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THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

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As recently as perhaps 25 years ago, employee voice was narrowly conceived. In the research literature, employee voice was largely seen as an extension of Hirschman's (1970, p. 30) conception of voice as a means to "change, rather than escape from [that is, exit], an objectionable state of affairs." In industrial relations, this was most influentially articulated through Freeman and Medoff's (1984) collective voice face of labor unions. Consistent with this, employee voice in practice was largely seen as something best delivered through labor unions. In retrospect, it is easy to see what should have been articulated 25 years ago as a future course for employee voice. Specifically, one should have called for broader definitions of employee voice, more diverse disciplinary perspectives on broader aspects of voice, and greater recognition of individual and nonunion forms of voice in practice.

Thankfully, that is where we are at today, as witnessed by the breadth and depth of the chapters in this handbook and other recent collections of employee voice research (e.g., Budd, Gollan, and Wilkinson 2010). So while the future of narrowly-conceived voice and the closely-associated institution of labor unionism are perhaps questionable at best, there is a strong future for richer and broader conceptualizations and forms of employee voice. Ironically, this new breadth and depth of contemporary research on employee voice makes it more challenging to lay out its future, and it is impractical as well as redundant to cover all of the future directions raised by the chapters in this handbook. I will instead propose some areas where I think particular attention is warranted, but the reader is again encouraged to also read the others chapters in the handbook with an eye toward thinking critically about future directions for employee voice in both research and practice.

### **Pushing the Conceptual Boundaries of Voice**

Academics and practitioners have many different conceptualizations of employee voice.

As noted above, Hirschman (1970) defined voice as a complaint mechanism. In this way, some employers see suggestion boxes as a voice mechanism. Advocates of high-performance human resources practices embrace an employee-involvement perspective in which voice can improve organizational performance through problem-solving teams and other methods. A neoliberal, free market perspective sees voice as exercised by one's feet in the form of quitting. To labor advocates, collective bargaining and other activities pursued by labor unions are viewed as the only legitimate forms of employee voice.

In my work, I have advocated for an inclusive definition that sees employee voice as expressing opinions and having meaningful input into work-related decision-making (Budd 2004; Befort and Budd 2009). This broad conceptualization of voice should include individual and collective voice, union and nonunion voice, and voice mechanisms that cover not only employment terms, but also work autonomy and business issues (see also Budd, Gollan, and Wilkinson 2010; Dundon et al. 2004). To be blunt, the traditional industrial relations emphasis on collective voice through collective bargaining is excessively narrow. Richer understandings have and continue to come from including nonunion collective voice as well as various dimensions of individual voice within our conceptualization of employee voice. Similarly, the frequent approach of starting with Hirschman's (1970) definition of voice is excessively narrow because employee voice is then linked so strongly with complaining rather than broader conceptualizations of input, expression, autonomy, and self-determination.

Consequently, future work on voice should continue to push the conceptual boundaries of employee voice in order to further broaden and deeper the theorizing on and understanding of employee voice. For example, one organizational development professional claims that "voice is only active if we have a culture where people feel they can communicate in an open and honest

way, upwards, downwards, and sideways” (quoted in Clarke and Manwaring 2011, p. 11). This idea about voice possibly being upwards, downwards, and sideways is a useful way to think about pushing the conceptual boundaries of employee voice. In particular, I believe that sideways or peer-to-peer voice has been overlooked (more on this later). At the same time, we need to be vigilant to avoid letting the definition of voice become so broad that it risks losing meaning. For example, downward communication from organizational leaders without opportunities for employees to respond might better be seen as communication rather than voice. Admittedly, the boundaries of employee voice might be porous and blurred, but researchers could continue to push and identify these boundaries.

Future work on voice should also address the extent to which voice is conceptualized as an intrinsic or as an instrumental activity. In other words, there is an unresolved tension over the extent to which voice needs to be effective in changing something in order to be considered voice. I have argued for an intrinsic definition to voice based on innate human needs for self-determination (Budd 2004) whereas, for example, Hyman (2005, p. 127) has countered that “voice is an effective means to achieve one’s aims, or it is a charade.” Admittedly, if voice never achieves an instrumental end or leads to something of substance (including something as simple as a deeper understanding), it is reasonable to hypothesize that individuals will not desire or exercise voice, and it is appropriate to question whether voice is meaningful. But this does not mean that voice must be conceptualized solely in instrumental terms. In other words, I assert that it is a mistake to only consider something as voice when it is instrumentally effective. Voice does not need to be effective 100 percent of the time; some of the time it can solely have intrinsic worth. But if voice never achieves instrumental ends, one can seriously question whether it is true voice. So where is the dividing line? This is another nebulous conceptual boundary that

future work on voice needs to wrestle with.

### **Exit-Voice Redux**

While I have criticized the literature's over-reliance on Hirschman's (1970) approach to voice, it nevertheless remains true that, in the words of Meardi (2012, p. 186), "to understand 'voice' we need to understand 'exit'." In the traditional literature on employee voice, exit is seen narrowly as quitting one's job. Meardi (2012), however, has significantly expanded the dimensions of exit to be three dimensional. First is exit from effectively contributing to one's organization. This includes not only the traditional focus on quitting, but also what Meardi (2012) terms "internal exit" and what some organizational behavior scholars have labeled "neglect" (Farrell 1983; Mellahi, Budhwar, and Li 2010)—organizational misbehavior, informal resistance, and low levels of commitment, loyalty, and engagement. The second dimension of an expanded perspective on exit is exit from one's local geographical area. In the context of work, this type of exit occurs through worker migration to areas with better work opportunities and conditions. For some, this might include seeking more desirable workplace voice mechanisms. Meardi's (2012) third dimension of exit is exit from the political arena such as through voter apathy and low levels of voter turnout. This can be related to the work context because political exit might be caused by political parties' lack of responsiveness to workers' concerns.

This broadened approach to exit can provide a useful framework for future work on voice. For starters, future research should consider how different forms of voice can serve as a counterweight to these dimensions of exit. Specifically, are there different voice mechanisms that alleviate the need for organizational exit, geographical exit, and political exit. Moreover, we can question whether the repression of certain forms of voice lead to different forms of exit, and ask what types of demands for voice arise from limitations on various forms of exit. Are these

behaviors driven by workers, managers, the state, or others? Also, there is recognition that labor union voice in the workplace can contribute to political participation (Budd 2012), but less is known about how other forms of employee voice might make such contributions. Deeper answers to these and related questions can contribute to our understanding of voice while also helping societies design more robust institutions of voice.

Similarly, while exit is one practical alternative to voice, and therefore one conceptual foil for voice, silence is another. That is, just as workers can choose exit or voice, they can also choose silence or voice. The research literature on silence, however, tends to be distinct from the research literature on voice, with the former largely the domain of organizational behavior scholars and the latter the domain of employment relations scholars and sociologists. In this way, the literature on silence tends to implicitly employ a unitarist frame of reference, while the literature on voice is rooted in pluralist or critical thought (Donaghey et al. 2011).<sup>1</sup> As such, there appear to be ripe areas for integrating these perspectives which could enhance our understanding of both voice and silence. For example, the literature on silence has used communicative theory (e.g., Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero 2003) which has not yet been systematically integrated into the traditional literature on employee voice.

The literature on silence has also devised a more fine-grained differentiation of types of motivations for silence than is common in the voice literature (e.g., Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero 2003; Detert and Edmondson 2011). This depth could be profitably applied to the voice literature, not only to better understand types of voice, but also their potentially different implications. For example, Burriss (2012) finds that managers respond differently to employees

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the unitarist, pluralist, and critical approaches to employment relations scholarship, see Budd and Bhawe (2008, 2010).

who are perceived to be using voice in a way that supports the organization's policies and practices compared to employees who are perceived to be using voice in a way that challenges the organization's status quo.

The issue of silence also begs questions about whether workers want opportunities for voice and what influences their participation. As noted by Markey et al. (2012), the extent to which employees perceive that they have influence and the extent to which they desire influence in the workplace are important issues that have not received a lot of research attention. These authors therefore survey workers about their perceived and desired influence, and find that organizational characteristics are more important than personal characteristics. Their results also uncover an interesting relationship between learning new things and wanting more influence. Cregan and Brown (2010) also find an interesting pattern of results in which willingness to participate in a voice mechanism depends on the types of issues valued by workers. Future work on voice should continue this research investigating what determines the extent to which employees desire more voice, more influence, and a willingness to exercise voice in the workplace. Indeed, returning to Meardi's (2012) expansion of exit, voice research should expand these inquiries beyond the workplace as well.

### **Rooting Voice in the Nature of Work**

Much research on work-related issues has lost its connections with what work actually is. Moreover, academic research as well as human resources policies tend to homogenize work to the extent that both theory and practice are implicitly rooted in particular, albeit unstated, conceptualizations of what work is and why workers work. These limitations are present in the literature on employee voice, such as when one research stream focuses exclusively on voice as a form of industrial democracy while another stream focuses solely on voice as a way to enhance

organizational performance. Future work on voice within both academic and practitioner circles needs to more carefully connect voice to concepts of work. And being more explicit in these connections would, in turn, improve cross-disciplinary conversations about work and facilitate deeper, multidisciplinary understandings.

As a broad foundation for this needed effort, Table 1 summarizes ten conceptualizations of work that are found in the literature on work across the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences: work as a curse, disutility, a commodity, freedom, personal fulfillment, occupational citizenship, identity, a social relation, caring for others, and service (Budd 2011). As further shown in Table 1, these conceptualizations yield diverse implications for thinking about employee voice.

If work is seen as a curse, then work as a lousy state of affairs is a pre-ordained fait accompli. From this perspective, there is little that can be done to change or improve work, so employee voice is not important. Workers should instead seek fulfillment or other rewards outside of work so perhaps non-work voice is important, but not employee voice. In a similar, albeit perhaps more modern, vein, conceptualizing work as disutility such that work is simply tolerated to earn income, also implies that employee voice is not an important construct because the focal point is money or other extrinsic rewards, not participation and self-determination. This is reinforced by the fact that modeling work as disutility in economic scholarship is typically accompanied by a complementary conceptualization of work as a commodity exchanged in competitive labor markets. Exit, not voice, is prioritized in market-mediated transactions so voice is embraced only to the extent that it can be seen as the freedom to quit and thus facilitate efficient market exchanges. In other words, voice is weakly seen as something exercised by one's feet, not through deeper expressive actions.

Work can also be conceptualized as a source of freedom. This conceptualization has different strands. First, work can be a source of economic freedom. This yields a perspective on employee voice that is similar to the one derived from seeing work as a commodity—specifically, voice is the freedom to quit. Second, work can be a source of political independence from others. In this way, employee voice includes not only the freedom to quit, but also the freedom of speech within the workplace. Unfortunately, free speech rights for workers are often overlooked in discussions of employee voice (Befort and Budd 2009). Third, work can also be a source of freedom from the dictates of nature. From this perspective, employee voice should serve human creativity, such as through individual autonomy and the peer-to-peer exchanges of ideas.

Work can also be conceptualized as a source of personal fulfillment through achievement, mastery, self-esteem, and self-worth, though this also goes hand-in-hand with the possibility that work with mindless repetition, abusive co-workers or bosses, excessive physical or mental demands, or other factors that comprise lousy work can have negative psychological consequences. Human resource management scholarship builds on this conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment by assuming that to be effective, human resource management practices must satisfy workers' psychological needs by managing their cognitive and affective functioning. Voice, then, is typically seen as something that can enhance job satisfaction and employee engagement which simultaneously enhances individual productivity and organizational performance.

Industrial relations theorizing goes further by seeing work as an activity undertaken by human beings who are entitled to certain rights. This occupational citizenship conceptualization of work then goes beyond the satisfaction and efficiency aspects of voice to also value human

needs, even when employee voice does not improve productivity. When paired with a belief that imperfect labor markets render individual employee-employer relations unequal, industrial relations scholarship traditionally prioritizes collective voice that provides self-determination and industrial democracy, especially through independent labor unions and collective bargaining. Labor unions are also privileged in industrial relations because their bargaining power is seen as providing necessary economic protection for workers who are individually disadvantaged in their dealings with their employers.

Work can also be a source of identity that helps individuals understand who they are and where they fit into the broader world. To the extent that individual self-determination is seen as an innate human need, the identity conceptualization of work indicates that employee voice should provide autonomy and self-determination in support of the construction of healthy, positive identities. This suggests that a lack of or repression of employee voice that stifles self-determination can prevent the development of positive identity. This conceptualization of work, therefore, should prompt analyses of the deep importance of voice, especially when contrasted with views that see work as a curse, disutility, or commodity.

Another conceptualization of work is as a social relation in which work consists of human interactions that are experienced in and shaped by social networks, social norms and institutions, and socially-constructed power relations. At a micro-level, this emphasis on human interactions suggests that employee voice should include peer-to-peer interactions. At a macro-level, the social relations theorizing on work is often accompanied by a belief that the employment relationship is characterized by deeply-conflicting, antagonistic employee-employer interests. In other words, work is viewed as contested terrain in which employers and employees continuously seek control and make accommodations. Employee voice, then, is seen as an

institution that should provide capacity for resisting and re-shaping managerial control strategies. Moreover, in selected radical traditions employee voice in the form of militant trade unions and other worker organizations is seen as radical, syndicalist voice that can help replace capitalism with an alternative socio-economic system.

Lastly, work can be seen as a way to care for and serve others. Workers in caring and serving occupations might value some or all of the preceding forms of voice illuminated by the other conceptualizations of work. But by themselves, these ways of thinking about work, which are typically outside of the mainstream in Western scholarship on work, suggest the need for a new, higher-level form of voice in which workers can influence what work means to them. I propose to call this “meta-voice.” Meta-voice can be exercised, for example, when workers choose to see work as a way to care for or serve others rather than seeing work in more typical Western ways. Another form of meta-voice is employees expressing a desire to their employers to have more time and support for volunteering.

As summarized in Table 1, if we consider a broad pattern of ways to model work, and in turn explicitly root our thinking about employee voice in the broad framework, then we can advance the literature on employee voice in two ways. One, the theoretical foundations of employee voice can be strengthened by a more careful linkage to the nature of work. Two, forms of voice that are commonly overlooked, such as employee free speech, peer-to-peer voice, and a newly-proposed meta-voice, are revealed as worthy of additional research. With that said, note carefully that the entries in Table 1 are intended to be read as complements, not substitutes. We should seek to further integrate the forms of voice that emerge from Table 1 rather than treating them in isolation. In this way, an explicit rooting of voice in theories of work can help stimulate more inter-disciplinary research on voice.

### **Emerging Institutions and Future Research**

In addition to the new conceptual directions I have proposed, voice research should continue to confront and analyze issues that result from changing and emerging institutions of voice. The decline of a key institution of employee voice, labor unions, has been well-documented for a variety of countries (Addison et al. 2011; Charlwood and Haynes 2008; Godard 2009; Pinto and Beckfield 2011). This has given rise to interesting studies on unmet demand for union voice (Pyman et al. 2009), employers' roles in determining voice regimes (Gollan 2010; Willman, Bryson, and Gomez 2006), the development of alternative voice mechanisms (Holland et al. 2009), and numerous other issues related to employee voice.

Yet there is more to be done. The importance of corporate governance structures and financial markets in shaping employee voice are worthy of additional attention. In a trend that has been labeled "financialization," corporations are increasingly focused on financial concerns such as boosting stock prices to satisfy Wall St. expectations and increase the value of executive stock options. Financialization also includes an increased pursuit of profits through financial transactions rather than through the delivery of valuable goods and services (Dore 2008). Financialization can affect voice by shaping corporate goals which in turn shape strategies toward employee issues generally, and labor unions specifically, including decisions on how corporations allocate resources; for example, by using corporate cash reserves to repurchase its stock rather than invest in new equipment (Lazonick 2009). More generally, the voice literature would benefit from a deeper understanding of the relationship between models of corporate governance and ownership, corporate decision-making, and employee voice structures.

The decline of labor unions also raises important questions about the ability of employee voice to provide checks and balances to shareholders and managers in corporate governance.

Among shareholders, managers, and employees, three patterns of conflict might occur: (1) class conflict in which shareholders and managers align against employees over compensation and other terms and conditions of employment, (2) accountability conflict in which shareholders and employees align against low-performing managers, and (3) insider-outsider conflict in which managers and employees align against shareholders over takeovers or other restructuring issues (Jackson, Höpner, and Kurdelbusch 2005). Strong forms of employee voice, especially via collective bargaining, have traditionally been advocated as a way to bringing a balance to the class conflict dimension, but a labor union or some other form of institutionalized power can also enhance social welfare by making employees an effective actor in balancing these other conflicts (Dau-Schmidt 2011). The decline in labor unions begs the question of whether other forms of employee voice can effectively play these roles in corporate governance.

In the public policy arena, the decline of unionized voice has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on soft law in the European Union (Peters 2011) and corporate self-regulation in the United States (Estlund 2010). In the context of the U.S. workplace, Estlund (2010) advocates for the need for “regulated self-regulation” or “co-regulation” rather than unadulterated corporate self-regulation. In this way, the weakening of the hard law of the state can potentially be offset by bolstering the regulatory role of nongovernmental actors, including for employment issues, workers themselves. A popular example in many countries is a health and safety committee. Notably for this chapter, the questions that surround the participation of employees in the regulatory process are essentially questions of voice. For example, to ask what types of employee participation are necessary to ensure that corporate compliance is more than cosmetic is to ask what forms of voice would be effective. There is scope for much research on the types of support that are needed to make these arrangements meaningful, such as protections

against reprisals and the assistance of outside monitoring agents, or whether this is a hollow exercise because of corporate power (Secunda 2010).

Related issues arise in the context of soft law approaches that provide weaker obligations for organizations than under hard law. For example, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and various European countries have implemented laws granting employees the right to request a flexible or altered work schedule. This can be seen as a form of soft law because employers' only obligations are to consider these requests. Within this type of framework in which workers are given more choice, "it is crucial to understand the conditions under which that choice is made and how choice is exercised and managed"—in other words, we need to understand employee voice in the presence of certain parameters around employee choice (Donnelly, Proctor-Thomson, and Plimmer 2012: 188).

There are many other areas where it is important for future research on voice to intersect with evolving practices and institutions. On a workplace level, for example, the increased diversity in voice mechanisms gives rise to a greater diversity of types of roles beyond traditional shop stewards and other union positions. Identifying the challenges of these positions and the skills required to be successful are important issues for future research. In representative systems, for example, how do representatives find a balance between being a delegate that simply voices workers' views and being a representative that takes a confident, leadership role in shaping as well as reflecting views. Related to this, what types of training do both worker representatives and managers need in order to make consultation and other voice arrangements effective (Hall and Purcell 2012)?

On more of a macro-level, voice research should continue to follow developments in multi-level voice and governance mechanisms and their intersections with public policy and

multinational corporations (Marginson and Sisson 2004; Marginson et al. 2010). Voice research should also continue to follow developments in employee voice in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Will these countries follow Western models or some other path, and what determines what type of path is followed? What are the implications for workers, their communities, their organizations, and their political systems?

Lastly, the implications for voice of changing technologies is an important issue for future research on voice. For starters, the tremendous use of social networking technologies by so many individuals seemingly supports the contention of voice researchers that it is human nature to want to engage in voice. Through blogs, tweets, online comments, and other tools, so many want to be heard. Through Facebook, LinkedIn, and other sites, so many want to connect with others. Our research on voice practices needs to keep pace with these developments. Are they complements or substitutes to more traditional voice mechanisms? Are they particularly useful for certain types of employees or issues? Why are companies so concerned with these voice behaviors, and what are ramifications of different organizational responses?

Changes in employee voice brought on by new information technologies should also prompt a re-evaluation of our conceptual approaches to employee voice. For starters, our traditional categories of employee voice seemingly overlook a major category of social media: employee-to-employee interactions such as voicing concerns with each other, sharing common experiences, griping, supporting each other, and sharing tips and techniques. Indeed, while overlooked in research, this form of voice has likely been occurring for centuries in guildhalls, union halls, pubs, bowling alleys, company cafeterias, and other venues where workers gather to socialize and talk shop. It seems that our conceptual as well as empirical research on voice should pay more attention to various forms of peer-to-peer or sideways voice.

## Conclusion

Employee voice is not a new issue. Two thousand years ago, at least one Roman farmer consulted with his slaves about changes in their work because “they are more willing to set about a piece of work on which they think that their opinions have been asked and their advice followed” (Columella 1941, p. 93). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a banner for the Newcastle, England, blacksmith’s union proclaimed that the union was “a voice from the forge.” But today, academic interest in employee voice has perhaps never been higher. This is visibly demonstrated by the breadth of the chapters in this handbook. These chapters draw from diverse intellectual traditions and theoretical perspectives, analyze numerous voice processes, and identify a broad range of intersections and implications.

At the same time, traditional, collective-oriented forms of employee voice in practice are either stagnant or declining in many parts of the world while individual and/or technology-based forms of voice are seemingly on the rise. So the future of employee voice is mixed. The challenge for researchers and practitioners is to continue to deepen our scholarship and broaden our practices so that employee voice remains a vibrant area of research and practice that engages with cutting-edge theory as well as with workers and their organizations in their everyday lives.

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Table 1: Relating Voice to Conceptualizations of Work

| Work as...                  | Definition  | Implications for Voice   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| 1. A Curse                  | An unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order.         | No voice warranted. Accept work as lousy.  |
| 2. Disutility               | A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure.                  | No voice warranted. Accept work as solely a source of income.                                    |
| 3. A Commodity              | An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.                     | Voice as freedom to quit.  |
| 4. Freedom                  | A way to achieve independence from other humans, or from nature by expressing human creativity. | Voice as freedom to quit and freedom of speech. Also, creativity-enhancing voice.                |
| 5. Personal Fulfillment     | Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs.               | Satisfaction-enhancing voice (where desired) and productivity-enhancing voice (where effective). |
| 6. Occupational Citizenship | An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights.                 | Voice as industrial democracy and self-determination over employment conditions.                 |
| 7. Identity                 | A method for understanding who you are and where you stand in the social structure.             | Voice for self-determination as part of healthy human identity.                                  |
| 8. A Social Relation        | Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.                 | Peer-to-peer voice. Militant voice for resistance. Radical voice for systemic change.            |
| 9. Caring for Others        | The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.        | Need for “meta-voice” about what work means, and therefore desired forms of work.                |
| 10. Service                 | The devotion of effort to others, such as God, household, community, or country.                | See caring.  |