

Work, Organization, and Employment
Series Editors: Tony Dundon · Adrian Wilkinson

Peter Holland
Julian Teicher
Jimmy Donaghey *Editors*

Employee Voice at Work

 Springer

Work, Organization, and Employment

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Tony Dundon, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Adrian Wilkinson, Business School, Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

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Peter Holland · Julian Teicher
Jimmy Donaghey
Editors

Employee Voice at Work

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Editors

Peter Holland
Department of Management and Marketing
Swinburne Business School, Swinburne
University of Technology
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Jimmy Donaghey
Warwick Business School
University of Warwick
Coventry, UK

Julian Teicher
School of Business and Law
Central Queensland University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Peter Holland is Professor of Human Resource Management and Director of the Executive MBA at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. He has worked in the Australian finance sector and consulted to the private and public sector in a variety of areas related to human resource management and employee relations. His current research interests include employee voice, workplace electronic monitoring and surveillance, and talent management.

Julian Teicher is Professor Human Resources and Employment and Deputy Dean (Research) in the School of Business and Law at Central Queensland University, Melbourne, Australia. In the early part of his career, he worked as an industrial relations officer for two unions, one in the maritime and power industries and the other in nursing. His research is in two related fields: workplace (industrial) relations and public policy and management. He has published widely on a range of topics including: conflict management, employee participation, voice and industrial democracy, bargaining and dispute resolution, and training and skill formation.

Jimmy Donaghey is Professor of Employment Relations at the Industrial Relations Research Unit, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK and Adjunct Professor at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. His research interests focus on the internationalisation of employment relations and worker voice.

Contributors

Nikola Balnave Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Alison Barnes Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Chris Brewster Vaasa University, Vaasa, Finland; Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, UK; Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Alex Bryson University College London, London, England

John Burgess Melbourne, Australia

Julia Connell Newcastle, Australia

Brian Cooper Department of Management, Monash University, Clayton, Australia

Richard Croucher Middlesex University Business School, London, UK

Niall Cullinane Queen's University Management School, Queen's University, Belfast, UK

Tony Dobbins Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Jimmy Donaghey Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Joe Dromey IPPR, Coventry, England

Tony Dundon Alliance Manchester, Business School, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Richard Freeman Harvard University & NBER, Boston, USA

Rafael Gomez University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Rob Hecker Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia

Eugene Hickland DCU Business School, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Peter Holland Department of Management and Marketing, Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Sarah Kaine Business School, University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, Australia

Xiaoyan Liang Central Queensland University, Melbourne, Australia

Benjamin Manning Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Graeme Martin University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland

Anthony McDonnell University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Alan McWilliams Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Paula K. Mowbray Griffith Business School, Nathan, Australia

Emma Parry Cranfield, England

Thomas Prosser Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales

Katherine Ravenswood Auckland University of Technology, Auckland,
New Zealand

Julian Teicher Central Queensland University, Melbourne, Australia

Louise Thornthwaite Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Herman Tse Monash Business School, Caulfield East, Australia

Adrian Wilkinson Griffith Business School, Nathan, Australia

Paul Willman London School of Economics and Political Science, London,
England

Introduction

Peter Holland, Julian Teicher and Jimmy Donaghey

Work is the dominant activity of most people's lives. Work acts as an enabler of economic activity for individuals and as the generator of wealth for corporations, nations and individuals and carries with it the important issues of redistribution and fairness. In addition to these economic functions, work also has important social functions in that it brings people together with very different personalities and moreover interests. At the heart of these economic and social interests is the ability of those at work to be able to articulate their position and also that these concerns are viewed *vis-à-vis* with those of others in the workplace. But as will be developed in this chapter and the remainder of the book, the content and context of voice in the workplace is changing. As such, the field of employee voice has gained prominence in the employment relations, human resource management and organisational behaviour literature in recent years. While these perspectives differ significantly in how they define voice, a common feature of all these literatures are the issues of why, how and when do workers influence what happens in their place of work. The purpose of this book is to add to the understanding of the changing nature of voice from an employment relations perspective.

The Employment Relations Approach to Voice

In the area of customer relationships, Hirschman (1970) introduced the idea of voice as an alternative to loyalty or exit. Voice was viewed as a mechanism through which those customers who did not wish to remain silent or seek alternative suppliers could lever their power as consumers. But while his work focussed on these consumption relations, in many ways, within the employment relationship, it is no surprise that the issue of voice comes more to the fore. As is long recognised, the employment relationship is more socially embedded than a simple, easily defined consumer relationship (Simon 1951) and thus voice or loyalty can be thought of as the defaults, with exit as being the last resort option.

A key feature of the employment relations approach to voice is that it is premised on the recognition that workers have interests independent to those of their employers. These interests may at times be common, may overlap or may be in conflict with those of their employers but as such, there needs to be a (voice) vehicle through which workers can advance their interests. From an employer perspective, it is also recognised that this is a valuable source of knowledge in an increasingly dynamic environment (Holland 2014). Taking this approach, the definition of voice adopted for the volume is that of Wilkinson and colleagues (2014:5) who define employee voice as,

as the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owners.

For Budd (2004), voice, along with economy and equity, was one of the three key tensions which the employment relationship had to balance. This point was also emphasised by Marchington (2007), who described voice as the area of HRM where the tension between the various stakeholders of an organisation is most apparent. As such, the employment relations approach puts the concept of voice as a central tenet of its ongoing contractual nature.

The literature on employee voice in the area of employment relations, where this volume is situated, has developed out of a convergence between debates around representation, participation and involvement. One of the seminal arguments on voice was Freeman and Medoff (1984) who highlighted that while unions may exercise monopoly power in wage bargaining and extract economic rents, unions also provided economic efficiency through the provision of collective voice in the form of representation. But employee voice and the employment relationship are evolving and changing. Gone are the days when large numbers of workers on standardised contracts working for large-scale manufacturing companies were represented by trade unions. But this does not mean that interest in employee (or union) voice has decreased. In fact, the opposite is the case. The myriad actors and forms which have emerged have meant that voice has become established as one of the key areas of enquiry in the various approaches which use the employment relationship as its theoretical and employment focus. With the decline of union based forms of representation in many advanced economies, the voice literature has expanded to analyse those forms of representation based around non-union representation schemes (Dobbins and Dobbins 2014). These indirect forms of representative voice are not the only forms covered by the definitions of voice with what have often been labelled as ‘involvement’ and ‘participation’ also included (Dundon et al. 2004). These more direct forms of voice encompass systems such as teamwork, quality circles and the likes are generally more directly related to the work task than more representative systems.

The vibrancy of research into voice is due to a variety of interrelated factors. First, there is a body of literature that seeks to explore the links between employee voice, with increased commitment and competitive advantage, and this is particularly of interest to managers and many management academics (Batt et al. 2002;

Farndale et al. 2011). Second, the changing industrial landscape of the advanced market economies in recent decades, especially declining union membership and the associate need for voice has witnessed the emergence of managerially driven mechanism to fill the emerging voice vacuum (Terry 1999; Taras and Kaufman 2006; Donaghey et al. 2011; Dundon and Rollinson 2004). Third, and related to the preceding point, the rise of human resource management, with its focus on direct relationships between employees and employers, has led to a more strategic focus on managing the employment relationship (Boxall and Purcell 2016). However, this is not without its problems, because as management attempts to fill the voice vacuum, there is a legitimate concern that it seeks to ‘crowd out’ other more critical forms of voice, particularly those forms which challenge management control. Fourth, public policy actors have increasingly sought to regulate issues around the provision of worker voice. Two contrasting approaches can be seen. In the EU, for example, a series of pieces of legislation have been passed which set minimum levels of voice which workers are expected to be provided with in their workplace (Hall 2011; Gold 2011; Donaghey et al. 2013). In contrast, in the US for example, the rise of ‘right to work’ states has sought to champion the individual over the collective will with resultant benefits to employers. The infamous example of the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga Tennessee where the German car maker was prevented from establishing a Works Council and recognising union was driven through an aggressive political campaign by those outside the employment relationship (Silva 2018). Therefore, it is important to look at what is happening in the contemporary workplace and how voice is being managed.

Change and Employee Voice

This book is firmly positioned to make a contribution to the employment relations literature on voice. This is not to say that the Organisational Behaviour (OB) based literature has not something valuable to say but that to keep a focus, our engagement is generally with the employment relations literature. Within our approach, a key focus is on the theme of voice and change. Three main cross-cutting, and often overlapping, aspects are present in this volume. First, the changing nature of the workplace and wider society, and how this affects voice; second, how voice systems have changed and transformed over time; and third, new ways to look at voice through an employment relations lens.

It is worth reflecting on these three themes at this juncture. First, without doubt, workplaces are changing. As is often highlighted, in the past 40 years, advanced economies have witnessed a shift from Fordist mass production to a more knowledge and services based post-Fordist economy (Rowthorn and Wells 1987; Coutts et al. 2007). Workplaces have seen greater diversity with emphasis on inclusion of women, people from multicultural backgrounds and disabilities. In addition, changing technologies and generational shifts in how such workers engage with each other and wider society make for changes in voice. It has been

emphasised that this increased awareness of workplace diversity and interests shifts the nature of the representation which workers seek (Safford and Piore 2006). While in general, these may be viewed as positive developments, other employer-driven changes have also changed the workplace. For example, casual employment, zero-hours contracts, 'gig-economy' jobs and privatisation have all created underlying threats to job security in the workplace through the dislocation of work and employment. These changes carry with them potential changes to the nature of worker voice which need to be investigated (see for example, Dean and Greene 2017).

Second, as outlined above, a key driver behind the employment relations approach to voice has been the question of how workers are represented in an era of the decline of collective bargaining and union representation? much research has gone into understanding the emergence of these new systems and what types of changes take place within systems. How have voice systems within workplaces changed and how have changed workplaces witnessed changes in employee voice? Forces such as privatisation, deindustrialisation and outsourcing/offshoring all carry with them pressures towards change. But the extent of such change needs to be explored in greater depth. Whilst many books have identified and documented the evolution of voice in the workplace, we have always been aware that the dynamic and changing nature of voice has not quite been captured within the context of the changes we have seen in work and the workplace of the twenty-first century. For example, the rise of social media which effectively flattens the communication within the organisation and provides information instantly to a global audience is changing the way employees communicate and importantly is often outside the control of management. This can be juxtaposed with 'old style' union voice which is embracing such technologies through what is known as 'E-voice' (Balnave et al. 2014).

Third, as outlined above, the employment relations approach to voice exists alongside scholarship in fields such as organisational behaviour, human resource management and labour process theory. It is worth noting that the literature on voice has often 'borrowed' terms from other literatures: While many authors cite Hirschman (1970) as being the basis of employee voice, as we do above, it is worthwhile to point out that Hirschman's famous 'Exit, loyalty and voice' formulation was focussed on consumer/customer relations rather than employment relations. Thus, important lessons can be drawn from fields across the social sciences. In terms of voice, it has generally been thought of as being workers exercising their voice to their line managers or at least those with direct relationship to their employment who listen to their concerns. But the assumption of management wanting workers to have a voice or actually listening and taking it into account is not guaranteed. For example, a growing literature focuses on the extent to which management may wish to have silent workers (Donaghey et al. 2011) or management may exhibit 'deaf ears' to the issues raised by workers (Harlos 2001). An emergent theme is that workers can have voice but their voice may be directed at those who they believe can influence the relationship but are not actually a participant in their employment relationship. This has particularly happened in the

context of the Internet. With the Internet and associated social media, workers can now post public frustrations with their employer online with the desire of being heard or creating reputational damage. While ultimately these target the employer, they aim to do so through an indirect route of mobilising power such as consumer power rather than traditional methods of employment relations (Donaghey et al. 2014; Holland et al. 2016). This particularly is the case in supply chain relationships where NGOs and others seek to inflict reputational damage amongst consumers for breaches of labour rights (Reinecke and Donaghey 2015; Wright 2016).

Motivation for the Book

In recent years, a number of books have emerged which seek to provide an overview of research into worker voice (Wilkinson et al. 2014; Johnstone and Ackers 2015). The motivation for this book is slightly different. In particular, the book seeks to develop insights associated with the changing nature of voice from theoretical and practical perspectives through case study analysis of employee voice. In our title, we use ‘voice at work’ in the double meaning of workplace voice but also what this means in practical and empirical terms in the modern workplace.

Whilst this book focuses on advanced market economies, because of the breadth of the concept of employee voice, it lends itself to differing perspective on employment relations and human resources management. Often described as the Anglo-American and European perspectives, these approaches are underpinned by differing levels of participation and involvement in the workplace, which need to be understood as ways of enhancing or inhibiting voice. In this context, the increasing focus on silence and how it can be ‘structured’ into the workplace by management to negate effective voice is also considered an important aspect of voice patterns and practices in the workplace.

As noted, the scope of the book is intended not only to cover theoretical aspects of voice but also the practical aspects of employee voice. Irrespective of the nature of the channel, employee voice arrangements vary widely in terms of their design, employee coverage, the scope of issues covered and their depth or embeddedness and effectiveness in the workplace. To address these issues, the final section of the book focuses on the dynamic and changing nature of voice at the workplace through case studies to provide insight into the role and impact in the day-to-day interactions within and outside organisations. This we see as providing the reader with an insight into how voice actually works in practice and how the various actors interpret and work within the social structures voice creates.

The Structure of the Book

The book is divided into three parts. Part one starts with a bold approach by Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse to unite the theoretical perspectives. As these authors note, such an approach will provide the HRM/ER and OB disciplines with new opportunities to advance the literature on employee voice with the potential of eliciting new findings. Noting the need to unite the field, the following chapters in this section highlight the structural differences that have emerged in what are seen as the Anglo-American and European models of voice.

Bryson, Freeman, Gomez and Wilman frame the Anglo-American model in the context of the decline of trade union density and traditional union voice, and the rise of direct voice which they argue has undermined collective voice. They highlight the emerging difference through a profile of the workforce, where 'new' workers are unlikely to join unions. This establishes their argument for a 'twin-track' model of employee voice. They however suggest that whilst many of the new workers or 'digital natives' are unlikely to join unions, the new e-platforms of the twenty-first century may provide a fertile environment to address workplace issues and problems. In contrast to this perspective, Brewster, Croucher and Prosser explore the European perspective on voice. Focusing on the European corporatist model of voice, the authors highlight the democratic approach which emphasises stakeholders rather than the shareholder, the proactive role of the state and the acceptances by management of the value of real consultation not just rhetoric. As such, voice is viewed as having a legitimate role in the workplace supported by legislation under the guise of legally supported collective voice or co-determination. However, these authors sound a word of caution to the long-term standing of established voice mechanisms, with the rise of right-wing governments across Europe, underpinned by neo-liberal ideology, which could see this model move closer to that of the Anglo-American model.

Part two explores what might be described as the new dimensions of voice. The first chapter by Holland, Cooper and Hecker looks at the increasing impact of social media as a new form of voice, building upon the points raised by Bryson et al. about these new platforms as a vehicle for workers who increasingly do not join unions. The research highlights the high and low road of these digital platforms for employers as something to fear and control or embrace as a real-time voice. The second strategy provides a framework to address issues as they emerge as a key HRM strategy to enhance involvement and participation. However, they note that such a strategy cannot operate in a vacuum, and key structural issues need to be in place such as mutual trust. Also picking up on the merging of old and new voice, Barnes, Balnave, Thornthwaite and Manning explore the impact of social media on union communication, member voice and democracy. They argue that these new digital platforms can enhance communications between the union and its members. This is a relatively new perspective on the use of digital platform by unions and the authors use a case study to explore this approach. They find that these platforms

have the potential to engage members with the union, although this remains relatively limited.

Donaghey, Dundon, Cullinane, Dobbins and Hickland address the emerging structural aspect of how management silences workers. In line with the book focus of looking at voice issue in the workplace, they use three case studies to analyse the implementation of the EU's Information and Consultation Directive in the UK and Ireland. The case studies illustrate how management responded to avoid elements of the Directive to prevent worker voice and how management acted in silencing workers and they highlight the implications of this approach. The final chapter in this sections looks at the role voice can play in addressing one of the most significant issues in the workplace, that of bullying behaviour and culture. Holland explores the importance of voice in combination with ethical leadership to address these issues and develop a culture of transparency and good governance. The chapter is completed by a major case study into the how such an approach was used to address an endemic culture of bullying and silence in the health sector.

The final section of the book is devoted to case studies in voice across different sectors. The first chapter by McWilliams, Holland and Hecker focuses on the manufacturing sector and is unique in that the research was undertaken inside a car plant which was in the process of a staged closure. The chapter charts the development of voice through various stage of the 70 years of production, culminating in the key role of voice in ensuring that in the 3 year planned shut-down employees remained engaged and involved in the work and workplace issues. The service sector case study by Burgess and Connell addresses one of the most contentious of the contemporary workplaces of the twenty-first century—the call centre. Call centre work is highly monitored, scripted and subject to forms of close supervisor control with the work being monotonous and demanding with few opportunities for participation. The chapter draws upon studies of voice in call centres in Australia and the UK to examine forms of voice mechanisms used and the outcomes emerging in the ICT driven continuous service delivery context. In exploring the health sector, Kaine and Ravenswood look to one of the most deregulated and under resourced areas of the sector—aged care. Their study of voice is framed through the different regulatory environment of Australia and New Zealand. The chapter considers the different levels at which voice is exercised as a means to analyse different voice channels and their efficacy. The next chapter returns to the theme of voice in the digital era with Parry, Martin and Dromey, research exploring why some organisations have embraced this technology and how best to incorporate these new digital platforms. Looking at six organisations, they explore the role of power in controlling social media and how it impacts the levels of trust and encourages voice and collaboration. The final chapter by Teicher and Liang explores voice in a largely overlook but significant part of the workforce—Third Sector organisations, which deliver important services on a not-for-profit basis. The examination of voice within the context of a mixed employee and volunteer workforces identifies it as an important element in this workplace. Against this

background, the case examined is a complex and long-running collective bargaining dispute in a rural fire service in Australia. A perceived lack of voice among volunteers underscored a legacy of poor management, which also impeded the resolution of the dispute.

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Part I
Employee Voice: What's it all About?

Chapter 1

Evolution, Separation and Convergence of Employee Voice Concept



Paula K. Mowbray, Adrian Wilkinson and Herman Tse

Abstract This chapter discusses the early conceptualisation of employee voice within the human resource management, employment relations and organisational behaviour disciplines. The chapter identifies the significant turning points within the literature and the resultant divergent pathways that these disciplines took with regard to the conceptualisation and study of voice. The discussion then focuses on ways to better integrate the disparate voice literature. Following this, future directions are provided to guide new voice studies where an integrated concept of voice can be applied. Accordingly, it is proposed that future voice studies should consider both employer and employee interests and formal and informal voice.

Keywords Voice concept · Voice mechanisms · Voice behaviour
Informal and formal voice

1.1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been burgeoning interest in the study of employee voice across a number of disciplines in management research (Greenberg and Edwards 2009; Johnstone and Ackers 2015; Kaufman 2014a; Morrison 2011, 2014; Wilkinson et al. 2014). This scholarly interest is aligned with changes over time in practice concerning how employee voice is operationalised within the organisations and the importance placed on it, which has been influenced by declining unionism around the world as well as a concern with better engaging with the workforce to help improve organisational performance. There have been many high-profile cases where the absence of voice is seen as having led to organisation crises, such as the Volkswagen emission scandal in Germany, the Bundaberg Hospital deaths

P. K. Mowbray · A. Wilkinson
Griffith Business School, Nathan, Australia

H. Tse (✉)
Monash Business School, Caulfield East, Australia
e-mail: herman.tse@monash.edu

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in Australia, and in the US the Columbia space disaster, the collapse of Enron, and the British Petroleum oil-rig explosion (Morrison 2011; Wilkinson et al. 2015). Moreover, there is increasing evidence that employee voice has positive outcomes on organisational performance (Harley 2014) and employee well-being (Pohler and Luchak 2014). Thus, the research indicates that employee voice continues to be an important issue for both employers and employees (Burke and Cooper 2013; Klaas et al. 2012; Wilkinson et al. 2014).

Certainly, since Hirschman's (1970) seminal book on voice was published in relation to customers, and then the voice concept later applied to employees by Farrell (1983) and Freeman and Medoff (1984), we have developed a greater understanding of how employee voice mechanisms may be shaped by different factors inside or outside organisations (Kaufman 2015; Marchington 2015) and the behavioural antecedents to employees expressing voice (Morrison 2014). However, despite the early research on employee voice stemming from Hirschman's concept of voice, we have witnessed differences between the employment relations (ER), human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB) disciplines with regard to how employee voice is conceptualised, and this has thwarted our understanding of employee voice. These differences extend beyond a focus on formal voice mechanisms within the HRM/ER voice field and informal voice behaviour with the OB voice field, and includes how scholars within these fields perceive the underlying motivation to voice (Mowbray et al. 2015). Consequently, employee voice has been studied in disciplinary siloes and there are significant gaps in particular in understanding how behavioural antecedents may apply to formal voice.

Studies within HRM/ER typically consider employee voice as a *formal mechanism* or system constructed by the organisation to provide employees with the *opportunity* to communicate with management and to have meaningful input into decisions (Lavelle et al. 2010; Pyman et al. 2006; Wilkinson and Fay 2011). Thus, there is recognition that employee voice may benefit both the employer and its employees, and that the issues raised may relate to both of these actors (Dundon et al. 2004; Dundon and Gollan 2007). However, the OB discipline primarily considers a managerial perspective of employee voice, i.e. that voice should benefit the organisation (Barry and Wilkinson 2016; Morrison 2011, 2014). Within this discipline, voice is typically considered a promotive and discretionary *behaviour* where employees communicate constructive ideas, suggestions, concerns and opinions with the intent to bring about improvement or change (Morrison 2011, 2014; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). The OB discipline also differs in its study of employee voice by primarily examining *informal* employee voice at the individual level of the employee or manager. Thus, aside from the separate body of work that examines remedial or justice voice (Klaas 1989; Klaas and DeNisi 1989; Klaas et al. 2012; Olson-Buchanan 1996; Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2002, 2008), the OB discipline typically discounts voice raised through formal voice systems within their studies, regardless of whether those mechanisms are designed for voice related to the organisations' or employees' interests.

There have been a number of recent articles, book chapters and calls for special editions (Kaufman 2015; Knoll et al. 2016; Mowbray et al. 2015; Pohler and

Luchak 2014; Sumanth and Lebel 2016; Wilkinson and Barry 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2014), that have discussed the limitations and differences between the HRM/ER and OB voice concept and studies, and which have called for an integration of the voice concept in order for the disciplines to draw from each other's studies and to move the literature forward more cohesively. Therefore, it would appear that there is recent interest by employee voice scholars (although primarily HRM/ER scholars at this stage) to adopt a more common conceptualisation, which may indeed lead to a convergence of the disparate research on employee voice.

In order to move toward this integrated HRM/ER and OB concept of voice, it is important for us to understand the nature, characteristics and trajectory of employee voice research within these disciplines. In this chapter, we explore how the conceptualisation of employee voice has evolved within the HRM/ER and OB disciplines since Hirschman's seminal book on voice, demonstrating the early similarities and then the later divergent paths. Next, we look further at the recent interest in the convergence of the voice concept and recommendations to integrate the HRM/ER and OB voice literature. We end the chapter with a discussion on how voice scholars could use a more integrated HRM/ER and OB concept of voice to advance future voice studies and to help resolve practical organisational issues.

1.2 Significant Turning Points and Pathways Within the Employee Voice Literature

While the concept of employee voice and 'employees having a say' can be traced back more than two centuries (Kaufman 2014b, 2015), it is Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice-loyalty theory, that was originally related to customers, that has underpinned the HRM/ER and OB employee voice studies in the past three decades. According to Hirschman, dissatisfied customers could choose between either exit or voice, when there was 'an objectionable state of affairs'. Hirschman theorised that customers would be more likely to choose the voice option when they were more loyal to the firm. Hirschman (1970, p. 30) defines voice as:

....any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions or protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion.

It wasn't until 1983 that Farrell applied Hirschman's (1970) voice theory to employees, and added an additional dimension, neglect, to the theory. Neglect refers to 'lax and disregardful behaviour' (Farrell 1983, p. 598) where employees choose to willingly underperform and which can be characterised by behaviours such as lateness, absenteeism and silent sabotage (Allen 2014). This was followed by Freeman and Medoff (1984), who applied the theory to employment relations and argued that voice mechanisms, such as grievance and arbitration systems, were accountable for

lower quit rates in unionised work places and that trade unions were the key to a functioning voice system. Interest in employee voice then began to grow, and Spencer (1986) examined the relationship between employee retention and employee voice mechanisms, finding that formal voice mechanisms (even those without union representation) were positively related to employee retention. As illustrated in Fig. 1.1, much of the early research on voice predominantly focused on Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice theory applied to formal union voice mechanisms and grievances, with notable publications by scholars across the ER and OB disciplines including those by Lewin (1987), Rusbult et al. (1988), Withey and Cooper (1989), Klaas (1989), Klaas and DeNisi (1989). Moving into the 90s, this focus on grievances continued, with Lewin and Mitchell (1992), Olson-Buchanan (1996) and Boroff and Lewin (1997) making notable contributions.

However, as we can see from Fig. 1.1, there was also a different path that some voice scholars were taking. For some, such as McCabe and Lewin (1992), there was a subtle differentiation and shift, with a call to include participation within voice studies. In the UK and Continental Europe, voice was linked to a wider agenda and debates around industrial democracy (Brannen 1983; Heller et al. 1998; Poole 1983). Industrial Democracy is a more powerful concept than voice as it promises to alter the structure of authority by giving employees a right to share in decision—making with management. Also influential from this tradition was the work of Ramsay (1977). Ramsay stresses the historical character arising from 'cycles' of working class resistance, creating periodic crises of management legitimacy with participation designed to help management deal with this. However, once these moments have passed the interest in participation and voice fades (Ackers et al. 1992). In contrast, Marchington et al. (1993) argued that there were a wider range of management motives behind the development of participation and voice and management saw it as more than a safety valve.

As Mowbray et al. (2015) note in their integrative HRM/ER and OB literature review, this turning point where employee participation and involvement were now considered within voice studies, coincided with decreasing unionism and increasing individualised voice arrangements, along with the increasing significance of HRM and a unitarist and high-performance approach to the management of employees. Consequently, we see within later definitions that arise after 2000 that the HRM/ER voice scholars conceptualise voice as providing both direct and indirect means to have a say over employer and employee interests. Within the HRM/ER studies, voice is now typically categorised as follows:

Task-Based Participation, which includes redesigned work operations, teamwork and self-managed teams. Voice through this mechanism is prevalent in HPWS and is seen as an opportunity for employees to use their discretion at work rather than be closely supervised by managers (Applebaum et al. 2000). Voice is integral to task-based participation as it facilitates workers having a say in how work is organised and is an integral part of the job, providing workers with more control over their working lives (Marchington 2007).

Upward Problem-Solving differs to task-based participation, in that these voice mechanisms operate independently of the work process. This form of voice can

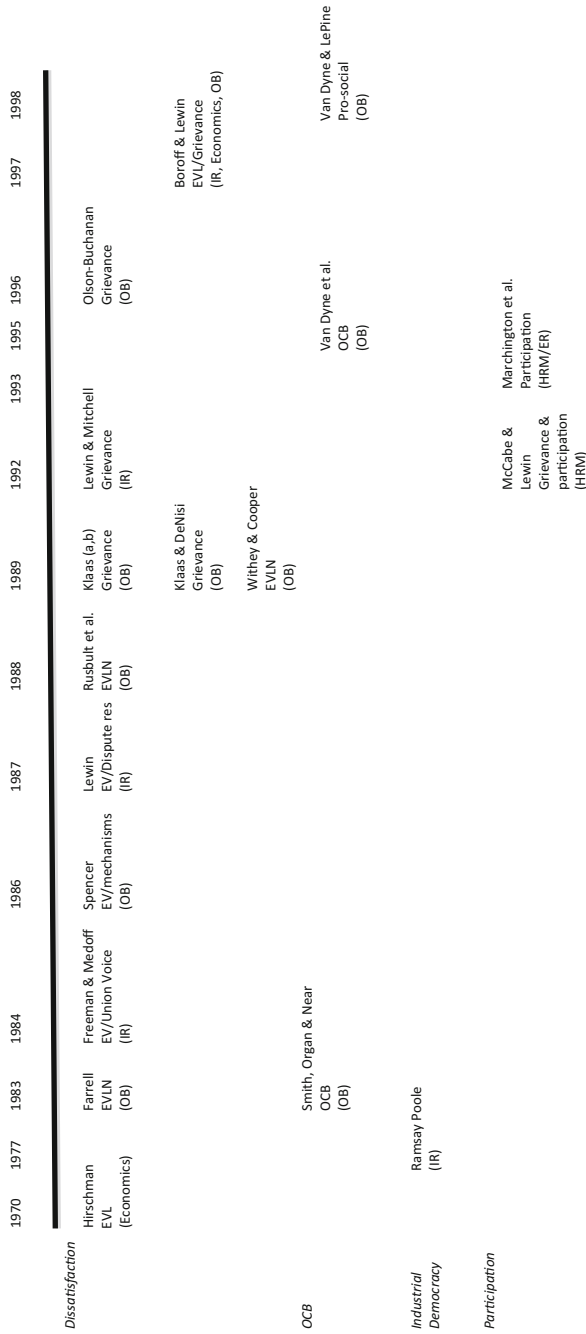


Fig. 1.1 Major turning points influencing current employee voice concepts