational insights from front-line employees, for example, can have significant benefits for the organisation.

Following on from our [earlier research](#) into the employee perspective of voice, we carried out a series of case studies to investigate how employee voice operates in various organisations and to capture their experiences as they sought to make improvements.

The organisations range from small firms with around 50 employees to large multinational corporations with thousands of employees. Five organisations completed the case study process and feature in the report, with two choosing to be anonymised. The full summaries of four of these case studies are collated here. They provide clear examples of employee voice operating within different contexts, including key challenges and initiatives in place.

Although the research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons learned and shared here remain relevant and will help organisations steer their own course in strengthening their voice channels and listening to the diverse and valuable voices within their workforce.

## 2 Airline logistics company

### Summary

This organisation is a rapidly growing airline logistics company, developing from a family firm to a multinational organisation. This growth has brought with it some challenges for employee voice, particularly in how to manage a larger and more physically dispersed workforce. To deal with these challenges, it has experimented with innovative solutions to encourage employee voice that have produced some unintended consequences, for example, some staff were inadvertently excluded from voice mechanisms designed to include them. This case study demonstrates the importance of viewing employee voice as an ongoing project of continual development, rather than a one-off initiative.

Challenges	Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• rapid growth from a family firm to be part of a global workforce</li><li>• divide between warehouse and office</li><li>• highly competitive market, working with tight margins and high-performance targets</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• introduction of pride values</li><li>• voice initiatives to connect with employees</li></ul>

## Background

This organisation is a global aerospace and defence supply chain provider that was founded in the 1970s and has since grown rapidly. It has grown rapidly and is now a multi-billion-dollar turnover business working in nearly 20 countries. Employee roles range from picking individual items in the warehouse and sending them out for delivery, to working in the office providing administrative support for customers and the warehouse.

## Challenges

### *Opportunities and challenges of rapid growth*

Growth from a small family-owned business to a large multinational has created many opportunities but also has created a series of challenges in managing a larger and more physically dispersed workforce.

The company origins are based on the values of support, familiarity with one another, and trust. As a result of the company's growth, relationships between shop-floor staff and senior managers have weakened due to reduced opportunities for interaction, personal and informal relationships:

*We were a small business where everyone knew everybody, and now we're growing and growing and growing and growing... They crave that relationship with that senior team.*

### *Private equity and short-term outlook*

Being a private equity company impacts the way the organisation is run. Interviewees described how this ownership structure requires the senior managers to report on quarterly financial targets, leading to short-term targets and prioritisation of targets. However, senior managers recognised they have a 'duty of care' towards employees, which required a longer-term focus to support manager–employee relationships and promote employee voice as a long-term issue.

### *Warehouse and office divide*

Like many of our case study organisations, there was a clear divide between operational and office-based staff. In this organisation, this was mainly due to the nature of warehouse work being very manual, requiring precision and focus. This leads to operational staff being managed in a more controlled manner. KPIs are tracked hourly, and all mistakes are tracked and traced to the individual. The job itself is demanding as operational staff are required to concentrate for long periods in a pressurised environment.

This type of work raises some key challenges impacting employee voice:

- **Recruiting and retaining warehouse employees can be challenging.** Finding suitable candidates who can work under pressure and with precision can be a challenge.
- **Tight management and control can often lead to command-and-control forms of management,** resulting in 'parent and child' working relationships.

Many initiatives have focused on encouraging warehouse staff to use formal voice channels, but these have often fallen short, either because they do not see them as relevant, or they find it difficult to leave the shop floor and find time to engage with voice initiatives.

### **Turnover of team leaders**

At one of the sites there was a regular rotation of team leaders, which had three key consequences:

- **Inconsistent team leaders meant key ingredients for voice missing:** Trust, psychological safety and mutual understanding were difficult to build given the rotation model for team leaders.
- **Confusing and conflicting management practices:** When new line managers arrived, they often made changes which meant that the team had different ideas and inconsistent leadership.
- **Unclear performance and development objectives:** The team leader may not have been present for the full performance and development review (PDR) cycle, so the goals set at the beginning of the year were not appropriate by the end of the year:

*For example, the end of line audit team, I've had them for a month. They're on their third manager... it's unfair on the team members that they've not had that bond, that conversation, and those objectives outlined with their team leader.*

### **Restricted capacity of line managers**

Employees often talked about their frustrations with equipment, which restricted their capacity to do their job and meet their KPIs. These operational employees also felt unable or unwilling to raise these issues, given the feeling that line managers had little discretion to implement these changes. This resulted in warehouse employees becoming silent, feeling that even if they did speak up, there would be little benefit.

## **Tackling the challenges to improve employee voice**

### **Values-based initiatives**

- **Placing values at the heart of work:** New values were introduced to the workforce to communicate organisational values and to help build their workplace culture through the decisions and actions that workers make. These values draw on the family origins of the organisation, seeking to formalise them in the larger organisation.
- **Making values visible:** A key strategy to disseminate these values is to make them visible. Employees were recognised and celebrated for their work achievements through an award scheme based on these organisational values.
- **Value champions:** Another strategy has been through the creation of champions across each business unit, who represent the new organisational values and encourage other employees to embody the values within the work that they do.
- **Changing organisational processes to encompass the new values:** These values are embedded through operational practice and the development of processes for everyday tasks, such as meetings: *'When you start the [daily briefing] meeting, don't just dive straight into profit and revenue. Start the meeting with a success story in terms of something great that somebody did that's recognised.'* This approach reinforces the values and success stories within the organisation and ensures that they are recognised and a positive tone is set for team meetings.

### ***Improved communication***

This organisation has focused on improving the information provided to employees. For example, rather than providing lots of financial data, the organisation shares information that is interesting and relevant to employees. It has also introduced the social networking software Yammer, which provides employees with an online space where they can discuss work-related issues and organise non-work-related events. However, an unintended consequence has been the increased division and exclusion of warehouse employees, who often have less access to the online systems.

### ***Valuing employees through a reward system***

This organisation implemented an online reward system where people can nominate and recognise their colleagues who have gone above and beyond expectations. The system provides monetary rewards for notable achievements and contributes to a culture of appreciation among employees. However, for those that do not have constant online access, such as warehouse staff, it is harder for them to register their nomination on the system, highlighting feelings of inequality for this group of workers. This may also affect the types of task that get rewarded; for example, smaller tasks are rewarded more often by office staff because of their ease of access.

### ***Improving employee voice channels***

There has been a considerable focus and effort to improve key voice channels:

- **Developing management practices and proactive leadership:** This involved training line managers to take a more collaborative management approach and create opportunities for dialogue with senior managers. Line managers are actively encouraged to engage in learning and attend workshops and other development activities. These activities aim to help line managers develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of the people side of their role. *'How do they give feedback? How did they deal with difficult conversations? How do they present the information, how did they listen, how did they develop? How did they coach? All those sorts of things are really important.'*
- **Improving the staff survey and feedback process:** Considering the frequency of survey, the format and content should be more reflective of current events. In particular, they are working on developing clearer tracking of who is responsible for the actions that arise from the survey and communicating more clearly the outcomes that they achieve as a result.
- **Developing the employee voice forum:** One of the significant changes, driven by the union, has been the transformation of the employee engagement forum. This led to a transformation of the previous workers council, which was seen as ineffective, to an employee engagement forum where staff representatives could raise issues directly with members of senior-level staff.

Employees directly involved in the forums perceived them as highly effective and participatory. They describe key impacts they have had around negotiating Christmas shutdown dates, the refit of the warehouses or representing employees to management, as well as putting on fun events to engage with the wider workforce,



including those harder to reach in the warehouse. However, those outside this group were more cautious about its impact.

One of the central challenges has been recruiting participants from the warehouse. Many employees from the warehouse seemed mostly unaware of the forum. There was also a concern from some stakeholders that the employee engagement forum only dealt with surface-level issues such as vending machines or aspects of the car park, instead of attempting to influence strategic decisions. For some employees, not hearing back about suggestions they had put to the employee engagement forum was an incentive to disengage from the process entirely, highlighting the importance of feeding back and following up on suggestions.

### **Changing senior management practices**

#### *Senior management visibility*

One of the strategies that senior managers used was increased visibility – walking around the warehouse, talking to people by name, and engaging with them in a more informal and personal way to build employee and senior leader relationships. The organisation saw this as particularly important with warehouse employees, who are unable, or choose not, to use the formal voice channels. Increasing the presence and visibility of senior leaders to staff is at the heart of this approach. *‘Our leaders are willing to be accessible and get themselves out there, in front of the audience, in front of the employees. I see examples, beautiful examples, where our senior leaders do that very well.’*

#### *Breakfast club*

Another strategy to encourage more informal interaction was the development of a breakfast club. Employees whose birthday falls within any given month are invited to have breakfast and coffee with senior leaders. This provides an informal setting to get to know one another while also creating a relaxed environment to put forward suggestions or discuss ideas:

*We have breakfast and coffee and we just talk... it’s just another forum where people can raise issues in an environment where they feel they’re relaxed... and some of the key initiatives that we have launched actually... come from the breakfast club, which is really refreshing to see.*

Some employees said they found the sessions useful to enable them to communicate more freely. *‘You’re allowed to speak about life... me personally... I feel like I speak quite openly and honestly, in that session.’* However, some employees were unaware of its existence, who attended or the purpose and aims of holding these breakfast clubs. This demonstrates the need for clear communication of such initiatives, to engage as many employees across the workforce as possible.

### **Organisational voice – improvement-focused**

Within this organisation, there was an emphasis on innovation and improvement, and therefore opportunities for organisational voice. Some of the senior managers were seeking to encourage improvement-focused employee voice. In particular, they used strategies from lean management such as Kaizen, Six Sigma and suggestions in team meetings:

*For me, that's employee voice... if they see something that's going wrong in their area or they can see a better way of doing it, give them the empowerment and the tools to be able to change and improve it.*

The organisation has also created management data improvement boards which allow people to understand their team's performance and contribute towards business improvement during meetings.

### 3 Fircroft College

#### Summary

Fircroft College has been through a large restructure that has transformed the way that they work. It was a difficult transition, as around 60% of staff left, but through this change employee voice, collaboration and involvement of all employees in having a say in decision-making has improved. They have introduced new sets of values, which they seek to embed into everything that they do, and new ways of working, including new meeting formats, which encourage greater participation and voice. They continue to experiment with new ways of working and see employee voice as central to what they do. This is perceived as a continual and ongoing process.

Challenges	Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• imbalanced power culture among a minority of employees</li><li>• developing work practices in the challenging environment of further education</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• changing the ethos of the organisation post-restructure</li><li>• developing values and gaining buy-in from staff</li><li>• changing internal communication processes</li><li>• developing a mission statement and aims</li></ul>

#### Background

Fircroft College provides further education (FE) to some of the most disadvantaged and excluded members of society and is one of the few remaining residential colleges in the country.

Founded in 1909 by George Cadbury Jr, grandson of Cadbury's co-founder John Cadbury, it is based in Selly Oak, Birmingham. Fircroft College is a small college employing approximately 50 people, including tutors, administrators, IT, cooks and cleaners. As a residential college it is more than just an education provider, functioning more like a hotel.

The college runs almost 200 short courses throughout the year, including the Access to Higher Education Diploma and higher-level professional development qualifications.

Fircroft College also builds and delivers bespoke training aimed at meeting the needs of employers and other local partners.

## Challenges

Fircroft College has been through a major restructure, which sought to overcome many of the key challenges that existed. This was understandably a difficult process, with around 60% of people leaving, many of whom had been in the organisation for years. Employees describe the outcome of this process as positive; however, it should be noted that all the employees included in this case study were new employees or employees who remained at Fircroft following the restructure.<sup>1</sup>

### **Centralised decision-making**

The organisational culture prior to the restructure was one of clear divisions between different roles, where most employees' voices were marginalised. Employees highlight that the majority of decisions were made by only four senior leaders. This had two key consequences:

- All decisions went to a small group of senior leaders, who spent all their time firefighting issues and needed to be constantly on-site to solve any issues that arose.
- This approach also created a parent–child relationship, where every decision was made by this small group, causing many of the employees to feel dependent on them to make decisions: *'Before we restructured... the culture was, we'll leave it to them really, they're the managers.'*

### **Unequal voices**

As mentioned above, prior to the restructure a small group of academics were considered by current employees to hold *'enormous power'*. The power these academics had, current employees claim, arose due to role and status they had as academics – a legacy from traditional ways of working established by the long-standing institution. This status brought with it privileges and benefits, including longer holidays and more investment in continuing professional development. However, in recent years senior leaders considered the modernisation of these roles that evolved to be more akin to FE college tutors.

A consequence of this legacy, according to the current employees, was that the division between academics and other employees resulted in silos where employees felt disengaged and excluded, and there was a lack of trust: *'I would say that the feeling of people in the organisation was that their voice wasn't heard, or represented, anywhere really.'*

These social divisions went against the core founding principles of the college, based on the Quaker beliefs of 'collectivism and community, living and working together'. According to the staff surveys, trust in management was also low and relationships across the college were bad, producing a toxic environment where 30% of the organisation had grievances within 12 months.

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that our access to this group of interviewees presents one perspective of the organisational change process. Throughout this narrative, we present the views of those currently working at Fircroft College.

## Tackling the challenges to improve employee voice

### Restructure

To tackle these issues, the college went through a very challenging major restructure. Approximately 60% of the staff left, including virtually all the academics: *'I don't think they were happy. ... People were averse to change and scared of it. And there was such a set culture that had been set for a long time.'*

The organisational changes included:

- **Rewriting HR policies to equalise all job roles:** *'There wasn't any denigration of terms. It was harmonisation. It was more bringing people up than bringing people down.'*
- **Academics redefined as tutors:** Job evaluations were conducted, benchmarking against other FE colleges, which meant that the academics' jobs were changed to tutors.
- **A newly established employee voice forum:** The old forum was seen as a place where personal gripes were put forward without much constructive action. A new forum was established, set up by HR, with new membership, remit and agenda.
- **Focus on organisational values:** Core values were developed and agreed, which were then embedded throughout the organisation.

### Equalising voice

One of the outcomes from the restructure was a shift in the way that employee voice operated throughout the college. With the redesigned tutor roles, previous power and influence held by academics no longer existed. As these powerful voices diminished, other voices started to emerge:

- **Culture shift:** with a new openness to change: *'With the restructure came a lot of new members of staff. And with [them] came a new culture. And those of us that still remained were able to still be influential within that. This cultural change released a massive surge of positivity – "a can do" sort of attitude.'*
- **Professionalisation and value-creation:** staff professionalised meetings, rebranded the employee voice forum and focused on the college values. They created new posts in areas like IT and professional services that didn't exist before, changing the structure of the college.
- **Emphasis on collaboration and communication:** the restructure broke down silos and enabled staff to work more collaboratively around joint projects: *'I'm also exposed to more things. So, for instance, the workings of different awarding bodies, actually working closely with their data. And there's lots of things that I get to work with within this new structure.'* Employees also described having a 'collective spirit' where collaboration and good communication led to 'joined-up thinking', where everyone responds collectively. Employees also meet daily to eat together, which aids informal communication and personal relationships.
- **Empowerment and responsibility:** the culture shifted from senior leaders making all the decisions towards staff taking responsibility and being empowered to make decisions. Part of this shift was to encourage more responsibility but also consider employees' suggestions more seriously. The senior leaders are no longer micro-managing and individual staff can take on more responsibility:

*We want to treat people like adults, we don't have a command-and-control culture. We want a flatter hierarchy, want people to have ownership over their own roles. So a lot of that is about employee voice and about it being heard and about the changes that go on in college being led by employees – not just communicated to, but kind of led from the bottom-up. Some of it might be operational decisions, but it would impact on the wider strategic goals in that way.*

- **Senior leaders taking a strategic focus:** as a result of employees taking on more responsibility and decision-making, senior leaders spent less time firefighting and more time focusing on strategic issues.
- **Capitalising on the organisational context:** the restructure has enabled staff to work collaboratively together and reduce siloed working. It also created a culture where employees are encouraged to share ideas: *'it's much easier to collaborate and the college uses the word collaboration a lot. It's one of the values so people are working together here.'*

### **Embedding the cultural change**

#### *Value-creation driven by the leadership*

Fircroft College has sought to embed their organisational values throughout the work they do at the college. Prior to the restructure and appointment of their new principal, Fircroft spent a long time working on their values, running engagement activities such as away days. However, it was felt that the values were not fully embedded within the organisation. This was one of the key goals of the new principal. Having the values enables Fircroft to describe behaviours and expectations so that everyone has a common way of thinking about the organisation.

The college has made the values highly visible by displaying them throughout the organisation, for example on posters and printed on staff cards worn by all employees. The values are also a central focus in meetings, policy documents and interviews. Initially the focus on values felt unnatural at times, but once familiar they found them more easy to embed in their day-to-day working lives: *'There was a period when every meeting, we took one of the values and at the end of the meeting, somebody reflected on if they had seen that value in the meeting.'*

#### *Employee voice as an ongoing accomplishment*

At Fircroft College, employee voice was more than an add-on, but rather there was a sense they were seeking to embed voice into the fabric of the organisation. It was notable that staff did not only talk about employee voice in terms of channels for voice, but also about the practices and values that shaped employee voice. Some of the channels, such as the employee voice forum, had been restructured, with a focus on the people practices that underpinned them. One of the most evident examples was the way in which meetings were structured. Fircroft had been experimenting with techniques such as 'checking in' and 'rounds' drawn from sociocracy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sociocracy *'is an inclusive method of organisational governance based on the equivalence of all members of the organisation... [that is]... the equal valuing of each individual, in distinction to valuing for example, the majority or the management more highly'* (Buck, J. and Villines, S. (2007) *We the people: consenting to a deeper democracy*. Sociocracy.info Press, pp242–49). One of the core principles of sociocracy is that *'every voice matters'* (Rau, T.J. and Koch-Gonzalez, J. (2018) *Many voices one song: shared power with sociocracy*. Amherst, MD: Sociocracy For All), so the aim is to create practices that enable everyone to be able to speak and be heard.

However, introducing these practices was challenging. Employees reported that the decision-making process feels slower and the new ways of working require learning how to best manage this process. The college acknowledges that until this becomes the norm, processes will feel difficult, awkward, or uncomfortable at times.

Fircroft is also experimenting and finding new ways to encourage voice throughout the college beyond employees – for example, rewriting their student engagement plan to develop student voice by encouraging students from different backgrounds to be represented within the college and developing their relationship with the student union.

For Fircroft College, employee voice is a long-term, ongoing process that requires hard work and flexibility. They describe it as a process of continually redefining what collaboration, voice and engagement really mean to the organisation. They have high aspirations for voice and recognise that the journey may be difficult, but worthwhile:

*So I would hope [in five years' time] that we would be able to be setting an example of a workplace that people will set as their standard, really, and won't accept anything other than that.*

## 4 NMCN

### Summary

NMCN is a rapidly growing company that has increasingly put employee voice on the agenda. They face many sector-wide challenges around voice, especially the construction industry's traditional, masculine, and command-and-control culture. They aim to make their culture more open, with increased two-way communication. To achieve this, they are taking some innovative steps – for example, using a psychologist to train line managers in new patterns of communication. However, challenges remain, as many employees reflect that it is difficult to change ingrained habits and behaviours that are industry-wide.

Challenges	Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rapidly growing company that is integrating difficult business units into one large organisation</li> <li>• divide between office and site workers</li> <li>• highly competitive market, working with tight margins and high-performance targets.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cultural change</li> <li>• communication channels</li> <li>• suggestion-box scheme</li> <li>• leadership briefings</li> <li>• site visits</li> </ul>

### Background

NMCN is a civil engineering, building and mechanical and electrical supply company. Major Terence Moyle co-founded the company in 1946 as North Midland Construction. He and his son, Robert Moyle, have both acted as chairman and CEO.

The Moyle family involvement gave NMCN long-established family values, enabling the organisation to maintain their family-run culture and ethos. While the legacy of the Moyle family continues, NMCN has grown rapidly, from around 400 employees in 2015 to almost 2,000 today. Between 2014 and 2016 the group was consolidated, bringing together the five divisions: building, highways, telecoms, power and industrial, and asset security. In 2018 the company was rebranded as NMCN, completing a transformation from a family-run firm to a PLC.

## Challenges

### **Sector-wide challenges**

Like most of the civil engineering and construction industry, the NMCN workforce faces a series of organisational structure and cultural challenges. For example, the large geographical spread of construction sites, the safety-focused culture, and tight operating margins all contribute to a unique and challenging environment for employee voice. NMCN had some specific challenges, mainly due to its very rapid growth and merging of the different areas of the business.

### **Office, site and geographical divides**

One of the key consequences of growth is the expansion across multiple divisions and geographical spread, making traditional forms of communication with employees, such as word of mouth or site meetings, more difficult. Additionally, onsite workers often have less access to computers and other technology and tend to have a lower digital literacy. Consequently, some employees feel isolated and unable to connect with the wider business.

Another critical challenge is insufficient communication between different parts of the organisation. NMCN is a complex organisation with different divisions undertaking different work. Many interviewees describe a silo mentality, and disconnection, but recognise that significant changes have occurred in recent years, as the company seeks to develop a collective brand, communication and engagement approach.

### **Tight financial margins**

Another challenge that impacts the whole of the construction and civil engineering industry is tight margins. Low barriers to entry in the construction industry can mean high levels of competition and price being a key factor when winning a contract: *'The aspirational target is 5%. I think a good contractor is doing 2%. The very good contractors are doing 3%.'* This means that construction companies have fewer resources to focus on long-term investment.

A key consequence of tight financial margins is that small issues can result in a loss, leading to a heightened control of work. The tight margins can also reduce opportunities for innovation, and opportunities for operational staff to speak up due to the lack of time and resources.

### **Command-and-control management**

A highly macho, command-and-control style of culture is prevalent across the construction industry, particularly when working in highly pressurised or high-risk situations. *'People get killed on construction sites... and people fall from heights, and all that sort of stuff is dangerous. So there has to be an element of command-and-control.'*

This command-and-control approach is said to be reinforced by the foreman and other site workers who regularly move between firms, meaning that it is harder to get organisation-specific culture. This might include the way language is used or long hours, and a tight deadline culture:

*[Some construction line managers] still conform to the old school... obviously they swear a lot and they say it as it is, but they're angry and you know about it... there's no filter... there's no consideration for how the other person may be feeling in that moment.*

Shifting such an ingrained culture is proving difficult. Lack of diversity, and high levels of mental health issues and suicide across the industry, also make culture change a slow process. *'Within construction... people are committing suicide because of mental health issues and it is because of it being this traditional industry of male behaviours that don't incorporate being supportive and emotional.'*

### **Middle-management barriers**

A commonly cited barrier for voice was middle managers and the lack of skills or training to support the management of individuals, as opposed to just having the technical skills for their role. Middle managers were said to be a barrier for voice, blocking top-down and bottom-up communication. Employees also felt unable to approach their managers with their personal issues, because they believed managers wouldn't be receptive and/or don't have the time:

*I've always found middle management is a barrier because they don't like some of the things from on-site to filter up because they think then that they're almost... 'Am I accountable here?' But again, that's the whole point of openness... I think sometimes the message that goes down can be diluted at that tier as well.*

### **Employment relationship tiers and retention**

NMCN employs different tiers of workers, with some projects requiring short-term contracts with specialist workers who are paid weekly. Permanent employees tend to be managerial, supervisor and administrator roles. In contrast, the weekly paid employees are the site operatives who do not always have access to the same communications tools and employee benefits. Also, the difference in job insecurity between the different tiers of employment can play an important role in employee voice – some employees felt concerned about speaking out and losing their jobs. Technological barriers experienced by site workers, such as having no email access or work phones to be able to interact with the business, may also affect their opportunities for voice. *'We need to give people the tools to be able to communicate with us and us to communicate with them.'*

Engagement levels between permanent and weekly employees also vary. As competition for both work and skilled employees is strong in the construction industry, making sure that the workforce is happy and productive was considered one way of gaining an edge over competitors. Moreover, NMCN was also aware of low retention and relatively high turnover at around 14%. *'Happy workforce, happy customers. I genuinely believe that if people are feeling good about the organisation that they work in, then they will deliver better for our customers.'*



## Tackling the challenges to improve employee voice

### Cultural change

NMCN is aiming to change its organisational culture through a series of strategic initiatives. These include rebranding and focusing on their values with their new motto – ‘Our people at the heart’. Driven by a key member of the HR team, they have been working with the senior leadership team to examine the links between engagement, commitment and performance. This cultural change also focuses on improving line management and behaviours by working towards two-way communication through formats such as a listening forum. While NMCN has made some improvements, it is recognised that the communication is still too top-down and cultural and behaviour changes will take time to materialise given the deeply ingrained culture throughout the construction industry: *‘It’s a culture of behaviours that have been programmed in, and it’s hard to revert to a new norm when you’ve only ever done things one way... It’s understood on one level [intellectually], but it’s not understood in practice and how that shows up in everyday behaviours.’*

### Communication channels

The need for increased communication and changing behaviours has led to an increase in channels for voice at NMCN:

- **Digital platforms**
  - **iConnect:** One strategy is using digital technologies to relay information more quickly through the workforce. NMCN now uses a system called iConnect that allows employees to find out news from different divisions across the company, seeking to bring a more holistic communication strategy to the whole organisation.
  - **Bright ideas:** This experimental initiative is a digital suggestions box where employees can enter their ideas for improving the workplace, or suggest ideas that would help to improve their health and wellbeing. Ideas are reviewed quarterly, which takes time and other resources to be able to work effectively, especially if there are many suggestions. *‘I think we have been a victim of our own success with that... because we have 550 bright ideas in two quarters and it’s how we manage that without disengaging the people who have raised them.’* The success of the scheme demonstrated the appetite for expressing organisational voice, but also the challenges involved in managing the process and the ongoing engagement with participating employees.
  - **Paper magazine:** NMCN has a paper magazine that it distributes quarterly with news and stories from around the company. NMCN decided to maintain this approach after surveying employees. The results showed there were still several employees who enjoy taking the print versions back to their families, particularly if the magazine contained a story about the work they were doing, or a project they were working on.

## **Leadership and line management**

### *Leadership briefings*

NMCN has introduced leadership briefings, where groups of employees can directly interact with the leadership team and raise issues or provide feedback about the ways of working. These meetings have resulted in the creation of new ideas and a sense of familiarity with the senior leaders, who make a concerted effort to engage with staff and to help solve problems arising on the ground.

On the other hand, some employees were less engaged and felt that attending these meetings was not part of their job. Some also found it difficult to raise concerns directly with a CEO, while others were concerned about the sessions becoming a place for disgruntled employees to complain.

### *Management by walking around*

Senior leaders described being more visible and approachable on-site to address practical issues and concerns highlighted by employees. This approach breaks down the hierarchical barriers between managers and employees, enabling managers to get an understanding of the lived reality for site workers and be more connected with them.

### *A new mentality: from command-and-control to listening and engaging*

NMCN described shifting away from the overriding blame culture of previous leaders and moving towards a new way of working. Part of this modernisation involved shifting communication and culture towards being more open, prioritising listening and responding in positive ways to problem-solving. This shift meant:

- changing communication from top-down to a two-way dialogue
- embedding a more open culture
- ensuring space for innovation, creativity, voice and action driven by empowerment.

NMCN is changing its approach to communication across the organisation. A trained psychologist who now works for NMCN has developed a programme that aims to enhance skills such as 'active listening'. This course also incorporates aspects of emotional management and the role of emotions in conversations at work. This initiative is tied to the health and safety remit of the organisation, as communication has an impact on how it deals with risk and safety issues.

## **5 Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust**

### **Summary**

Employee voice has become increasingly important throughout the NHS and particularly for Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust (NHT). The trust's recently appointed chief executive has tackled many key challenges, including a 'requires improvement' Care Quality Commission (CQC) rating, high levels of turnover, and low staff satisfaction scores. Employee voice was seen as a key mechanism to improve these issues, and changes include new board membership, the 'Freedom to Speak Up Guardian', the 'Just Culture' approach, and employee voice being a standing item of the trust's board agenda. Focusing on employee voice is a way to

encourage employees to speak up about issues they face, to improve patient safety, and ultimately to enhance both patient and employee experiences.

While this case study reflects an increased focus on employee voice, and the desire to empower staff throughout the organisation, it also highlights that transformation of a large and complex organisation takes time and requires buy-in throughout the organisation.

Challenges	Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor CQC rating</li> <li>• high turnover</li> <li>• large, complex organisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Just Culture'</li> <li>• 'Freedom to Speak Up Guardian'</li> <li>• employee voice on board's agenda</li> </ul>

## Background

NHT is a provider of mental health, intellectual disability and community healthcare services for Nottinghamshire, annually attending to around 190,000 patients. The 9,000 staff carry out a wide range of roles, providing integrated and co-ordinated care and support across 150 sites with a budget for 2019/20 of £465 million. They run services ranging from a high-security psychiatric hospital, to healthcare in prisons, through to community care.

## Challenges

### Complex organisation

One of the most notable features of NHT is the complexity, scale and range of the services they provide. NHT is spread across multiple locations from hospitals and prisons to community settings, and has a diverse workforce, including highly educated consultants through to entry-level jobs. Furthermore, they work with some of the most vulnerable people in society, often dealing with life-and-death situations, regularly in the public eye, where human error is highly scrutinised and widely reported in the media. This creates a complex and challenging work environment with high demands on employees.

This complexity is exacerbated by continual change, restructuring, individual-level services being recommissioned or decommissioned, mergers, and changes in funding, to name a few. Such changes are a regular feature of most NHS trusts; in particular, NHT faces three key challenges:

- **CQC rating** (2019) of '*requires improvement*' in three of the main five categories (safe, responsive and well-led). It was stated that '*there was a disconnect between operational staff and the board in the communication of messages and a lack of consultation and engagement*' ([CQC report](#)).
- **Staff recruitment and retention:** NHT has a vacancy rate of 11% and 14% for registered nurses ([CQC report](#)) compared with a national average of 8.5% ([ONS](#)) and 12% for registered nurses ([Nursing Times](#)), particularly due to cuts in bursaries.
- **Poor staff survey results** when benchmarked against other trusts.

## **Hierarchy and lack of trust**

NHT, like other NHS trusts, is also a complex, highly regulated organisation, with over 800 policies, procedures and guidelines. This high level of regulation demonstrates the complexity of the work and the organisational culture that underpins it. Employees felt this hierarchy and regulation, although necessary, can stifle individual decisions, and creates problems for employee voice:

- **Communicating decisions from ‘board to ward’:** Decision-making is problematic given the bureaucratic nature of this process and the levels through which decisions go before reaching an outcome. For example, messages were misinterpreted and inadvertently changed at each of these levels, meaning messages were distorted or sometimes received correctly, but the original intentions were skewed.
- **Hierarchical focus: prioritising staff grades over experience and expertise:** There were examples where employees who had years of experience and high-level nursing qualifications were dismissed because their current role was a lower grade than colleagues. This suggests that official staff grades take precedence over experience and expert knowledge.
- **Confusion and absence of direct line management:** Line managers are an important channel for voice,<sup>3</sup> however some employees stated that there was confusion over reporting structures and direct reports. As a result of both the organisational focus on grades and this uncertainty over who they reported to, staff were often reluctant, or in some cases unable, to raise ideas or concerns with their line manager.

## **Culture and lack of autonomy**

The organisation’s previous target-driven culture had led to employees feeling de-professionalised and not trusted to make key decisions or given the autonomy to do their jobs effectively: *‘There’s lots of narrative identifying, describing what the problem is, but there’s a lack of “so what”... I don’t think [we’re] giving staff permission to give things a try.’*

Employees also felt that blame culture had pervaded the trust, and the NHS more broadly: *‘So the feedback from our clinic from our doctors I would say specifically is that if they were to make a mistake or misjudgement or something like that, they expect to be blamed for it.’* Some argued that to create a genuinely safe environment for staff and service users, staff had to be free to take risks and make difficult decisions. Additionally, the trust previously undertook time and motion studies,<sup>4</sup> which were said to restrict the autonomy and professionalism of staff.

## **Tackling the challenges to improve employee voice**

NHT is undergoing many key changes, some introduced through the trust’s new leadership and others as a result of a wider focus on employee voice across the NHS as a whole. Employee voice was felt to be particularly important for an

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<sup>3</sup> For more discussion see: Shipton, H., King, D., Pautz, N. and Baczor, L. (2019) [\*Talking about voice: employees’ experiences\*](#). London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

<sup>4</sup> Time and motion studies are a scientific management technique that involves measuring how long tasks take and redesigning work to maximise efficiency (King, D. and Lawley, S. (2019) *Organizational Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). By setting how long a task should take, and the mechanisms to complete it, tasks are routinised and individual autonomy is reduced.

organisation like the NHS, to help leaders improve decision-making by drawing on a wider range of perspectives:

*Employee voice can help senior leaders, decision-makers and influencers take better-informed decisions when they're thinking about what they do in a large, busy, complex organisation, and... really be able to tap into people[s knowledge], who we don't necessarily hear from... [it creates a] different and thriving culture if you have an organisation where people genuinely feel able to speak up and be heard, and in a position to influence change.*

## Leadership

One of the significant changes the trust has made is appointing a new CEO with a clinical background and a focus on employee voice. This new leadership is shifting the trust's culture away from targets and figures towards focusing on the employee experience, particularly front-line staff. This shift in leadership is part of a larger focus on making the trust a 'great place to work', seeking to give employees more control, and focusing on wellbeing. However, interviewees acknowledged that in a large, bureaucratic and complex organisation, with over 9,000 staff, spread over diverse sites and roles, such changes would take a significant length of time to be felt on the ground: 'We know that staff voice has a latent impact on patients. So if staff feel like they're not being heard, and they're not being engaged, then you know that there's a latent patient experience and element to that.'

### *Developing new channels for employee voice*

- **Improving surveys:** Engaging employees in voice mechanisms, in particular employee surveys, can be a challenge for the trust. They have a range of surveys, many of which are compulsory, which produce great data but leave employees experiencing survey fatigue.<sup>5</sup> This is exacerbated when they feel little or no action has been taken on previous surveys. To improve this experience, the trust is exploring how to show they are listening to the feedback, and using sentiment analysis<sup>6</sup> to gain a deeper understanding of people's views and take action.
- **Employee voice on board's agenda:** Employee voice is a standing agenda in NHT's monthly board meetings. This mirrors the focus on patient voice, which has been a longstanding agenda item. The board focuses on one division per month, giving employees in that division the opportunity to directly feed back to the board. However, uptake on this is low, with only 15–20% of staff generally responding. Employees suggested this was because of high workload and staff feeling little action would be taken from their feedback. A key challenge was keeping staff engaged while changes are being decided upon and implemented, as this process can be slow for a large organisation such as NHT.

### *Individual voice – focusing on wellbeing*

There is a new focus within the trust on the health and wellbeing of staff, particularly in reducing stress and burnout. Staff absence is estimated to cost the trust about

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<sup>5</sup> Survey fatigue occurs when respondents feel tired or uninterested in completing a survey. It often occurs when there are too many surveys or they do not see that the survey results in action.

<sup>6</sup> Sentiment analysis is a form of machine learning that detects opinions and automatically analyses responses. It is useful to analyse large quantities of data, which would be highly time-consuming to analyse manually.

£20 million per annum and impacts on patient outcomes and care as well as staff wellbeing. One interviewee pointed to a report that provides evidence that a focus on staff health and wellbeing ultimately means that staff are better able to care for patients. It was felt that employee voice was important for employee health and wellbeing, specifically that employees are able to voice their needs rather than applying a one-size-fits-all policy.

### ***Moving away from hierarchy: empowering staff at all levels***

The senior leaders described improving employee voice by co-producing and co-solving problems: *'I think that the organisation has been top-down... a lot of the problems that we've got in terms of our staff experience are because [employee] voice hasn't actually been heard.'* NHT is seeking to put employees [first](#) and a key approach to this was through [Just Culture](#). This seeks to move from blame and hierarchy towards a learning culture, where understanding and learning from mistakes are central.

Just Culture seeks to empower staff at any grade to speak out, which is particularly important in the NHS where employees' grades are seen as important. For example, some of the training materials for Just Culture specifically focus on these power differentials, depicting hypothetical situations where less experienced staff challenge senior team members over breakdowns in communication, breaches of safety protocol, and systematic issues. Training examples highlight that 'speaking up' is the responsibility of all members of staff, regardless of their experience or grade.

### ***Freedom to Speak Up Guardians***

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians<sup>7</sup> are part of an NHS-wide approach to improving employee voice. The role supports employees and provides them with opportunities to explore issues that they are facing and represent these views to others. The Francis Review, which came from the failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, highlighted that nationally only 72% of respondents felt it was safe to raise a concern.

NHS reports on speaking up closely connect it with whistleblowing. Some literature and training material in this area uses the two terms interchangeably. While there is a clear connection between speaking up and whistleblowing, an interview with a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian highlighted that speaking up is about much more than this: *'It should be about being listened to and heard and embraced by everybody in the organisation. I'm not sure we've got that right.'*

While the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian offers an interesting avenue to support employee voice, employees felt the trust should work towards having a culture where everyone has the psychological safety to speak up. There was a recognition here that these changes wouldn't happen overnight and that the process of making speaking up a normalised part of working lives would take time to implement throughout the trust.

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<sup>7</sup> The Freedom to Speak Up report came about as a result of the Francis Enquiry (2010) into failings of care in the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. NHS staff were asked to share their experiences of speaking up and interviews were conducted with a sample of those who came forward. The report sets out a clear pathway for how the NHS should deal, at all levels, with concerns raised by staff. This pathway includes guidance on identifying when things are wrong, how individuals should raise concerns, how these concerns should be treated, how outcomes should be fed back, and how to reflect and move forward from this process.



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