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14 Nov 2017

Employee voice

Learn about employee voice, its purposes and use, and the benefits it can bring to an organisation and its workforce

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Employee voice is the means by which employees communicate their views to their employer. It's the main way employees can influence matters that affect them at work. For employers, effective voice contributes toward innovation, productivity and business improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development.

This factsheet explores what employee voice means and the different perspectives and purposes of voice initiatives in an organisation. It looks at the legislative background to employee voice and the UK's position in relation to its European neighbours. It also outlines mechanisms for implementing voice initiatives in an organisation through upward problem solving and representative participation. Finally, it takes a closer look at the benefits effective employee voice can bring to an organisation and its workforce.

CIPD viewpoint

Giving employees an effective voice is a fundamental element of treating them as legitimate stakeholders in the employment relationship and helping them feel valued. It provides a way for individuals to have control over what happens to them at work. Effective employee voice helps to build open and trustful relationships between employers and their people, and can contribute to organisational success. People are more likely to show commitment to the organisation if they have a voice, and sharing views can lead to greater innovation, problem-solving and productivity.

Having a meaningful voice is critical to both better experience and outcomes at work. However, this is becoming more challenging as the nature of the employment relationship and workforce are increasingly diverse. In the context of modern working practices, we need a new framework for voice to enable workers and employers to fully benefit from sharing of expertise, ideas and opinions. Traditional approaches to employee voice tend to view it as a means to an end of improving organisational performance. Understanding the human nature aspects of voice, and considering outcomes for workers such as well-being and fulfilment, can create shared value for organisations and their people.

At the CIPD, our 'Sounding Board' is a group of representatives from across the organisation who meet every two months to represent the views of their colleagues. We use an ongoing 'pulse' survey tool which gauges at any time our employees' views on a number of key factors within the organisation. We've also appointed a staff member to sit on our Remuneration Committee. Our Diversity and Inclusion Group captures the commitment and support of people across our organisation to make this a truly inclusive place to work.

What is employee voice?

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Employee voice is the means by which people express their opinions and have meaningful input into work-related decision-making. In their [seven layers of workplace productivity \(http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5461\)](http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5461), Acas define strong employee voice as 'informed employees who can contribute and are listened to'. To enable a genuine two-way exchange between employers and their people, it's important that management listen to and act on employee voice.

Voice is used in different ways in organisations, such as employee involvement/ participation in decision-making, and as a central pillar of employee engagement (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/engagement/factsheet/>). Employee voice can appeal both to those seeking business improvements and to those pursuing employee rights. Our future of engagement (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/engagement/future-report/>) work suggests that organisations that seek to promote voice are those that believe that ‘employees want to contribute to the business’ and that ‘for employees to have an effective voice, the important part of the communication process is not what the employer puts out but what it gets back. Good managers recognise that much of the knowledge required for businesses to be competitive is actually in employees’ heads’.

More important than focusing on the type of voice practice/ mechanism is the nature of the process, its intended purpose and meaning, and the moral standpoint that underpins it. For example, is employee voice seen only as a means to maintaining positive employee relations and driving engagement, or does it have inherent value as a fundamental right of individuals? In practice, employee voice continues to be approached from the instrumental point of view of value in achieving business objectives. Our [Best to good practice HR](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/hr/good-practice-report/) (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/hr/good-practice-report/>) research found that a quarter of practitioners said that the principle 'People should be able to influence the decisions that affect them' is one that they never apply in their decision-making, or they merely see it as a 'nice to have'. Voice was seen as a mechanism to reduce negative outcomes for workers, rather than as a proactive way to include people in the decision-making process, contributing to engagement and well-being.

Systems and legislation for employee voice

The United Kingdom: collective bargaining and joint regulation

Collective bargaining has been seen as necessary to give employees a say in decision making (in organisations with formally-recognised trade unions) and the emphasis has been on managing the conflict between employees and employer. As union membership has declined so has collective bargaining, although it remains influential particularly in the public sector.

In continental Europe there is more emphasis on employees having a formally-recognised role in the management of companies. Germany has a system whereby employees in large companies elect representatives to a supervisory board in which they have one third of the seats. The employees also elect a worker director, who has a seat on the main board but can only vote on matters concerning employees. Smaller German companies have a single tier board with a worker representative.

This model has spread to other European countries, with variations. Sweden, for example, has a one-tier board system with co-determination, whereby employee representatives hold seats on the board of directors. Because it is widely used across Europe, co-determination has also had an impact on the European Commission's terminology (for example 'social partners') and policies (especially on European Works Councils).

In the UK, co-determination hasn't developed nearly as much as elsewhere in Europe. During the Conservative leadership campaign in 2016, Theresa May raised the prospect of putting workers on company boards, but has since ruled out forcing businesses to do so.

Joint consultation

Joint Consultation Committees (JCCs) exist in organisations to address issues that are not covered by collective bargaining. JCCs consist of management and non-management representatives. In unionised organisations, the trade unions typically provide the employee representatives, but JCCs also run with non-union employee representatives. JCCs do still exist in many organisations but have declined as organisations have moved their emphasis to direct communication.

The 2011 [Workplace Employee Relations Study](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/3/c/0414-joint-consultative-committees-under-the-information-and-consultation-of-employees-regulations-A.pdf) (<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/3/c/0414-joint-consultative-committees-under-the-information-and-consultation-of-employees-regulations-A.pdf>) shows that from 2004 to 2011 the incidence of workplace-level JCCs has remained constant in the UK, but higher-level JCCs have become less common. This has been seen as a waning of employee influence in some of the most significant decisions. It is also consistent with the increasing decentralisation of HR management to individual workplaces in multi-site organisations.

Recent legislation

The legislative changes of the 1980s left British workers with fewer rights in terms of workplace consultation than their counterparts in other EU member states, and before 2005, British organisations were only required to inform and consult employees on specific issues such as health and safety, collective redundancies and pensions.

The Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations 2004, based on an EU Directive, now place wider obligations on employers, though [in general their impact has been limited](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32158/10-1380-information-consultation-ice-regulations.pdf) (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32158/10-1380-information-consultation-ice-regulations.pdf). Further, European Works Councils, which bring together senior managers and employee representatives from a number of sites, have introduced international consultation for multi-nationals operating across Europe.

[Whistleblowing](https://www.cipd.co.uk/443/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/whistleblowing/factsheet/) (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/443/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/whistleblowing/factsheet/>) is increasingly recognised as an effective means for employees to communicate important messages to employers. Employees have had protection from disciplinary action or victimisation for whistleblowing since 1998 and it's important for organisations to recognise its value and support its use.

In the referendum on 23 June 2016 the UK voted to leave the EU. For information on what Brexit could mean for employment law, visit our [Brexit hub](http://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/brexit-hub/) (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/brexit-hub/>).

Mechanisms of employee voice

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There's a range of different and often complementary mechanisms for employee voice. We distinguish two groups: upward problem-solving and representative participation.

Upward problem-solving

Managers can use a range of techniques to directly tap into employee ideas and opinions to improve work processes. Techniques include:

- **Digital media** – seeking and discussing questions or ideas via electronic means, for example, by email. Increasingly, social media is being used in this way through enterprise social networks (ESNs).
- **Two-way communications** - face-to-face discussions between managers and staff for whom they have responsibility; for example, through regular meetings every few weeks.
- **Suggestion schemes** – under which employees put ideas to management, who then reward those whose ideas are implemented.
- **Attitude surveys** – questionnaire-based surveys designed to gauge employees' experiences and views of particular aspects of work.

- **Working groups** – employees brought together on a regular or ad hoc basis to discuss specific organisational issues.

Many of these mechanisms are formalised, but informal mechanisms can be a very effective form of voice, particularly in the use of social media or ESNs through which employees can converse with colleagues at the same time as giving their opinions to management.

Representative participation

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

- **Collective representation** – negotiations between senior management and employee representatives (usually but not exclusively union representatives) leading to joint regulation of pay and other conditions of employment. These can be periodic in the case of pay, but continuous or ad hoc in the case of other matters, for example grievances.
- **Partnership schemes** – employee representatives and employers emphasise mutual gains and tackling issues in a spirit of co-operation, rather than through traditional adversarial relationships. This includes a high commitment to information sharing.
- **Joint consultation** – to consider issues that are deemed to be of common interest or of key importance to the parties, at non-union as well as unionised workplaces.
- **Employee forums** – groups of non-union or mixed groups of union/non-union employees meeting with management for consultation and information sharing.
- **European Works Councils** – see above.

Benefits and success factors of employee voice

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Benefits for employers

With a greater voice for employees:

- employees' skills and knowledge can be better used, leading to higher productivity, greater innovation and solutions to problems
- employees feel more valued, so they are more likely to stay and to contribute more
- conflict is reduced and co-operation between employer and employees is based on interdependence
- organisational effectiveness can be improved by listening to staff who interact with clients and customers day-to-day.

Benefits for employees

Employees benefit from:

- having more influence over their work
- higher job satisfaction
- more opportunity to develop skills
- improved well-being.

Success factors

Factors that make for effective employee voice are:

- **Leadership** – without active commitment from the top, initiatives will not succeed. Managers at all levels need to lead by example for employee voice to become part of the organisation's culture, while employee representatives (whether union officials or others) must also be effective leaders of those they represent – find out more in our [leadership factsheet \(http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/leadership/factsheet/\)](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/leadership/factsheet/).
- **Training** – managers used to a top-down hierarchical style of communication may find it difficult to adapt to a more open way of doing things and may need to be trained in communication skills. Similarly, employee representatives can benefit from training to shift from an often reactive, adversarial mode of communication (as in negotiation) to a more proactive style focusing on mutual gains.

- **Trust and openness** - honesty in communications, even when messages may not be palatable, is important for building trust, which in turn is necessary for employees to voice their views. Breaking a commitment to openness can very quickly break trust which has built up over a long time.

Further reading

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Books

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Members and *People Management* subscribers can see articles on the *People Management* (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/>) website.

This factsheet was last updated by Louisa Baczor.



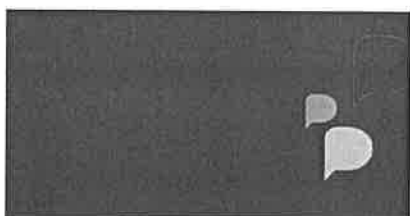
Louisa Baczor: Research Adviser

Louisa joined the CIPD in 2015, specialising in research for the CIPD's Profession for the Future programme. This research explored what it means to be a professional, key drivers impacting the future of work, and how practitioners apply ethical principles when making people management decisions.

Louisa's current research is investigating the future of voice in the workplace, and how organisations can enable people to have a meaningful voice at work. Prior to this, she worked on workplace well-being, employability, and professional identity streams.

With an undergraduate degree in psychology, Louisa studied the changing roles of HR and impact on trust during a Master's at the University of Bath.

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