



Finding a Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations

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CHAPTER

7 The case for workplace partnership

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Abstract

The decline of trade unions in recent years has raised important questions about the future of employee voice. In Britain, many commentaries have been pessimistic, especially regarding the prospects for a revival of unions in the private sector. The most appropriate strategies for union revitalization have divided opinion, and have often been presented as a choice between ‘organizing’ and ‘partnership’. This chapter argues that partnership is a strategy which can be successful at the workplace level in a liberal market economy like the UK. Partnership is also consistent with what many employers and workers prefer, and the only model of unionism the state is likely to support. While partnership is no panacea, the central argument is that partnership merits serious consideration and potentially has a much wider reach than critical commentators believe.

Keywords: [union renewal](#), [partnership](#), [labour–management partnership](#), [organizing](#), [trade union](#), [neopluralism](#), [pluralism](#), [human resource management](#)

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Introduction

For many years industrial relations scholars have normally associated employee voice with employee representation, and especially representation through formal industrial relations institutions such as trade unions, joint consultation, and collective bargaining. For much of the twentieth century, voice in Britain was synonymous with trade unions. The central idea is that the inherent imbalance of power between most individual employees and their employer means that independent collective representation is likely to be more effective and safer than speaking up individually. However, the decline of trade unions over the last thirty years in Britain has raised important questions about the future of employee voice. Union membership has fallen from a peak of 13 million in 1979 to around 6.5 million today, or around 26 per cent of all employees (BIS 2012). Union decline has been particularly severe in the private sector where trade union representation is now very much the exception to the rule; only 14 per cent of employees are union members compared to 57 per cent of their public sector counterparts. In 2011, 6 per cent of private sector workplaces bargained over pay for some of their employees and one sixth of private sector employees have their pay set by collective bargaining (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). This is compounded by the evidence which suggests that even where unions continue to be recognized they are increasingly 'hollowed out' (Millward et al. 2000). This has led to vigorous debates in both policy and academic circles regarding the future of trade unions. Many commentaries are pessimistic regarding the prospects for a revival of trade unions, especially in the private sector. Howell (1999: 26), for example, declared that 'British trade unions are in crisis' and a report by Metcalf (2005: 28) concluded that 'the future for private sector unionisation is bleak indeed...perdition is more likely than resurgence'.

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The most recent Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) confirms divergence between employment relations in the public and private sectors in several areas, including patterns of employee voice (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). But is the decline of unions a problem for employment relations and worker voice in the private sector? It could be argued that most modern employers now recognize the value of 'good' people management, employees enjoy a range of individual employment rights, and might also have access to an array of alternative employee voice mechanisms. Trade unions are thus superfluous: either relics of a bygone era when workers were at real risk of exploitation from unscrupulous employers but which no longer applies in advanced economies, or more critically as destructive forces. Of course most employment relations specialists would reject such unitarist arguments as ill-conceived, oversimplistic and naïve at best, or as a ruse to further bolster managerial prerogative at worst. An employment relations perspective generally rejects viewing the employment relationship as a straightforward economic exchange. The employment relationship is believed to be multifaceted, with various social, psychological, legal, and political dimensions (Colling and Terry 2010). Labour is not simply a commodity which can be traded on the free market like any other resource, and maximizing 'economic efficiency' is not the only goal. A pluralist approach recognizes the potential for both overlapping and divergent interests in the employment relationship, as well as a power relationship which is normally tipped in favour of employers. Representative participation is considered to be important in order to redress this imbalance. Constructive and cooperative employment relations are believed to be possible but by no means automatic, and again representative participation can help lubricate workplace relations. From this perspective, union decline is a worrying trend for both workers as well as the overall shape of the societies in which we live.

The prospects for union voice in the private sector are likely to depend upon a combination of external factors, such as state policy, as well as internal factors such as union strategies, policies, and actions. However, the most appropriate strategies for union revitalization have divided opinion in recent years, and this divide has often been presented as a choice between a 'partnership' approach on the one hand, and an 'organizing' approach on the other (Heery 2002; see also Simms, this volume). The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the notion of workplace partnership. The central argument is that partnership is a strategy that merits serious consideration

and has a much wider potential reach as a model of employee representation in the private sector than many critical commentators suggest.

p. 155 The chapter is structured as follows. I begin by exploring the meaning of workplace partnership given the ambiguous and contested nature of the term. The second section then evaluates polarized conceptual debates regarding partnership, and in particular the contrasting views of industrial relations radicals and pluralists regarding the viability and desirability of partnership approaches to employment relations. The third section then assesses the prospects for partnership, and the extent to which partnership may represent an opportunity to revitalize and reconstruct collective employment relations by regaining employer and employee support. The chapter ends by briefly considering the merits of alternative approaches to workplace partnership, such as union organizing. The focus of the chapter is primarily upon the prospects for workplace partnership in the context of the British private sector, where the development of partnership has normally been argued to be the most challenging, and where union decline has been most acute.

What is workplace partnership?

Partnership was once described as ‘an idea with which almost anyone can agree without having a clear idea what they are agreeing about’ (Guest and Peccei 2001: 207). It has also been described as terms which have become ‘too diffuse to carry much meaning’ (Oxenbridge and Brown 2004: 389). It is therefore important to attempt to clarify at the outset exactly how workplace partnership is interpreted, especially as the term is often used in an ambiguous way with the precise meaning dependent upon the user (Bacon and Storey 2000). Despite this fluidity, several common themes can normally be discerned. In its most general sense, workplace partnership can be used to refer to a *particular style of collective employment relations*: a style associated with an explicit emphasis upon fostering cooperative workplace relations and an attempt to avoid or at least minimize adversarial and conflictual relations, especially in unionized settings. Huzzard et al. (2004) describe this as the difference between ‘boxing’ and ‘dancing’, while Harrison et al. (2011: 412) define partnership as ‘agreements between competing actors who deliberately choose to co-operate instead of maintaining adversarial relations’.

Though perhaps capturing the spirit or guiding philosophy of a partnership approach, this interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, it could be argued that it views partnership as an employment relations outcome (for example, cooperation) but reveals little about the policies, practices, or processes associated with the approach. An emphasis upon shifting from conflict to cooperation means partnership can be interpreted as a unitarist philosophy which downplays the potential for conflict and seeks to galvanize unions, employers, and workers around a vision of collaborative and harmonious employment relations and mutual gains. The philosophy of partnership may have little appeal to unitarists who assume cooperation to be the natural state of organizational life, requiring strong leadership and communication rather than developing relationships with trade unions.

p. 156 However, from a pluralist perspective, disagreements and conflicts of interest are a normal and inevitable part of organizational life. Differences of interests are believed to be both inevitable and legitimate, and the aim is to promote constructive dialogue which provides the opportunity to pre-empt and resolve differences of interest when they do arise and before they spill over into outright conflict. The partnership model of unionism is concerned with an attempt to reconcile inherent social and economic tensions (Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2002). The key proposition is that it can be both economically effective and socially responsible for unions and employers to work together on important issues such as organizational change, and that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For pluralists, partnership recognizes potential differences of interest; however, all parties are believed to have some common interests including the sustainability of the organization, and that in part hinges upon fostering positive employment relations. So partnership may represent an aspiration to construct high-trust and cooperative employment relations even if it is not fully realized. It also raises

several other questions. If the employment relationship is characterized by ongoing and dynamic tensions between conflict and cooperation (Edwards 2003), what do 'cooperative employment relations' look like? Does partnership require a wholesale shift from adversarial and arms-length relations to cooperative relations? Would periods of conflict mean the failure or end of partnership? Such questions highlight the weaknesses of simply viewing partnership as a management style or a cultural characteristic.

Partnership is more than an employment relations style or philosophy with aspirations of cooperation. In more tangible and practical terms, partnership is normally associated with a particular set of *HR policies, practices, and commitments*, and these policies are helpful in understanding how a partnership might translate into particular HR systems 'on the ground'. Typical HR practices include commitments to some degree of job security, workforce flexibility, and employee voice. In some respects these may be viewed simply as a repackaging of the various HR policies and practices typically associated with 'best practice', 'high performance work system', and 'high commitment management', or more prosaically as 'good personnel management'. However, from a pluralist perspective, workplace partnership differs, in part because it is underpinned by the philosophy of reciprocity and mutuality. As a result, proponents of workplace partnership usually stress the importance of representative participation as an essential part of employee voice. Some US commentators prefer the term 'mutual gains' (for example, Kochan et al. 1986; Kochan and Osterman 1994) because it:

Conveys a key message: achieving and sustaining competitive advantage from human resources requires the strong support of multiple stakeholders...employees must commit their energies to meeting the economic objectives of the enterprise. In return, owners must share the economic returns with employees and invest in those returns in such a way as promotes the long-term economic security of the workforce.

(Kochan and Osterman 1994: 46)

- p. 157 Despite this broad agreement concerning management style and HR practices, there is still some debate regarding the prerequisites required to qualify as a *prima facie* case of workplace partnership. One matter of contention is whether partnership requires a *formal* 'partnership agreement' or whether an informal identification with the approach is sufficient. For example, Bacon and Samuel define partnership as 'formal collective agreements to enhance cooperation between employers and independent trade unions and staff associations' (Bacon and Samuel 2009: 232), thus excluding the possibility of more informal workplace partnerships. It is estimated that 248 formal union/management partnership agreements were signed between 1990 and 2007, covering 10 per cent of all British workers (Samuel and Bacon 2010). Clearly there are merits to establishing some boundaries and a formal agreement between unions/staff associations and management seems sensible, otherwise any organization could claim to be 'working in partnership'. Again, this reinforces the challenges of viewing partnership in more nebulous terms as a 'cooperative culture'. On the other hand, it does seem feasible that some organizations may exhibit many of the day-to-day characteristics of working in partnership, but without a formal agreement. Similarly, is workplace partnership only possible in unionized organizations? To be sure, much of the research evidence and almost all of the high profile cases of partnership focus upon arrangements in unionized environments, yet as Ackers et al. (2004: 16) state in relation to participation more generally, 'it seems unreasonable and sociologically unproductive to rule out non-union forms before examining the evidence'. *Workplace partnership* can also be contrasted with other uses of the term 'partnership', such as the John Lewis partnership in the UK, which is more concerned with a particular system of financial ownership as opposed to a model of employment relations. Finally, workplace partnership can be contrasted with the *social partnership* associated with several continental European nations, and which represent a distinctive tripartite and institutionalized approach to national policy issues such as skill, training, and employment strategy. Workplace partnership focuses more upon the nature of the relationships and interactions between individual employers and trade unions operating within a voluntarist framework.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is proposed that a more useful conceptualization of workplace partnership is as both an overarching employment relations style and philosophy, as well as a particular (and more tangible) bundle of HR policies, processes, and outcomes. In terms of practices, employee voice is central to all definitions of partnership, but especially representative participation, normally involving trade unions. In terms of processes, partnership is usually associated with a highly consultative style of decision making, requiring early consultation and an opportunity for employee representatives to genuinely influence decisions.

p. 158 This style is related to a particular form of actor relationships requiring high levels of trust and ↪ openness. Employment relations outcomes, such as cooperation and high levels of trust, might be key aspirations of partnership which need to be explored empirically, but are not an integral component of partnership per se. Partnership may concern an attempt to achieve these outcomes irrespective of whether or not they are achieved. It is proposed that it is this particular framework of mutually reinforcing philosophies, practice, and process which underpin a prima facie case of workplace partnership (see Johnstone et al. 2009).

Conceptual debates

Workplace partnership has divided opinion and generated contentious conceptual debates. The most vocal critique of partnership has come from those writing from radical industrial relations and labour process traditions. From these perspectives, the idea of labour management partnership is simply fraught with inherent contradictions and paradoxes, as the interests of employers and unions are so sharply opposed. Radicals note how workers are simultaneously a cost to be controlled as well as a resource requiring investment, and how the balance of power in most capitalist workplaces is typically heavily skewed in favour of the employer. This renders attempts at 'partnership'-style relations deeply contradictory and naïve. As Danford et al. (2005) state, 'partnership cannot mask irreconcilable conflicts of interest that are prime characteristics of capitalist workplace dynamics'. The fundamental dynamics of capitalist societies simply undermine any meaningful notion of workplace 'partnership' between workplace actors. As Kelly (1996: 88) argues 'it is difficult, if not impossible to have a partnership with a party who would prefer you didn't exist'. This perspective assumes employer hostility to trade unions and a desire to protect and preserve managerial prerogative. By implication, developing partnerships with unions is likely to be a low priority for employers unless it offers some other attraction, such as an opportunity for employers to contain unions within tightly defined parameters.

Moreover, the nature of contemporary political economy and capitalist relations is likely to hinder attempts at fostering long-term collaborative relations, characterized by mutual trust and employment security, envisaged by partnership advocates. Even where employers are not actively hostile or seeking to exploit workers, the dynamics of modern capitalism mean even good-willed and well-intentioned employers 'cannot keep their promises' because of the preponderance of short-term financial concerns at the expense of long-term societal concerns (Thompson 2003, 2011; see also Simms, this volume). By implication, the notion of mutual gains is little more than an ↪ illusion, and even where some gains are seemingly achieved, they are likely to benefit employers more. As a consequence, it is argued that the reality of partnership is likely to be a compliant model of unionism, which makes it more difficult for unions to demonstrate credibility or effectiveness to members and potential members. For IR radicals, the 'counter-mobilisation thesis' stresses an irreconcilable and fundamental antagonism of interests between workers and employers, meaning militant forms of unionism are more appropriate than the 'moderation' strategies supported by partnership enthusiasts (Kelly 1996, 1998).

p. 159 Assessments of partnership by IR pluralists have tended to be more equivocal. The political nature of the employment relationship means pluralists are sceptical about the likelihood or capacity of employers to balance countervailing tensions without regulatory mechanisms and institutional support setting out some basic 'rules of the game' (see Heery, this volume). Pluralists also believe organizations are characterized by complex tensions which need to be managed in order to reconcile different opinions and keep conflict within

accepted bounds, though they differ from radicals in their perceptions of the nature and extent of class conflict and power imbalance in society and work (Ackers 2014). The key challenge is the effective regulation of employment and the representation and moderation of these different interests (Johnstone and Ackers 2014). Some regulation of behaviour is believed to be necessary in setting out fundamental rules employers are required to follow and clarifying expectations they must meet. For many years, classic IR pluralists assumed institutions such as trade unions and collective bargaining were the most appropriate process of employment regulation, combined with state policies and employment law where necessary. However, the decline of unions in recent decades means unions are no longer a taken-for-granted part of the employment relations scene in many private sector workplaces (van Wanrooy et al. 2013), leading to important concerns regarding the appropriate means of regulating the contemporary employment relationship.

One option is a relegitimation of trade unions based upon proactive partnership relations (Ackers and Payne 1998), but industrial relations pluralists are divided regarding the potential reach, feasibility, and sustainability of the partnership model. On the one hand, radical-pluralist commentators, which Ackers (2014) describes as the mainstream perspective for British and European industrial relations scholarship, tend to be pessimistic regarding the potential development of enduring partnership relations in Britain, especially in the private sector. This is not necessarily because they are ideologically opposed to partnership per se, or because they think partnership is inherently and inevitably flawed, but perhaps because radical pluralism has a default bias towards conflictual rather than cooperative dimensions of the employment relationship, rather than the other way round (Ackers 2014).

p. 160 For example, Heery (2002) suggests that the British business environment provides a lack of incentive for employers to pursue partnership, due to corporate governance systems which prioritize short-term performance and shareholder value, rather than developing long-term cooperative relationships with the workforce. In addition, a focus on cost reduction, a desire to preserve managerial prerogative, as well as a weak HR function and default bias in favour of individualistic human resource management (HRM) are all barriers to the spread of partnership. Where unions are recognized, the priority may be keeping traditional but narrow relations. As Heery concludes, 'The dominant characteristics of British business, therefore, seemingly do not furnish an environment in which a union strategy of partnership can flourish' (Heery 2002: 26). Similarly, Simms (this volume), suggests that meaningful and sustainable partnerships require specific conditions to be successful. Key ingredients are likely to include a strong commitment from the corporate centre to partnership working, as well as a business model and labour management strategy which is not predicated upon cost minimization. Such environments might offer a favourable context for the development of a high-trust partnership relationship. However, Simms is concerned that the dominant contemporary financialized capitalism means that such favourable contexts are likely to be very rare in the private sector. Again, building on Thompson's (2003) notion of 'disconnected capitalism', the argument is that even where managers *are* able to build good local relations, these are always at risk of disruption and derailment by decisions made by the corporate sector rendering any partnership relations precarious and fragile. In short, the antagonistic nature of the employment relationship, combined with short-term systems of corporate governance, are not believed to offer the conditions required for partnership to flourish or become widespread (see also Heery 2002). As a result, alternative approaches to union renewal such as union organizing are generally recommended (Heery and Simms, this volume).

In contrast, a *neopluralist* perspective suggests greater grounds for optimism regarding the prospects of workplace partnership. This perspective acknowledges the potential for conflict over both the processes of employment regulation and the distribution of employment outcomes, but is more sanguine about the potential to reconcile these tensions through proactive partnership relations characterized by commitments to joint working with the aim of achieving mutual gains (Johnstone and Ackers 2014). Budd (2004) notes how the aim of 'striking a balance' between competing interests is central to the pluralist frame of reference, and that the normative agenda of IR pluralists and their preferred public policy responses can be described as those

which facilitate an attempt to balance the interests of individuals, stakeholders, and institutions. This is compatible with the ‘mutual gains thesis’ which rejects the view that collective employee representation must be an adversarial zero-sum game, and stresses the prospects for mutually $\hookrightarrow$ beneficial collaboration and problem solving, as well as expanding the agenda to include issues such as job quality, work-life balance, and employee well-being. It also rejects the view that representative participation and trade union representation inevitably damage productivity or contribute to high levels of conflict. The core argument is that it is better to encourage stakeholders to work together to ‘increase the size of the pie’ and to resolve tensions before they spill over into conflict, rather than focusing on the distribution of gains and conflict resolution which tends to dominate in a more adversarial pluralist model (Cooke 1990; Kochan and Osterman 1994). In short, neopluralism is much more positive about the potential scope for the development of cooperation at work (Ackers 2014).

Prospects for partnership

Given the contested conceptual debates outlined above, which lead to us very different conclusions regarding the prospects for partnership, it is useful to now consider some of the research evidence in order to shed some empirical light on the processes and outcomes of partnership in practice. The most fundamental criticism of partnership is that it is highly unlikely to achieve the putative mutual gains suggested by more optimistic analyses. However, a review of the extensive research evidence suggests that in certain circumstances partnership can deliver gains to stakeholders (see Johnstone et al. 2009 for a detailed review). Though the specific benefits identified vary between studies, several benefits can be discerned for different stakeholders. For trade unions, the potential gains of a partnership approach have included greater facility time, access to a wider range of information, access to senior decision makers, improved consultation, stronger relationships, enhanced legitimacy and negotiating position with employers, an increase in perceived union effectiveness, employee support, and in turn higher membership and greater worker commitment to the union. Studies also report how partnership has allowed trade unions to extend their sphere of influence beyond a traditional but narrow focus upon issues such as pay and conditions and discipline and grievance, into broader issues of HRM such as work organization and organizational change. Reported benefits for employees have included enhanced work-life balance, reduced stress, increased job satisfaction, opportunities for employee voice, job security, higher wages, increased opportunities for participation in decision making, work autonomy, job security, and flexible job design. Finally, the more positive studies of partnership also identify various gains from the employer perspective including greater employee commitment and productivity, enhanced product/service quality and innovation, lower $\hookrightarrow$ industrial relations conflict, lower absenteeism and labour turnover, support for change, flexibility, and higher levels of trust (see Johnstone et al. 2010b; Oxenbridge and Brown 2004; Whyman and Petrescu 2013). In many ways, these have the potential to be mutually reinforcing as the mutual gains thesis suggests. For example, partnership can help improve the general industrial relations climate, in turn improving firm competitiveness and financial performance, leading to greater job security for employees and an increased membership base for trade unions.

However, not all analyses of partnership identify such positive results. For example, Kelly (2004) found that while employers appeared to benefit in some ways from partnership, there were negligible gains for workers or trade unions when evaluated against criteria such as wages, hours worked, holidays, or job losses. Employee gains were only found to be achieved where unions were strong, and where the firm was performing well. His findings in relation to wage levels, influence in the company, and employment security were negative. Various other studies also find very little support for the mutual gains thesis, and suggest a range of negative outcomes that are actually more likely including difficulties demonstrating union effectiveness, greater distance between unions and their members, work intensification, job insecurity, and labour outcomes no better than non-partnership firms (see for example Danford et al. 2005; Kelly 2004; Upchurch et al. 2008). Much of the interest in mutual gains appears to relate to the balance of advantage, or the issue of who gains most. From this

perspective, even broadly positive studies of partnership report evidence of ‘constrained mutuality’, suggesting that while employees may well stand to benefit from partnership, typically the ‘balance of advantage’ will be tipped in favour of the employer (Guest and Peccei 2001). Whether or not this represents a problem is where ideological differences emerge, with radicals generally seeking gains which flow equally to employers, employees, and unions, while pluralists take the view that the aim is one of levelling the playing field and having sufficient influence to make a difference. Much depends upon the criteria we employ to judge the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of partnership, and what we believe the process is supposed to achieve (Johnstone et al. 2009).

Nevertheless, the mixed nature of findings suggests that some of the arguments of the most ardent partnership critics may be overly deterministic. Instead, they lend support to the view that partnership outcomes are contingent upon a range of conditions which determine the favourability of the context to partnership working and moderate the outcomes. Much will depend upon the precise configuration of strategic, structural, and institutional factors (Butler et al. 2011). In other words, it is too simple to dismiss partnership as a strategy which cannot deliver mutual gains in a liberal market economy, because in some cases partnership does seem capable of generating mutual gains. However, the partnership research also suggests that there is no straightforward or automatic cause and effect relationship. In practice, it seems partnership is neither intrinsically ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ as the divided conceptual debates imply, and suggests that in supportive contexts partnership can deliver positive outcomes to a range of stakeholders (see for example Johnstone et al. 2010a, 2010b, 2011). The key issue, then, becomes one of developing our understanding of the factors associated with the success and failure of partnership, in order to consider how and whether these seemingly exotic ‘islands’ of partnership and cooperation can be transfused across the private sector economy.

Of course, this assumes that private sector employers would be receptive to notions of partnership, or amenable to the idea of working with unions, yet a key criticism is that employers generally do not want to work with trade unions, in part because there are very few incentives for them to do so. This would suggest that there are limited opportunities to develop partnership across the British economy, and attempts by unions to promulgate the partnership model are likely to encounter employer resistance. Undoubtedly, from an employer perspective, debates concerning employee voice have evolved in recent years, and for the majority of private sector employers voice no longer necessarily means working with trade unions or indeed engaging with any form of collective employee representation. Post-war terms such as joint consultation, industrial democracy, and collective bargaining have been superseded by a new managerial language of employee involvement, empowerment, and employee engagement. Even where unions are present ‘local union representatives—shop stewards—are not the negotiators or co-authors of “joint rules” that we have typically taken them for since the late 1960s’ (Terry 2003: 488). Employers now also have a myriad of fashionable HR techniques from which they can choose as part of their approach to managing work and employment. Simply put, the reality is that unions are no longer the default option for worker voice outside the public sector in any Anglophone country (Boxall et al. 2007). Few British employers with established union relationships have derecognized unions, but for many non-union employers, HRM and employee voice have moved beyond traditional industrial relations institutions. Employers may not have completely lost their appetite for employee voice, but their tastes do seem to have changed in favour of more ‘modern’ approaches to voice which are often direct and individualistic (Willman et al. 2007). Even where employers do sense a need for collective voice infrastructure, there may be a preference for the development of in-house representative structures such as employee forums and committees rather than union voice (Johnstone et al. 2010a). This could be interpreted as providing support for the view that the UK offers an unfavourable environment for the widespread development of partnership relations with unions.

However, as Willman et al. (2010) argue, unions can be thought of as an ‘experience good’. It is perhaps unsurprising that non-union employers might be concerned about the potential costs and risks of entering into new relations with unions. Experience of employment relations in unionized contexts may be limited, and

perceptions may be influenced by negative media coverage which is more likely to report episodes of conflict and militancy rather than evidence of workplace cooperation. Yet, as Freeman and Medoff (1984: 179) stated over thirty years ago that 'unionism per se is neither a plus nor a minus to productivity. What matters is how unions and management interact at the workplace.' Given the plethora of voice options available to employers, this is perhaps where a partnership approach offers potential benefits as a way of gradually influencing the attitudes of employers. This might involve, for example, ways of demonstrating to employers the positive benefits of working in partnership with trade unions, as well as how partnership relationships can actually complement other HR and direct voice techniques. In the 1960s, the Donovan Commission suggested that trade unions can act as a 'lubricant not an irritant' in the management of workplace relations (McCarthy 1967), but such a view may no longer be shared by employers and managers who hold negative attitudes towards unions influenced by the industrial relations strife of the 1970s and 1980s, or have no strong feelings either way. As Metcalf (2005: 26) states: 'The challenge for the union movement is to demonstrate that they can come through for workers without putting employers at a disadvantage and/or deliver for employers while simultaneously looking after worker interests'.

Partnership approaches present such an opportunity for unions to reposition themselves as organizations that can add value rather than as destructive forces, and there are several research studies which confirm that this can indeed be the case. Charlwood and Terry (2007), for example, found that productivity outcomes are better in dual voice systems which combine direct and indirect mechanisms, while other studies have also suggested that unions can enhance productivity where management are supportive of the union (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Bryson et al. 2006). Voice systems which combine 'embedded' direct forms of involvement with indirect voice through representative bodies are also associated with higher levels of organizational commitment (Purcell and Georgiadis 2007). Further studies have revealed the benefits of combining high-performance work practices with trade union representation (Bryson et al. 2006), and the most recent WERS evidence reveals that around a quarter of British managers agreed that unions helped them to find ways to improve workplace performance (van Wanrooy et al. 2013), a figure which showed no significant change from the last WERS conducted before the global financial crisis hit (Kersley et al. 2006). Studies also reveal that the number of workplace problems falls when management and union work cooperatively, while more adversarial relations are not only stressful but can also hinder the ability of unions to deliver for members (Bryson and Freeman 2006; Freeman and Medoff 1984). The above evidence can be used by unions to demonstrate the value they can add.

Besides the findings of various quantitative research studies, further benefits of working cooperatively with trade unions are sometimes more qualitative and difficult to measure through raw economic analysis (Purcell and Georgiadis 2007). Nevertheless, a review of the recent policy literature alludes to some of the more difficult-to-measure benefits of employers working cooperatively with unions to address the challenges of the recession, and to boost employee engagement. For example, the EEF, the manufacturers' organization, note how there has been evidence among their member organizations of employers and unions working together to take a long-term view to identify imaginative and innovative ways of working and to avoid job cuts (Podro 2010). The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) also report a desire on the part of many unions to avoid rushing into confrontation, and to work with employers as 'partners in change' to seek mutually acceptable solutions to the challenges of recession. Finally, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) acknowledge that it can be the collective dimension which stands to 'undermine or support engagement strategies'. A similar—but often overlooked—point is made in the 2009 *MacLeod Review* on employee engagement, which specifically suggests 'synergies between engagement approaches and partnership working between unions and employers where trust, co-operation, and information are key...many organisations with partnership agreements emphasised to us that it complemented and enhanced their engagement strategies' (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). In other words, while critics often highlight the lack of a latent employer demand for developing partnership relations with unions, it could be argued that it is the partnership model of unionism which is likely to be most

appealing to employers, because this also suggests the potential to add value to the business, as well promoting the interests of workers.

Of course, any consideration of the potential reach and merits of partnership as a model of employee voice must also consider the extent to which it is compatible with what modern workers want from voice.

Comparative research by Boxall et al. (2007) found that, while employees want some form of voice which will help them deal with problems at work, workers across Anglophone countries are now increasingly indifferent to what unions offer and often express a preference for direct over indirect forms of voice. Other studies reveal that many workers doubt the effectiveness of union voice, and also suggest worker satisfaction with direct non-union forms of representative voice (Bryson 2004; Bryson et al. 2006). Again, if unions are an 'experience good' this can make it difficult to attract new members who typically give reasons such as perceived union ineffectiveness and social norms to explain not joining unions, as well as the potential to 'free ride' and enjoy many of the benefits in unionized workplaces without incurring the financial cost of membership. Either way, these findings suggest that as well as considering how they can demonstrate legitimacy in the eyes of employers by adding value to the business, unions also need to consider how they can increase their appeal to modern workers, many of whom are apathetic or indifferent regarding the value of trade union membership.

One potential solution to the challenge of falling membership and worker apathy is the organizing approach, which is often presented as an alternative to partnership. As with partnership, organizing can refer to a wide range of different approaches and techniques and can be difficult to define with much precision. However, most definitions of organizing normally refer to an approach which prioritizes extensive recruitment efforts by unions, as well as 'empowering' workers so they can resolve workplace issues without external representation (Heery 2002). Organizing has been defined as 'an attempt to rediscover the social movement origins of labour, essentially by redefining the union as a mobilising structure which seeks to stimulate activism among its members, and generate campaigns for workplace and wider social justice' (Heery et al. 2000: 996). In contrast to partnership strategies, the focus of organizing is normally upon trade unions building networks and strengthening relationships with their members (and potential members) rather than attempting to develop partnership relations with managers and employers. While partnership is largely predicated upon aspirations of greater levels of cooperation and the achievement of mutual gains, organizing returns the focus to the potential conflicts of interest between employers and employees. With organizing, the interests of workers on issues such as pay and conditions or employment security are centre stage, rather than attempting to find ways of aligning or balancing these with employer priorities. Particular aims include defending and promoting the interests of workers, building collectivism among workers to work together and pursue their interests, as well as tackling broader societal issues of injustice and inequality (Simms, this volume). Organizing is also associated with a desire to embed a broader cultural change within the union movement towards one which is significantly more participative and also representative of its members. This is said to require attracting new people to work in the union movement as specialist professional organizers, as well as a culture of workplace activism rather than passivity among union members (Simms et al. 2013). More practical concerns of organizing campaigns typically include winning new recognition deals and increasing membership and participation where unions are already recognized (in-fill recruitment). A range of techniques might be used including person-to-person recruitment, raising the union profile at the workplace, establishing organizing committees, using employee grievances as a basis for recruitment, as well as high-profile public campaigns against anti-union employers (Simms et al. 2013).

There are at least two important limitations of organizing. First, the evidence suggests that despite significant union investment in organizing activity in recent years, the evidence of a recovery in union membership is limited. Research has identified various internal and external constraints which are encountered and act as barriers to successful organizing. On the one hand, organizers have encountered employer opposition to trade unions, especially where recognition was being sought or where the union only had a weak presence (Heery and Simms 2008). This often resulted in a 'spiral of mutually hostile activity' and blocked organizing efforts

(Heery and Simms 2010: 10). Gall (2005) has also identified employer resistance as a major factor hampering union attempts to winning recognition rights in various 'new economy' firms, including Orange, Egg, and Amazon. Interestingly, organizing efforts have tended to enjoy greater support where unions already have established relationships with employers (Heery and Simms 2010). This leads to a paradox of organizing, in that one of the main aims is to get a foothold in new workplaces, yet the approach often does not succeed unless the door is already open or at least ajar. Yet because organizing typically favours an overtly worker-focused and adversarial approach over building positive relationships with employers, it is unsurprising that many employers prefer to keep the door latched firmly shut.

Finally, it is not only employers who may be wary of organizing attempts. Targeted workers may be resistant to the encouragement to join a union. Such resistance has been attributed to the individualistic values of non-members, the poor reputation and image of unions, and a perception that unions do not reflect the interests and diversity of modern workers, or adopt counterproductive and damaging militant strategies. In addition, while much union organizing activity is conflictual in character (Heery and Simms 2008), evidence has suggested that many workers no longer support adversarial union strategies. Rather, the majority of UK workers now express a preference for cooperation, where unions 'work with management to improve the workplace and working conditions', rather than unions which focus more narrowly upon 'defending workers against unfair treatment by management' (Bryson et al. 2006). Indeed, employee preferences for 'more cooperative styles of engagement with management which help improve their firm performance and their working lives' have been found in comparative research across the Anglophone countries (Bryson and Freeman 2007). In summary, many organizing campaigns are blocked by resistant employers or fail to ignite the interest of the very workers they are seeking to target. In such cases, a partnership model which offers value to employers and also chimes with worker preferences for cooperative rather than conflictual workplace relations may be more fruitful.

Conclusion

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The purpose of this chapter was to assess the prospects for the development of workplace partnership in the British private sector, where union representation is now very much the exception to the rule, as well as where the challenges to partnership relations are argued to be most acute. At a national level, partnership enjoyed a brief spell in the limelight towards the end of the 1990s but the interest of senior politicians and union leaders quickly evaporated in the first few years of the new millennium. Partnership has continued to divide the opinions of both academics and public policy makers, with views ranging from those suggesting partnership remains an important opportunity to revitalize collective employee representation and trade unions (Johnstone et al. 2010a, 2010b), while others have highlighted perceived inadequacies and contradictions (Upchurch et al. 2008).

The central argument of my analysis is that, despite polarized conceptual debates, in practice partnership does appear to provide a valuable model of employment relations which can work in certain contexts. Deciding what constitutes success, however, is complex and depends on our expectations of what partnership is meant to achieve. Partnership is also a very loose term used to refer to many different types of arrangement, so there is always the risk we cannot easily compare like with like. However, it appears that a range of positive outcomes *are* achievable for employers, unions, and employees, thus calling into question pessimistic accounts which suggest that partnership simply cannot work. Partnership may have fallen out of fashion in national political debates, but at a workplace level many flagship partnership agreements appear to be robust (Bacon and Samuel 2009). A review of key quantitative indicators such as collective bargaining coverage, union membership, union density, or number of partnership agreements signed means it is easy to be pessimistic about both the achievements and potential of partnership unionism in the UK private sector. However, aggregate statistics ignore the fact many of these have been signed in high-profile private sector firms including Barclays, Jaguar

Land Rover, Rolls-Royce, and Tesco. These are exactly the type of organizations we often find in mainstream HR textbooks as exemplars of 'strategic' and 'best practice' HRM, and which proclaim that 'people are our greatest asset' on glossy corporate websites. A more optimistic interpretation would suggest that the development of partnership in such organizations confirms first that partnership is compatible with other HRM concepts and techniques and not at the expense of organizational performance, and second that there is scope to encourage the diffusion of partnership across the different sectors in which 'flagship' agreements are located.

p. 169 Partnership is also valuable because it focuses attention on the nature and value of collective employee representation, which is increasingly absent from contemporary HR debates and textbooks. The WERS series has documented the decline of employee representation and trade union membership over several decades (van Wanrooy et al. 2013), and the partnership debate is important because it rejects the unitarist assumptions of many HRM techniques, and emphasizes the value of pluralist conceptualizations of the employment relationship. This is especially important at a time when employment relations as both a field of study and area of management practice is under threat from the increasing 'psychologization' of HR (Godard 2014). This is epitomized by the current vogue for employee engagement, which as Guest (this volume) notes, underemphasizes notions of reciprocity which are at the heart of partnership and mutual gains. Interestingly, some HR commentators have also acknowledged the need for a more balanced agenda in HR, especially as HR professionals no longer see themselves as 'employee champions' but strategic 'business partners' (Francis and Keegan 2006). A particular strength of partnership is that it sets out a normative, pluralist vision of the employment relationship, and views strong employee voice as a means of moderating the tensions between business efficiency on the one hand and equity and fair treatment of workers on the other (Budd 2004; Johnstone et al. 2011).

This is not to suggest that partnership is a solution for all the ills of employment relations. Certain conditions appear to be associated with more robust instances of partnership, and arrangements which fail to deliver regular gains to the various stakeholders are unlikely to be sustainable. The factors typically associated with more robust partnerships include strong trade unions and HR departments, the commitment and competence of all actors, and integration within a wider suite of supportive HR practices. Others include the need for a high-quality workforce, a high involvement culture, and the ability to take a longer-term perspective. Of course there are contexts where few of these features are likely to be present. Some employers express overtly anti-union sentiments, and others appear to operate on the basis of tight control and cost-minimization rather than high commitment. In such contexts the notion of developing partnership may seem inappropriate or unrealistic, at least in the short term, and organizing may be viewed as a more viable strategy. Different contexts might require different strategies, or as John Monks (1997) put it, 'partnership with good employers and organise the bad employers'. With anti-union employers there might be few short-term alternatives to organizing strategies, but as noted above such approaches have had limited success when faced with the employer hostility they are likely to encounter.

p. 170 The relationship between partnership and organizing is therefore complex. Partnership with existing employers might lead to organizing, and organizing ↪ new workplaces might lead to opportunities to develop partnership in the long term (see Heery 2002). However, for many other employers who have established union management relations, partnership might be something to which they can aspire. In the long term, partnership could also be a model of unionism which is more attractive—or at least less worrying—to organizations which do not currently recognize trade unions. Successful high-profile case studies of union-management partnership can be used by unions to reassure employers that positive relations with unions can actually add value and lubricate employment relations. In such circumstances, partnership could be used as a strategy to neutralize employers' concerns, to win support and recognition in new workplaces, and in turn help organizing efforts. A form of unionism which recognizes the need to balance economic competitiveness and performance, on the one hand, with employee well-being and broader societal priorities on the other may also

help in winning the support of public policy makers. Howell (2005) notes the importance of government policy in influencing employer behaviour, and it is the promise of the mutual gains associated with partnership which is more likely to attract state support. It is perhaps no coincidence that both advocates of partnership and organizing approaches often highlight the impressive success of the approach adopted by Tesco and Usdaw. In the Tesco/Usdaw case, partnership and organizing have operated in parallel, and membership reportedly increased by 17 per cent between 1999 and 2009, in a sector where staff churn means unions must recruit vigorously to stand still.

The central argument of the chapter is that it would be short-sighted to dismiss partnership in the British private sector as something which cannot work within the context of a liberal market economy. Inevitably, workplace partnership is challenging. However, with the appropriate support, partnership can deliver mutual gains and also offer unions the opportunity to reinvent themselves in the eyes of employers, workers, and the general public as constructive organizations that lubricate workplace relations and make a positive contribution to society. Partnership might not work everywhere, at least in the short term, but its long-term reach is likely to be far wider than the critics admit. Finally, partnership demonstrates the advantages of a shift towards a more pluralist reading of HRM, and the potential value of an employment relations model which aspires to mutual gains for employers, workers, and society as a whole.

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