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Research report
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Social media and employee voice:
the current landscape

future-fit organisations

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Summary

Social media allows people to connect with each other to create and share information. It is people-powered communication, an authentic dialogue motivated by a basic human desire to share information. As social media has matured, so has the ability of people to voice their opinions as customers and consumers. In turn, this has also raised people's expectations of how they should be heard inside organisations.

Despite the increasing prominence of employee engagement, employee voice still remains in the shadows and in many organisations never gets beyond the annual employee survey. Apart from transitioning to the Internet and some advances in analytical capabilities, the basic model of employee surveys has broadly stayed the same for the last 50 years. When one considers that social technologies are offering some pioneering ways of eliciting voice, it is a particularly pertinent time to review current thinking in this area.

This report argues that our conceptualisation of employee voice should not be static, but rather should evolve in line with technological and social developments. In recent years, as a result of the relentless advance of social media, employee voice is evolving rapidly. The greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication, from being one-way or two-way to being multi-directional. This has moved voice on from giving employees a say behind closed doors to enabling them to engage in an open forum. It is hard to ignore and as such is voice with muscle.

For the first time, social technologies are allowing new forms of collaboration that comprise mechanisms for making collective decisions. This aggregation is crucial in the evolution of employee voice because it is a necessary condition under which the wisdom of crowds can be harnessed. The result is a new form of collective employee voice that is mobile, organised and intelligent.

To date, much of the conversation within organisations has been about the risks and threats (especially to employers) that may be associated with social media. However, the perils of an open approach to employee voice and the benefits of more traditional closed systems are often overrated. Moreover, there is little organisations can do to stem the rise of social media. Organisations should be designing their future in employee voice, before it designs them.

Introduction

Employee voice: increasing in prominence?
Over the last century, there has been increasing recognition that giving employees a say in how they experience their work is beneficial for organisations in a number of ways. Employee voice is the most basic premise of industrial relations, protected by law and identified as the main antecedent of employee engagement. Yet employee voice is a broad term and an intricate topic. Most definitions include some reference to the 'opportunity to have a say' (Wilkinson and Fay 2011), although its meaning can vary widely and can assume various forms in practice. Voice is not just about providing the opportunity to have a say, but also about encouraging participation, using the insight obtained and about providing genuine transparency.

As with employee engagement, there is a mass of literature demonstrating the link between employee voice and various organisational benefits, which are seen to include a more satisfied, trusting, cohesive and productive workforce. However, despite the increasing prominence of engagement, voice still remains in the shadows, in many organisations never getting beyond the annual employee survey.

Policy initiatives, such as the 2004 Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Regulations, have also attempted to increase the sharing of information. By 2008, the ICE Regulations applied to all businesses with more than 50 employees. Yet the British Social Attitudes Survey shows no signs of an increase in employee involvement in decision-making over recent decades. If there has been a drive for greater involvement, it has certainly not met the expectations of employees (Bryson and Forth 2010): since 1980, the percentage of people wanting more of a say in decisions that affect them has remained stable at around 50%. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that management style in the UK has actually become less transparent in recent years. Whereas in 2008, 36% of UK employees felt that management were secretive, this rose to 41% in 2012 (Towers Watson 2012).

This is despite the fact that, over the same period, there has been an increase in the proportion of organisations conducting employee surveys, which currently stands at about three-quarters of organisations with more than 100 employees (IPA and Tomorrow's Company 2012b). The most recent CIPD *Employee Outlook* survey (2013) shows a serious deterioration in employees' satisfaction with their ability to feed views upwards. This is especially problematic in the public sector where little more than a third of public sector workers are satisfied with having a say.

The impact of technology
The conceptualisation and practice of employee voice are not static – they evolve alongside technological and cultural developments. The increasing use of employee surveys in recent years is probably in part due to it being quicker and cheaper to deliver surveys online. Moreover, when one considers the explosion in social technologies over the last five years, it is sensible to take a fresh look at these developments. Social media has profound implications when applied to organisations, because it is changing the way people interact and work and even the nature of the employment relationship.

Organisations are increasingly recognising that social media has the potential to *'enhance the ways in which employees work, learn, communicate and lead'* (CIPD 2012a). In particular, social technologies are offering some pioneering ways of eliciting feedback, making it a particularly pertinent time to review current thinking about employee voice. Social media is based on informal interactions. It is people-powered communication, an authentic dialogue motivated by a basic human desire to share information with each another. However, to date, only a minority of organisations have embraced social media as a voice channel and many, especially large organisations, are apprehensive about the in-house use of social media.

Aim of this report

This report sets out to review the existing literature on the opportunities that social media opens up for employee voice. By scoping the landscape in this way, it is hoped that this report will guide future research in this area.

Our discussion is primarily focused on *internal* employee voice (that is, what is said within organisations) although we make reference to the issue of external employee voice (for example organisational ambassadorship, which relates to employer branding). There has already been a great deal written about organisations' responses to the use of external social media by their employees, which has typically focused on misbehaviour on blogs, Facebook or Twitter.

Also beyond the scope of this review is the issue of using social media in recruitment, which is a substantial area in its own right. These areas of recruitment and external employee voice are an important part of a wider social media framework that demonstrate the blurring of boundaries between public and private life (Broughton et al 2010). However, because our current interest lies in how employees can express their views and concerns and influence decisions within the organisation, this report largely leaves them alone.

The world of social media is moving rapidly. Thus, to capture the most up-to-date thinking and practice, the literature used for this report necessarily encompasses material from sources such as blogs, discussion forums and news stories, as well as from the traditional sources of academic journals, books and industry publications.

Following this introduction, sections 1 to 3 explore what employee voice means, track the rise of social media and look at how social media is currently being used in organisations. In section 4 we then consider how social media is changing the nature of employee voice. Sections 5 and 6 look at the potential gains to be had from harnessing the 'wisdom of crowds' and, conversely, barriers to social media in the workplace. Section 7 discusses specifically the implications of social media for traditional forms of employee representation. And in section 8 we consider how employees can be encouraged to express their voice through social media.

1 The nature of employee voice

What is employee voice?

The term 'employee voice' was first coined by Albert Hirschman in 1970, who was describing those who *'suffer in silence, confident that things will soon get better'* (p38). Employee voice can relate to both large groups of employees, even whole workforces, but it can be equally applied to employees on a smaller scale (for example, within a team). In general, the term employee voice refers to the extent to which employees are *'able to have a say regarding work activities and decision-making issues within the organisation in which they work'* (Wilkinson and Fay 2011). MacLeod and Clarke (2009) explain employee voice as when:

Employees' views are sought out; they are listened to and see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate. A strong sense of listening and of responsiveness permeates the organisation.

IPA and Tomorrow's Company (2012a) state that:

Voice is about enabling conversations to take place across the whole organisation…It means that the things employees say and the ways in which they say them positively contribute to helping an organisation meet all its objectives – from the level of the immediate task being undertaken through to the strategic objectives of the organisation.

According to Armstrong (2006), employee voice has four purposes:

- it helps organisations to understand the employee attitudes about work
- it presents a form of collective organisation to management
- it influences leaders' decisions on work-related issues
- it shows the reciprocal nature of the employment relationship.

Benefits of voice

Research has demonstrated the benefits that can be accrued by giving employees a voice. In broad terms, the benefits will fall into three areas (Wilkinson and Fay 2011):

- improved employee attitudes, behaviours, loyalty and more co-operative employment relations
- improved organisational effectiveness, including increases in productivity and individual performance
- improved systems by tapping into employees' ideas, knowledge and experience and promoting greater diffusion of information.

In looking at specific studies, employee voice has been shown to enhance people's job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Employees who have the opportunity to have a say report more positive emotions, such as cheerfulness and optimism (CIPD 2012a). It can also enhance confidence and levels of organisational trust and help to foster a sense of community.

Moreover, a substantial body of literature has found higher levels of productivity and lower levels of absenteeism for employees who are given a voice in their organisation (MacLeod and Clarke 2009).

Finally, employee voice can both improve the quality of decision-making and help with the execution of organisational change. If employees are given the opportunity to have a say through genuine dialogue, they are more likely to accept organisational decisions, even if they ultimately disagree with them (IPA and Tomorrow's Company 2012a).

Employee voice and related terms

There are a number of words in the literature that are used interchangeably with employee voice – involvement, participation, empowerment and engagement – and the conceptual differences between them are not always drawn out (Parks 1995).

For example, employee empowerment is a stronger term than voice, because it assumes the ability of employees to have influence. It is also more local, as it usually refers to discretionary decisions that relate closely to job roles, as opposed to organisation-wide changes (Gifford et al 2005).

IPA and Tomorrow's Company (2012a) report that the terms voice and engagement are often confused by organisations that find it difficult to separate their thinking about employee voice from discussions about more general employee engagement activities. Voice can be considered an antecedent of the broader concept of employee engagement. Engagement is also enabled by other factors, such as a compelling organisational story, good management and leadership integrity (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). To some extent, voice can also be considered an output of engagement, in that people with high levels of engagement would be more likely to contribute voice (in particular in a constructive way).

Voice may well be a necessary condition to enhance empowerment or engagement, but it will not automatically lead to either. New technologies will continue to allow the enhancement of employee voice, but if leaders do not give up some authority or power, it may leave decision-making untouched. This is *'voice without muscle'* (Kaufman and Taras 2010) or *'spitting in the wind'* (Strauss 2006). Employee voice will only have any real meaning and make a difference if it is heard and acted upon.

Two dimensions of voice

A useful framework in which to think about the different types of employee voice is Gorden's two-spectrum model (1988). Despite being developed before the advent of the Internet, this can still be used to gauge the extent to which voice is active or passive (how much employee voice is expressed volitionally or how much it is encouraged or directed); and the extent to which the purpose of the voice is constructive or destructive. This gives four quadrants of behaviours:

- **active constructive**, including 'principled dissent', 'co-determination' and 'argument and dialectic'
- **passive constructive**, including 'attentive listening' and 'quiet non-verbal support'
- **passive destructive**, including '"I just work here" responses', 'calculative silence' and 'psychic withdrawal'
- **active destructive**, including 'duplicity', 'badmouthing' and 'antagonistic exit'.

Whistle-blowing could be considered active constructive or active destructive, for example depending on whether it is done internally, with the aim of rectifying malpractice in-house, or externally, with the aim of shaming the organisation into action. Overall the framework is useful because it highlights not only that different types of employee voice can be expressed, but also that certain types of voice are more beneficial to the organisation than others.

However, there is another dimension of employee voice that has become increasingly salient with the advent of social media. This is the extent to which voice is direct (for example, through processes such as employee surveys, suggestion schemes and discussion groups) or indirect, through the use of union or non-union representatives. We discuss this in section 7.

Employee silence

To a lesser extent, researchers have also explored the opposite of employee voice, employee silence. The theory here is that the decision to withhold information may not necessarily be governed by the same variables that cause people to speak up. Many reasons have been identified as to why employees might withhold their beliefs and opinions. These include:

- a perception that their voice will fall on deaf ears (Donaghey et al 2011)
- fear of damage to their reputation, or even retribution (Graham 1986)
- fear of isolation from colleagues (Bowen and Blackmon 2003)
- the belief that they are representing a minority (Donaghey et al 2011)
- employees' personality characteristics (Premeaux and Bedeian 2003).

While employee silence has received less attention than employee voice, it is important to consider both together. They may be conceptually different, but they remain two sides of the same coin. We consider the practical issue of how employees can be encouraged to voice their opinions in section 8.

2 The rise of social media

Social media terminology

Social media is changing the way we exchange knowledge, opinions and ideas. It represents *'a fundamental shift in the way we want to communicate'* (Martin et al 2013). There is still some uncertainty regarding the terminology used in this area, although this is not surprising given the exponential rate of advancement. In broad terms, social media is online technology for *social interaction*. This is in contrast to traditional media in which content is broadcast en masse, typically by a single organisation. Social media uses technologies that allow people to connect with each other to create and share information. *Social Media = Technology + Interaction.*

One of the issues is that no matter how we define social media, the meaning and associations that people make when they hear the term vary enormously. For many people it conjures up thoughts of public social networking sites, for example Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn. As Hunt (2013) explains, this is problematic for two reasons: firstly, it overlooks the fact that it is the underlying technology that comprises social media; and secondly, it causes people to make false assumptions about the value that social media has for employee voice. Thus, while we use the term social media throughout this report, a more accurate term would be social technology.

Some authors suggest that we must also consider the hardware (for example mobile devices) as well as the software when talking about social media in organisations. So a more encompassing, albeit cumbersome, term could be social and digital technology (Hunt 2013). While we should not get bogged down with terminology, it is helpful to recognise that advances in hardware are an equally important point to consider in discussing advances in capturing employee voice. Advances in hardware will also have an impact on how various communications channels are accessed and used.

The advance of social media at work

Social media has become an important feature of many people's personal lives: it is estimated that 60% of all Internet users access some form of social networking site (CIPD 2012a). As social media has matured, the ability of people to voice their opinions as customers and consumers has also grown. The days of consumer surveys and feedback forms are all but gone, as social media platforms are enabling dissatisfied customers to complain rapidly and vociferously.

Research shows that two-thirds of customers think that social media is a better way to communicate with companies than call centres, with 68% believing that it gives them a greater customer voice (Paternoster 2012). As Smith et al (2011) put it, social media has *'provided individuals with a voice in public space'*.

Many organisations have responded to and helped shape this shift and are now using social media as a way to win consumer trust and brand advocacy. Allowing customers to express their opinions, preferences and ideas about products and services can enhance an organisation's level of productivity directly. But interestingly – and of more relevance to this report – it has also had the effect of raising people's expectations of how they should be heard *inside* their organisations.

Until recently, most organisations' social media strategies had been outward looking, focusing on customers and consumers while neglecting an important audience: their own people. However, employees' increasing desire for using social media in their working lives and the organisational benefits to be had from this will change this completely. It is not unreasonable to propose that by 2020, many organisations will be wholly reliant on their internal social network (whether that be a 'Facebook-like' internal social network, or something different). The internal social network stands to become as essential as telephones and email are today (Gose 2013).

3 The use of social media in organisations

To understand how organisational life is being affected by new social media, it is useful to consider two different perspectives. Firstly, we can distinguish between broad categories or patterns of collaboration or interaction that are emerging. These are the underlying social processes that can be observed in the use of social media. Secondly, we can look at how social media is applied to specific organisational practices, systems and processes across the employee lifecycle. These perspectives are covered in turn below.

Categories of social media use

Bradley and McDonald (2011) identify six broad emerging patterns of collaboration under which organisations are using social media:

1 **Expertise location** allows people to identify the right expert or solution from an organisational community, making it faster to tackle various business issues.
2 **Collective intelligence** is where people in online communities can discuss and contribute to different subjects through channels such as blogs, 'wikis' and discussion forums.
3 **Emergent structures** are organisational networks of hidden virtual teams who are communicating with one another via an internal channel that leads to the emergence of a new unplanned online structure. Studying these groups gives an insight into how colleagues interact informally and how they look to get their job done more effectively and/or efficiently.
4 **Interest cultivation** uses blogs, online forums and social feedback platforms to bring like-minded people together, creating a community of people with similar interests and increasing engagement with a particular topic.
5 **Mass co-ordination** is when a community is created quickly with the aim of spreading messages virally. A well-known version of mass co-ordination is 'flash mobbing', where people assemble in a public place for an ad hoc performance.
6 **Relationship leverage** is the act of maintaining and getting value from an extensive number of online relationships. This is driven by posting on blogs and social networking websites, a prime example of this being Twitter.

Utilisation across the employee lifecycle

Another perspective on workplace uses of social media looks at how it is used within the various organisational systems, processes and practices that comprise the employee lifecycle. To some extent, these overlap with the categories outlined above.

In addition to the area of employee voice, which is the main focus of this report, social media is being used in the following areas:

- **Career development:** technologies that allow employees to create and maintain their own organisational profiles can help employees develop themselves and manage their own careers.
- **Induction:** organisations are starting to use social media to assist in supporting employees who are making transitions into new roles and responsibilities, as well as learning the culture of the organisation and the way in which things are done (Willyerd 2012). An online community can be created for new and recent hires, with information and signposting, as well as chat and discussion features that allow them to help each other navigate their initial experiences.
- **Project management and knowledge-sharing:** for example, tools that allow people to work together on a number of projects and have the capacity to track their activities and successes. Face-to-face meetings and agendas can also be set up collaboratively via its team-working aspect (Semple 2011). Participating in social media channels can assist colleagues in sharing their knowledge and experiences and help them manage their projects more effectively (CIPD 2012a).

- **Agile working:** with the increasing number of communication channels and faster Internet speeds, more and more employees are now able to work remotely.
- **Reward and recognition:** some organisations now use social media in recognition schemes in the form of platforms where people can be nominated for awards. Although such schemes have traditionally run annually and often been associated with length-of-service awards, more frequent programmes recognising achievements are seen as a more motivating way of rewarding employees (Lupfer 2011). Employees can also use social media to obtain up-to-date information on employee benefits and rewards (Keefe 2011).
- **Product development/innovation:** social media plays a huge role in innovation as it allows collaboration on a mass scale. This allows crowdsourcing to occur, by which different groups of people who may be internal or external to an organisation are presented with a problem and possible solutions are put forward and evaluated by the community (Sambhi 2012). Another advantage is that brainstorming can be done on a continuous basis instead of only during a planned session. This allows for individual differences. For example, people are creative at different times of the day and some are most creative in a particular environment (Viskovich 2012).
- **Internal communication:** social media has revolutionised the way that employees communicate with each other by making the communication process more interactive and engaging (CIPD 2012a). Internal social networks allow for two-way, or in some cases, multi-way conversations between people who couldn't normally collaborate with each other. Internal networks stimulate engaging conversations from all levels of the organisation, from the executive board to front-line employees. In addition, social media platforms can *'promote leadership transparency by conducting regular Q and A sessions online or having leaders comment on different employees' statuses'* (Cornelius and Radlund 2011).
- **Learning and training:** social media can contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of employee learning and development – for instance, delivering training via social channels such as blogs, videos and 'wikis' (Zielinski 2012). Many organisations have implemented online learning systems that include videos, online help chat and discussion forums to train and engage employees.

4 The impact of social media on employee voice

Traditional voice channels

Before the advent of the Internet, organisations had to rely on suggestion boxes, employee hotlines, face-to-face meetings and surveys as a way for employees to raise and express concerns. The origins of employee surveys date back to the 1950s, but it was not until the late 1960s that employee surveys started to become prevalent in the workplace. Pioneers of employee surveys believed they had the potential to improve organisations. They viewed the survey as an opportunity for employees to come up with suggestions and to let management know what they really thought (Walker 2012).

There is no doubt that the employee survey was a hugely important innovation. But since its introduction, apart from transitioning to the Internet and advances in analytical capabilities, the basic model of surveys has broadly stayed the same. Produce a questionnaire, encourage participation, crunch the numbers and report back the findings.

The problem with employee surveys

Despite employee surveys being the most common method used to generate employee voice, there are several problems with this approach (Silverman 2012). Firstly, at the most basic level, surveys can be extremely boring to complete, especially when the same set of questions are used year after year.

Secondly, because senior managers love the simplicity of numbers, there's a huge over-reliance on standardised tick boxes, particularly the notorious agree/disagree Likert scale. The focus on quantitative scores means that leaders can often get distracted by historical, sub-group and external comparisons, rather than focus on the real task at hand: acting on the results. Moreover, survey reports solely comprising metrics often make it very difficult for leaders to obtain any meaningful insight to initiate an effective action plan.

Thirdly, surveys – as with the majority of employee voice channels – are initiated by management. This can be problematic because management can still be seen as *'the cold hand that grips most organisations and chills the human spirit'* (Bradley and McDonald 2011, p28). It's popular nowadays for organisations to brand surveys with misleading straplines like 'Have your say!' 'It's your Shout!' or 'Talkback!', sometimes even when there are no open-ended questions. Whether a survey comprises tick boxes can be considered *'giving employees a voice'* is debatable. Employees' creativity and insights cannot be captured effectively via voice channels that are heavily controlled by management. This is where social media opens up new opportunities.

Fourthly, if any open-ended questions are included, most organisations have historically been poor at analysing unstructured written data – and for many, this remains the case. More recently, advances in text and sentiment analysis have started to change this. Text analysis has become increasingly prevalent due to more and more organisations wanting to understand the large amounts of data produced from social media channels. Indeed, a number of companies are using text and sentiment analysis to glean insight from internal social networks such as Yammer, Chatter and Jive. This 'social listening' allows organisations to tap into spontaneous conversations that are already happening (as opposed to conversations that are directed by the organisation).

This brings us to the final problem with surveys, which relates to speed. Surveys cannot capture the voice of employees in realtime. As Fairhurst (2011) puts it, *'Why would you wait months to understand the mood of your employees, when in just a few seconds you can understand reactions to what is happening, not what has happened?'* Organisational trends can develop quickly if left undetected, and no matter how frequently organisations conduct 'pulse' surveys, they will never be able to provide feedback in real time with a traditional survey approach (Cvent 2011).

Encouraging employees to express voice

Employee 'silence' and declining response rates pose a serious challenge for organisations: how can voice channels be made interesting enough to engage employees in a meaningful dialogue with management? Technological advances in graphical user interfaces (Faridani et al 2011) and 'gamification' (CIPD 2012b) provide more engaging ways for employees to express their opinions about various work-related issues.

Social media that use these techniques have huge advantages over the lists of comments that are collected on traditional discussion forums and message boards (Newhouse 2012). Linear lists of comments have various limitations, the worst being that they can quickly grow to overwhelming proportions. Without a means of effective navigation, many comments may not ever be read, meaning that people do not have an equal chance of being heard. Coupled with over-simplistic thumbs-up/thumbs-down or five-star ratings, lists hide the true diversity of opinion that exists, favouring early birds or those with extreme views.

Interactive visualisations also provide a compelling and engaging experience for participants who can themselves get instant and authentic feedback, therefore increasing participation rates. Research has shown that we are more likely to comply with requests (such as participating in research) if we find the task intrinsically rewarding – for example, interesting or purposeful (Nahai 2012).

On a related note, recent research demonstrates that there is a clear demand from employees for social media to be used more for internal communications and organisational development. Wadee (2013) reports that UK employees want more communication with senior leaders via social media channels: 42% of people would be happy to interact with their manager on Facebook and 20% would be happy to tweet the head of department or senior leaders. Similarly, Towers Watson (2012) report that nearly a fifth of UK employees use internal social media tools in a work context at least once a week (for example blogs, discussion forums or internal social networking platforms).

Patterns of communication: two-way versus multi-directional

Traditional conceptualisations frequently make reference to the two-way communication that needs to exist between employees and their organisation for employee voice to be generated effectively (for example CIPD 2009). Social media is, however, changing the *patterns* of communication within organisations – communication is no longer a monologue, but rather a conversation over which the organisation has less control. The crucial point here is that communication, via social media, has become multi-directional – it provides a space where people can 'shout out' their comments (CIPD 2012a). In this way, it is not just senior leaders that get to listen to employee voice, but everyone in the organisation. It prevents employees giving feedback in isolation, which gives rise to an increasingly networked, less structured and less hierarchical voice channel.

In fact, the terminology of social media has also changed in line with this change in conceptualisation. As Hunt (2013) points out, in the past it was an essential requirement to tag '2.0' to terms such as Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 to demonstrate the social media shift from static one-way communication sites to collaborative multi-directional communicative social media channels. It seems less important today because social technologies have become an integral part of various digital platforms.

This change in the pattern of communications has two huge implications for employee voice. Firstly, it provides *a richer* employee voice. It is social media's ability to give employees an opportunity to have their say *in an open forum* that is challenging current conceptualisations of voice. This is vital because employees' knowledge of what happens to the information that they provide can impact not only whether someone speaks up, but also the quality/richness of the voice that is elicited. After all, who wants to produce a carefully constructed answer only for it to disappear into the corporate ether?

Second, it provides a *more authentic* employee voice. Social technologies that allow people to read and rate each other's comments are able to identify comments that resonate the most with that community. Aggregation, a mechanism to transform individual comments into collective decisions, is a necessary condition for crowds to be intelligent (Surowiecki 2004). The process of peer-reviewing comments means that organisations can now aggregate responses in a different manner. In effect, this works as a devolved form of text analysis, whereby employees are each shown a number of different comments and asked to rate them on a number of different criteria. These evaluation scores are then processed statistically to identify the comments and themes that resonate most with that particular employee population. This is in contrast to the high-level aggregation of employee voice that is typically seen in organisations – that is, aggregating individual survey responses to produce an overall employee engagement score. Aggregation is discussed further in the next section.

5 The wisdom of crowds

Defining the wisdom of crowds

Employees possess a huge amount of knowledge and experience that, if captured correctly, can make a big difference to an organisation's decision-making. According to Surowiecki (2004), people have limited foresight into the future, are often unable to make sophisticated cost–benefit calculations and tend to let emotions play a role in decision-making. Yet, when individuals come together, the crowd's collective brain can often be smarter than its most intelligent members. Social media has facilitated capturing the wisdom of crowds for dealing with various business challenges. This is because, prior to the arrival of social media, it was less feasible for large groups of employees to participate in single brainstorming sessions (Viskovich 2012).

Exploration of crowd intelligence stems from the British scientist Sir Francis Galton. At a livestock exhibition in 1906, Galton observed a competition where people had to guess the weight of an ox. At the end of the contest, Galton gathered all the guesses and calculated the average guess. The crowd's estimate turned out to be near perfect (the crowd's estimation was 1,197 pounds and the ox's actual weight was 1,198). Galton referred to this as the *'collective wisdom of the crowd'*: the fact that groups of people can be more 'intelligent' than an intelligent individual and that groups do not always require intelligent people to reach a smart decision or outcome.

Related crowd concepts

The concept of the wisdom of crowds has given rise to a number of related crowd processes and behaviours that are commonly used in organisations. Crowdsourcing can be defined as the *'act of outsourcing the job of an employee to a large group of people'* (Sloane 2011). It can be differentiated from the wisdom of crowds because it refers to the process of solving or discussing problems in a group rather than the output achieved by the crowd.

Crowdsourcing can provide organisations with an insight into outside ideas, leading to better innovative techniques for tackling various business issues. Howe (2009) identifies four main types of crowdsourcing:

- **collective intelligence** (as mentioned in section 3): this is the original 'wisdom of crowds' where the purpose of the group is to exchange knowledge and generate ideas
- **crowd creation:** the creation of the products and services
- **crowd voting:** judgements from crowds are used to organise large amounts of quantitative information
- **crowd funding:** where people can invest money into various business ideas and projects.

Groups of people need rules to function coherently and they work well under certain conditions, which Surowiecki (2004) calls the four essential conditions required to harness the wisdom of crowds. These are:

- **diversity of opinion:** each member of the group should have some private information
- **independence:** people's opinions should not be affected by the opinions of others
- **decentralisation:** people should have the capacity to specialise and extract from local knowledge
- **aggregation:** there must be mechanisms that transform private judgements into collective decisions.

The importance of aggregation

To some extent, social media has affected each of the above, yet it is the impact on aggregation that offers the most potential in terms of employee voice. Aggregation refers to the mechanisms (that is, collaboration, co-ordination, co-operation and committees) that can transform individuals' responses to collective decisions (Surowiecki 2004).

There are two main ways of aggregating information or knowledge. The most common way of reaching a collective decision is by adding all of the individual responses together. For example, a survey provider can create an employee engagement score for the organisation by totting up individual survey responses.

However, advancements in technology have allowed new means of aggregation to emerge. In particular, through social media, large groups of employees can read and rate each other's responses to a particular question. From these ratings, it is possible to identify which comments (and which themes) resonate most with the community. As a result, the message provided to leadership is not shaped by an individual analyst or team of researchers; it is shaped authentically by employees themselves.

Aggregation in social media marks such a shift because aggregators can be used to help *shape* employee voice, as well as represent and analyse it. It is only through these new technologies and algorithms that we are starting to see, for the first time, genuinely bottom–up, large-scale and collective opinion forming, rather than employee responses to questions that reflect the constraints of managers' or researchers' thinking.

6 Barriers to using social media for employee voice

Organisational barriers

It is worth reviewing the barriers and risks that organisations face in embracing social media practices for employee voice because both cultural barriers (for example leadership and transparency) and structural barriers (for example systems and channels) need to be addressed before employee voice can be optimised.

A number of barriers to implementing social media practices for use in people practices have been identified by research. For example, some of the most significant barriers include (Silverman and Newhouse 2012):

- a lack of knowledge and understanding about the wider uses of social media, how online communities can be effectively mobilised and what can be done in practical terms to facilitate implementation
- fear and apprehension caused by uncertainty, an inability to control the communication process and dealing with the increased transparency that comes with transitioning power away from managers to employees
- insufficient attention given to engaging employees in implementing social technologies, especially in maintaining engagement post-implementation and addressing cynicism
- organisations not trusting employees to use social media responsibly and preventing employees taking forward social media initiatives
- issues associated with moving to new ways of communicating, especially in managing the flow of information when communication becomes multi-directional as opposed to one-way or two-way; and properly communicating the purpose of social media tools
- senior management lacking skills and awareness about social media that stifles their view of tangible organisational benefits, prevents leaders from driving cultural shift required in moving from a top–down hierarchical culture to a transparent culture that fosters openness and honesty.

The last issue regarding the importance of leadership is particularly important and is outlined in more detail in the next section.

The role of leadership

All of the barriers outlined above appear to have one thing in common: they exert their influence either as causes or consequences of leadership inaction and a resistance to change. A common theme to emerge from the literature is that leadership in the digital era necessitates a different way of doing things, a new mind-set. However, as noted previously, leaders often lack the necessary skills and awareness about social media that stifles their view of tangible organisational benefits, prevents them from driving change and makes them dismissive and distrusting. Similarly, Martin et al (2013) found that introducing social media to encourage employee voice may not always have the desired outcome and that the success of such programmes are largely dependent on factors external to the technology itself.

Yet unlike many organisational initiatives, leaders do not necessarily need to own or champion community collaboration; they just need to understand it, maintain a close eye on the business benefits and support the approach (Bradley and McDonald 2011). In terms of leadership, this means finding an approach that is befitting of the notion of 'Digital Era Leadership' – for example, embracing change, being open to experimenting, demonstrating transparency, working collaboratively and creating dialogue (Hunt 2013).

Related to this, some authors argue that the skills required to make the most of social media are actually causing organisations to develop valuable leadership strengths. If social media genuinely can make organisations more agile, innovative and interactive, *'then we should stop wringing our hands about whether to let employees watch YouTube at work, and focus on ensuring all of us are leveraging social media to become our best selves'* (Clark 2012).

Organisational risks

There are two main ways in which social media usage by employees can cause problems. The first is revealing work-related misbehaviours, such as posting photos of oneself on a boozy night out and then calling in sick. The second problem is reputational, when employees post comments or opinions that their organisations do not want to be associated with, for instance criticising the management of the company or its products or services (Broughton et al 2010).

In addition to this, there is the threat of cyber-bullying, where employees post negative comments about their colleagues on social networking sites. Social media also has the power of distributing critical business information to competitors. Leaked secrets can damage an organisation's bottom line. Much of the talk in organisations has concerned controlling usage through social media policies and there is now a good deal of material on this (Broughton et al 2010).

There must always be a balance between preventing employees from making disapproving comments about their employer and allowing them the freedom to speak up about genuine issues at work. This is where one can potentially enter the world of whistleblowing and corporate gagging orders. The key is for employers' responses to the risks of social media to be proportionate to the context. Generally speaking, there should be a balance. It makes sense to have rules against employees putting proprietary information on social media sites. But equally, a draconian 'lock-down' mentality will almost always be counterproductive. Social media is one of the main vehicles for collaboration and information-sharing today and, where possible, employees' engagement with it should not be hampered.

7 Social media and union voice

The decline in trade union influence

Trade unions are the most prevalent arrangement through which employees' interests are represented at work. Historically, they have been seen as the best channel to provide voice because of their independence. Collective employee voice via trade unions helps employees to speak up about work-related issues that they may find difficult to do as individuals, for example through fear of being penalised (Bensen and Brown 2010).

However, recent data from the Workplace Employment Relations Study (van Wanrooy et al 2013) shows that over the last 30 years there has been a significant decline in union membership. In 2011, the percentage of all workplaces with any union members was just under a quarter. Similarly, the prevalence of joint consultation committees (groups of managers and employees concerned with consultation) has also dropped, with only 7% of organisations having such groups. Coupled with the previously mentioned increase in staff surveys, one can see an increasing focus on individual voice to the detriment of collective voice. But the decline in trade union membership clearly does not mean that employees have a decreased appetite for voicing their opinions.

Unitarist and pluralist views of employee voice

The study of unions has raised some important theoretical considerations with regard to employee voice. Most common has been the distinction between *unitarists* and *pluralists* (for example, see Cradden 2011). While unitarists view employment as a relationship within a single social group that shares a common purpose, pluralists view employment as a strategic relationship between strangers who have competing aims and therefore cannot form a single social group. Thus, conflict in the employment relationship can be characterised either as a natural state or simply as a consequence of misunderstanding.

This has clear implications for employee voice. From a unitarist perspective, it can be argued that employee voice can lead to positive impacts on quality and productivity, while from the pluralist perspective, it could highlight and help find solutions to workplace problems (Gollan and Wilkinson 2007). But from either perspective, employee voice can be considered invaluable.

The implications of social media for unions

The relentless advance of social media brings into question some serious legislative and moral issues for both organisations and unions. It also provides new opportunities to communicate with employees on an individual and collective basis. As Smith et al (2011) note, *'In this new digital social space the rules are still developing, and the implications for workplaces are still emerging.'* One of the main implications of social media on unions is its capacity to organise and co-ordinate individuals. This is because of the inherent features that comprise social media:

- **reach:** the ability to communicate with a huge number of people
- **accessibility:** the availability to anyone who can use a computer or a smartphone
- **immediacy:** social media can reach its users instantaneously
- **co-creation:** social media can be adapted or enhanced almost instantaneously through user comments, editing or content submission.

With these in mind, the increasing connectivity of individuals means that they are able to operate and achieve what once was the exclusive domain of large centralised organisations. In organised industrial disputes, social media has the power to rapidly organise and mobilise employees, even when they are geographically or temporally dispersed. For example, in the East Lindsey Refinery disputes, much of the organising was done via websites and SMS messaging (Smith et al 2011).

Given the decline in union membership, social media also has the potential to connect with a new generation of prospective members. Indeed, as Smith et al (2011) contend, despite being slow on the uptake of social media, unions are starting to wake up to its potential.

Most organisations that have shunned or ignored social media have been lucky in that, to date, employees familiar with social media have not been highly organised. But that will doubtless change in the future.

Bradley and McDonald (2011) use the term 'social union' to define a collaborative online community whose main focus is to create social and economic change. The increased organisation of these communities might well give employees more weight to throw about in the organisations of the future and this should not be seen as a bad thing. 'Social swarms', where people congregate temporarily online around a shared objective and then disperse, will become more common within and across organisations.

Marc Wright, chairman of Simply-communicate, illustrates this point well (see Walker 2012). The shipping and delivery company, UPS, was slow to implement an internal social network, so employees set up their own external site where they could discuss any work-related issues they wanted. UPS then attempted to create their own internal network, but, as one might expect, they were largely unsuccessful in converting employees to the in-house site.

What if, in the future, this external UPS site grew in numbers, not only with employees, but customers too? Could this group become highly organised? What if those employees managed to monetise and start recruiting members who paid a subscription for lawyers and lobbyists? What if they used other external social media sites to give UPS a bad name and decrease sales?

Clearly, there are lessons here for employers too. Employers must wake up to the fact that, if they do not move on social media and help shape it, they will be overtaken by it and find themselves on the back foot. In a recent example, the music retailer HMV was subjected to an embarrassing ordeal when their official Twitter account was used by an angry employee who 'live tweeted' from a mass redundancy meeting (Holmes 2013). Such was the lack of media savvy of senior leadership at HMV, they hadn't thought to secure their Twitter feed. *'We're tweeting live from HR where we're all being fired! Exciting!! #hmvXFactorFiring',* stated the first tweet. Over the course of the meeting the tweets went viral, eventually making the headlines in every major newspaper.

There are still many uncertainties about the impact of social media on employee relations. In particular, it remains to be seen whether the adoption of social media will help stem the decline in union membership or conversely make trade union organisation less relevant for employee voice. For unions as well as employers, it seems there is a lot to be gained from being in the vanguard with social media and thus in a better position to help shape it. But both employers and unions should reflect on how social media can be used to reinforce, rather than undermine the employment relationship. Social media offers an opportunity to address weaknesses in the traditional model of collective consultation (for example, poor feedback mechanisms and lack of employee interest) and this should be grasped.

8 Encouraging voice via social media

Participation cannot be taken for granted

We have already reviewed the barriers that organisations face in embracing social media practices. However, encouraging and maintaining participation in online discussions is one of the greatest challenges for any online community, especially those inside organisations. In this last section, we explore the issue from the employee's perspective. Once social media has been established within an organisation, what makes employees more likely to use it to express their opinions? What are the risks to employees? And what can organisations do to encourage participation?

IPA and Tomorrow's Company (2012b) offer some data about barriers to accessing employee voice. With regards to reasons for non-participation, their survey found that managers typically point the finger at employees themselves: a third of managers highlighted a lack of employee response to voice initiatives, and just over half of respondents cited employee cynicism as the main barrier to eliciting voice (it is not clear to what extent they thought this cynicism was justified).

What encourages employees to voice their opinion?

One might expect that employees who are enabled to express voice online would feel more liberated to speak freely, without fear of ridicule. But this is not necessarily the case. Bishop (2007) distinguishes between two broad types of participants in online communities: 'elders', who are regular and active members of the community, and 'lurkers', the more observant members who tend not to participate in discussions. So what factors play a role in whether someone is an elder or a lurker?

First, research has shown that senior managers play a significant role in creating the right conditions for employee voice, especially because they typically have the authority to choose which issues are addressed (Burris 2012). There are a number of factors concerning management style that come into play, for example, how managers respond to suggestions and how employees perceive the manager. In face-to-face interaction, if a manager is perceived as approachable, employees are more likely to speak up because there is more to be gained (it is more likely it will have an impact) and less risk that their image will be damaged. Burris (2012) argues that managerial factors are most prominent when traditional voice channels are used, such as discussions around a table with senior managers, as these are more likely to be face-to-face.

Second, people will only speak up when they feel it is safe to do so. Reducing the perceived risk of speaking up is not only important to drive engagement and innovation, but also to ensure that whistleblowers feel protected. One way of making employees feel safe in speaking up through social media is to have platforms that allow anonymous contributions to be made (Burris 2012).

However, an advantage of forcing users of social media to be named is that it becomes largely self-regulating and reduces the risks associated with inappropriate comments. Further, there are benefits in fostering a transparent culture in which employees trust the organisation enough to express their views, whether they are invited to offer their views or do so of their own volition. Indeed, the Government has recently announced its intention to increase the protection offered to whistle blowers, so that they will have protection from bullying or harassment by their co-workers, as well as by their organisation. It is therefore a matter of the organisation weighing up the pros and cons of allowing anonymity and judging the sort of culture it wishes to promote.

Third, as with employee surveys, if employees feel that their suggestions are unlikely to be read, they will be more likely to feel that input is simply wasting time. Therefore, there needs to be a clear explanation of what will be done with the comments once they have been submitted. Clearly, leadership are sometimes unable to act on the suggestions of employees, or take the decisions that employees propose. However, the act of asking employees for their input in the first instance makes it more likely that they will be accepting of the outcome, irrespective of

whether it was the decision they wanted. An explanation from leadership as to why certain suggestions cannot be actioned should always be offered to employees who have taken the time to make them. Organisations have no problem doing this for customers and consumers, yet it is rarer for organisations to get back to employees in this way.

Fourth, employees are much less likely to speak up in the future if they do not receive due recognition when their ideas or comments are actually implemented. Simply recognising someone who has a workable idea that is actually implemented can give a huge morale boost to that individual (CIPD 2013).

Fifth, individual differences in personality influence how likely employees are to speak up (Bishop 2007). Having more channels of open communications and, therefore, more opportunity to put forward an idea will increase the likelihood of lurkers becoming more active members. For example, in addition to organisation-wide initiatives such as surveys, organisations can consider building in opportunities for employee voice as part of formal performance reviews, as well as informal one-to-ones with managers, meetings and knowledge-sharing forums.

Sixth, Martin et al (2013) also point out that contextual factors can also affect whether voice is expressed. These might include the external economic environment, employment prospects in other organisations, employee engagement levels and the nature of internal communications within the company.

There are a range of factors that can influence the successful implementation of social media and determine whether someone will be a lurker or an elder. Clearly, there are some issues that organisations are unable to influence, such as the personality of individual employees. However, encouraging a culture of openness, explaining what will happen to the feedback and communicating subsequent action will all encourage employees to participate.

Conclusion

This review has explored a number of issues that relate to the use of social media to elicit employee voice, the conclusions from which are drawn out below. The report also raises a number of questions about the future of employee voice and these are outlined alongside suggestions for future research.

The novelty is wearing off

For a number of years now, much of the business literature has referred to the novelty of social media in organisations, for example describing it as being *'in its infancy'* or *'at the beginning of the curve'* (CIPD 2012a). Clearly, social and digital technologies will continue to evolve. Yet at the same time, they are firmly embedded in our society and have permeated a significant number of organisations. Social media affects even organisations that have been slow on the uptake, whether they realise it or not; indeed, whether they like it or not.

There has to come a time at which the novelty of social technologies in organisations wears off, when it is just thought of as *normal*. We are not far from that stage and some pockets are already there. Social media usage in people's personal lives increases daily across the globe, regardless of demographic characteristics, and people are becoming increasingly comfortable with using these technologies at work. It follows, therefore, that organisations should be designing their future in this area, before it designs them (consider, for example, the UPS example mentioned in section 7).

This report has argued that the conceptualisation of employee voice is not static – it evolves in line with technological and cultural developments. In recent years, as a result of the relentless advance of social media, the evolution of employee voice is advancing rapidly. The greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication, from one-way and two-way to multi-directional. Consequently, this has moved voice on from giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say *in an open forum.* Employee voice is becoming much more a question of *who's listening?* Is it the person looking after the employee survey? Maybe a group of senior managers? Or is it everyone in the entire organisation? One could argue that the collective employee voice expressed through social technologies is much more likely to have influence because it is more likely to be heard. This is people-powered communication. It is hard to ignore. It is voice with *muscle*.

Leadership and culture

Within organisations, openness and transparency will be the vital business characteristics that will make all the difference in the coming years. In the same way that machine technology forced the rise of mass production in the industrial revolution, social technology is driving us headlong into the age of mass collaboration and mass transparency. For many leaders, this appears not to have sunk in yet. It seems that many leaders are yet to be convinced of the potential value that an authentic employee voice, through social media, can deliver. This is because the perils associated with a more open approach and the benefits of more traditional systems are often overrated.

We have argued that convincing leadership is the most significant barrier to overcome in using social media to elicit employee voice. But what can be done to convince leaders of the benefits of an open approach? Is it simply a matter of educating leaders what it actually means to be a leader in the digital era? How will generational changes in leadership affect how employee voice is generated in organisations? And what impact will the ascent of the 'millennial' generation into positions of power have on employee voice? After all, this cadre of leaders will have been brought up on social media.

Traditional employee surveys

The basic model of employee surveys has broadly stayed the same for the last 50 years. This report has argued that, although they have been a key step in the enhancement of voice, employee surveys have been severely limiting. With their focus on response rates, metrics and external benchmarks, they have often distracted leaders from what they were supposed to be doing in the first place: listening to employees.

It is common nowadays for organisations to brand their employee surveys with strap lines that clearly allude to voice, sometimes even when there are no open-ended questions! As new conceptualisations of employee voice spread, what will happen to employee surveys in the future? Will response rates plummet as employees increasingly see surveys as a measurement tool for senior managers? Will surveys become more qualitative in nature? Will they be supplemented by more real-time monitoring of unstructured text and sentiment on internal social networks? With the capability of employees to provide detailed feedback at any time through social channels, will surveys become redundant, considered a quaint feature of organisational life in a pre-social media era?

Related to this, further research is desperately needed on the impact of social media on the quality and quantity of comments that are expressed, in particular compared with collection via traditional channels such as surveys. Are more comments likely to be made? Are these comments lengthier and richer in content? Is the underlying intent more constructive or destructive, and more or less extreme? And how is the sentiment contained within comments affected by the medium?

Social channels for employee voice

It is clearly important for organisations to have a range of voice channels that are available to employees. At the moment, however, the problem that many organisations face in using social media is that a number of employees may not have access to computers or a work email address. While computer literacy is much less of a problem than it used to be, the issue of accessing social technologies at work will continue to be a challenge for years to come. To overcome this, some organisations have computer rooms or shared Internet kiosks for non-office-based staff. However, it is likely that mobile technology will fulfil the need of universal access in this area. The use of social media through smartphones is already pervasive in society. As the cost of these technologies cheapens, it is not hard to foresee that almost all employees, whether office based or not, will be given a work smartphone. This is likely to enhance the practice of eliciting employee voice through social media.

The use of internal social networks such as Yammer, Chatter and Jive is growing daily and this raises some important questions. Will internal social networks really become as indispensable as smartphones and email? If so, will people become utterly reliant on them, unable to unplug, burdened as they are with mobiles and emails? In the future, organisations will increasingly be monitoring, analysing and extracting insight from employees' conversations on internal social networks. Will employees start to open up on internal social media? Will the sort of things they discuss be useful to organisations? Or will it make employees even more likely to clam up and become lurkers, in the knowledge that every word they type is being monitored by Big Brother?

Equally, at what stage will the firewall break down as organisations become increasingly fragmented and boundaries blur between contractors, consultants, suppliers, partners and employees? It would be useful for future research to explore what it is that employees are discussing on internal social networks. Is it honest and candid information about their experiences at work and how things can be improved, or is it more about what people ate for breakfast?

The wisdom of crowds

For the first time, technology is allowing new forms of collaboration that contain mechanisms for making collective decisions. This is crucial in the evolution of employee voice because it is a necessary condition under which to harness the wisdom of crowds. But how will the process of aggregation change in the future? What can HR and internal communications functions learn from disciplines such as neuropsychology, decision sciences, cybernetics and systems biology?

There is clearly much more to come from aggregation than employees simply rating each other's comments and suggestions. Will different methods of aggregation be able to shape the collective voice effectively and, more importantly, will employees always be right? If we see a growing trend to democratise the workforce, to what extent will this increase organisational performance? Will the rise of group decision-making in organisations cause

more subtle problems to emerge? There are, of course, circumstances in which groups are not wise and make terrible decisions, and there are many examples of this in both organisations and wider society. A key question, therefore, is how will the employee voice tools of the future be susceptible to social phenomena such as group think and social herding?

The future is...unknown

The fact that social and digital technologies are advancing so quickly makes it difficult to predict where things will go next. It remains to be seen which aspects of organisational life will be most disrupted by social media. It is also exciting to consider what further technological developments will enhance voice. An obvious contender here is speech recognition: why spend time tinkering away on a keyboard when employees can simply speak as much as they like about their experience of work and how it could be improved? But what about other potential methods of assessing employee opinion, such as monitoring facial expressions or neurological activity? Can these even be considered as voice?

There is no doubt that drastic changes are afoot to the way in which employee voice is expressed within organisations. Yet, however voice channels and the conceptualisation of employee voice change in the future, one hard truth remains: if it is not heard, it is not genuine voice. This is the principle on which organisations should base their voice systems, irrespective of the channels they use.

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sustainable organisation performance

Future-fit organisations is one of the three themes in our Sustainable Organisation Performance research programme. The other two themes are stewardship, leadership and governance and building HR capability. Within each of these themes we will research a range of topics and draw on a variety of perspectives to enable us to provide insight-led thought leadership that can be used to drive organisation performance for the long term.

stewardship, leadership and governance

future-fit organisations

building HR capability