

An aerial photograph of a city skyline at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm golden glow over the scene. The skyline features several prominent skyscrapers, including a tall, curved building on the left and a tall, rectangular building with a construction crane on top in the center. The city is situated along a river, with many boats anchored in the water. A large green park area is visible in the foreground, separating the city from the river. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds.

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Employee Voice at Work: Evolution and Perspectives,  
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# Better to be at Work or Sick? It's a Toss Up...

Paid work is ranked lower than any of the other 39 activities individuals can report engaging in, with the exception of being sick in bed. (Bryson and MacKerron, 2017).

- Intimacy, making love
- Theatre, dance
- Sports, exercising
- Singing, performing
- Chatting, socialising
- Walking, hiking
- Hunting, fishing
- Drinking alcohol
- Hobbies, arts
- Meditating, religious activities
- Sporting event
- Childcare
- Pet care
- Listening to music
- Games, puzzles
- Shopping, errands
- Gambling, betting
- Computer games
- Eating, snacking
- Cooking, preparing food
- Drinking tea/coffee
- Reading
- Listening to speech, podcasts
- Washing, dressing, grooming
- Sleeping, resting, relaxing
- Smoking
- Browsing the internet
- Text, email, social media
- Housework, DIY
- Travelling, commuting
- Meeting, seminar, class
- Admin, finance, organising
- Waiting, queuing
- Care or help for adults
- **Working, studying**
- Sick in bed



## What Do We Mean by Voice?

- Variety of mechanisms (collective/ individual, union/ non-union)
- Covering: employment issues, autonomy, organisational issues
- Cooperation and conflictual aspects
- The ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say, formally and/or informally, collectively and/or individually, potentially to influence organisational affairs relating to issues that affect their work, their interests and the interests of managers and owners



# Focus on Organisational Voice Failure



“Here are the results of the latest employee satisfaction survey”

Photo Credit: Pinterest

- Space shuttle Challenger disaster
- Enron
- United Airlines 173
- Bundaberg ‘Dr Death’ case
- HMS Sheffield

# Perspectives...

The first century Roman farmer Columella consulted his slaves 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 cited by Budd )

# Perspectives: The Ideal Worker

“....one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make up the ox”

The Case of Schmidt  
(F .W Taylor)

# Perspectives...

“Organisations are designed  
by geniuses to be run by  
idiots”

(Herman Wouk)



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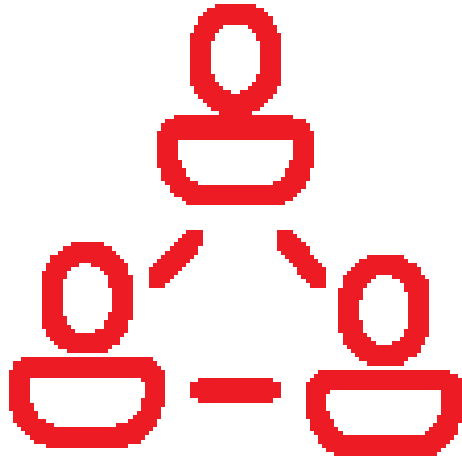
## Perspectives...

“Something happened that must not happen again. Somewhere, somehow, the employees got the idea that they were in the driver's seat. That they had control in their hands. This is an attitude, gentlemen, that must be reversed. This is the fantasy that must be eradicated”.

(Lemuel Bouleware, GE executive after a strike in the 1940s)



## Perspectives...



“I don’t want yes-men around me. I want everyone to tell me the truth – even though it costs him his job”.

(Samuel Goldwyn)



## Perspectives...

“...[it is] impossible to be a free citizen in the public square but a slave in the workplace. Democracy [cannot] end outside the factory gates: workers [are] stakeholders in the firm...and must have industrial citizenship rights”

(Hyman, 2015)

Photo credit: Brillo.net



# The Modern Management Narrative...

- “In this changing business world, unleashing and releasing employee voice is essential in developing the economic growth we all want to see”.

(Nita Clarke, director of the Involvement and Participation Association, (IPA))

# Or the Same Old Times? Alternative Narrative around Functional Stupidity

Functional stupidity is [the] inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways. (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016)

“(1) You never go around your boss. (2) You tell your boss what he wants to hear, even when your boss claims that he wants dissenting views. (3) If your boss wants something dropped, you drop it. (4) You are sensitive to your boss’s wishes so that you anticipate what he wants: you don’t force him, in other words, to act as boss. (5) Your job is not to report something that your boss does not want reported, but rather to cover it up. You do what your job requires, and keep your mouth shut”.

# Employee Voice: Theory, Focus and Philosophy

Theoretical strand	Indicative voice schemes	Voice rationale	Form of voice	Philosophy
<b>HRM/HPWS</b>	Focus groups Open door policy	Organizational Performance	Individual	Managerial/unitarist: <i>Engender Loyalty</i>
<b>Political science</b>	Workers on boards Join consultation	Citizenship	Representative	Legalistic: <i>Democracy</i> <i>Human rights-based</i>
<b>TCE (economics)</b>	Dual (union and/or non-union) voice	Cost switching	Representative	Utilitarian: <i>Transaction efficacy</i>
<b>LPT (sociology)</b>	Collective bargaining Works councils Partnership	Power and control	Collective	Pluralist-Radical: <i>Power-sharing</i> <i>Countervailing power</i>
<b>OB (psychology)</b>	Teamworking Speak-up programmes	Job design improvements	Individuals and groups	Humanist/unitarist: <i>Engagement</i> <i>Commitment</i>

# Hirschman Definition



- “Any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs”.
- The point about voice is that its provision may secure general improvements, although if exit is reduced as a consequence it may force the discontented to take action within the organisation, and hence make voice a more powerful tool for change.

(Hirschman 1970, p. 30)

Photo credit: Dice Insights



# IR

- Voice as the expression of worker interests that are separate and distinct from those of the firm, and as a vehicle for employees.
- Employees seek voice to have some level of say in decisions that have a material impact on what they do in the workplace, and to assert and protect their interests.
- Extra-organisational voice mechanisms are necessary to protect the rights of individuals to express themselves, such as unions and whistleblowing provisions.
- A focus on formal institutions, such as trade unions, collective bargaining, arbitration, works councils and grievance procedures.

# Broadening IR Voice

- “the dichotomy between no voice and collective voice needs to be reviewed”. Marsden (2013: 251)
- “The traditional industrial relations emphasis on collective voice through collective bargaining is excessively narrow. Richer understandings have and continue to come from including non-union 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”. (Budd 2014, p. 478)



Photo credit: Creative Crew



# Voice from an OB Perspective

- “One important commonality is the idea of voice being an act of verbal expression, where a message is conveyed from a sender to a recipient. Second, voice is defined as discretionary behavior... A third commonality is the notion of voice being constructive in its intent. The objective is to bring about improvement and positive change, not simply vent or complain”.
- Morrison (2011, p. 381) acknowledges “a rich literature” within industrial relations, but notes:
  - “They have not considered discretionary voice behaviour, or the causes or consequences of this behaviour. In sum, as these various literature streams define voice in a way that does not closely match current conceptualizations [sic], I exclude them from this review”.

# OB

- What motivates individual employees to speak up when they have opinions, concerns, ideas or suggestions.
- There is an underlying assumption that employees generally want to speak up, and that management should value this voice because of its potential benefits for organizational performance.
- The focus is on the micro-level factors that encourage or discourage voice, and voice is portrayed as an individual-level behavior.
- The OB conception of voice is divorced from the historical development of mechanisms of employee representation as vehicles for creating voice opportunity.

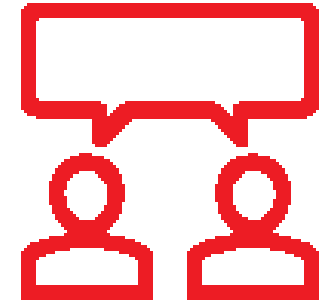
# What Do We Mean by Pro-Social?

- For OB, “pro-social” is behaviour that is defined as being other-regarding (not self-regarding), and of benefit to the organisation/work unit.
- But who defines what is of benefit? And what is constructive? Is pro-social simply pro-management?
- Alternative conception of voice as a pro-social activity. Roy (1952, 1954) challenged the view that employee soldiering resulted from a lack of understanding on the part of work groups of the “economic logics of management”. The workers in the machine shop were in fact highly alert to their economic interests, which differed from those of management, in restricting output.
- Roy as an employee, was scolded by workmates on many occasions for working too hard because the work group reasoned that the inevitable result of turning in excess earnings would be a retiming of the work and a consequent cut in the piece rate. Although this soldiering behaviour advanced the interests of the work group, can this be seen as pro-social behaviour, given it clearly was intended to frustrate the interests of management?

# Comparing IR and OB

	Voice in IR	Voice in OB
Primary level of analysis	Collective	Individual
Primary focus of analysis	Voice structures and systems	Voice as a behavioral act
Primary means through which voice occurs	Formal mechanisms	Informal interactions
Primary enablers/inhibitors	Structural	Both individual and contextual
Types of employees	Workers, both unionized and non-unionized	All, including professionals and mid-to-high level managers
Types of input being voiced	Worker interests, grievances	Suggestions, ideas, opinions, information about problems
Assumptions about motives	Expressive or corrective; self-interest	Promotive or improvement-oriented; self plus other interest
Assumptions about employment relationship	Adversarial	Largely non-adversarial
Assumptions about interests	Conflicting	Largely aligned
Assumptions about who controls voice	Management	Employees
Why voice is important	Protecting workers; promoting workplace democracy	Improving organizational effectiveness; preventing or correcting problems
Alternative to voice	Exit	Silence

**Table 1:**  
Key Differences between IR and OB Conceptualizations of Voice (Wilkinson et al 2019)





# Moving Forward? Levels of Analysis

- The macro level consists of the regulatory framework, which determines organisational policy around voice. (IR )
- The meso level, relates to the voice systems that organisations establish and the extent to which these are utilised in practice. (IR/HRM)
- The micro level, examines the individual-level motivators and inhibitors to voice, such as dispositions, attitudes and perceptions, emotions and beliefs. (OB)
- Voice systems are the focus of the first two levels whereas voice behaviour is the focus of the third.

# Moving Forward: Integration

- IR and OB look at different types of employees and different types of voice messages.
- As noted, IR is interested mainly in workers and the communication of grievances and worker interests.
- OB has focused on managers and professionals, and communication of ideas, suggestions, and concerns about workplace dynamics and processes.

# Moving Forward: Voices for All? From Employee to Worker Voice?

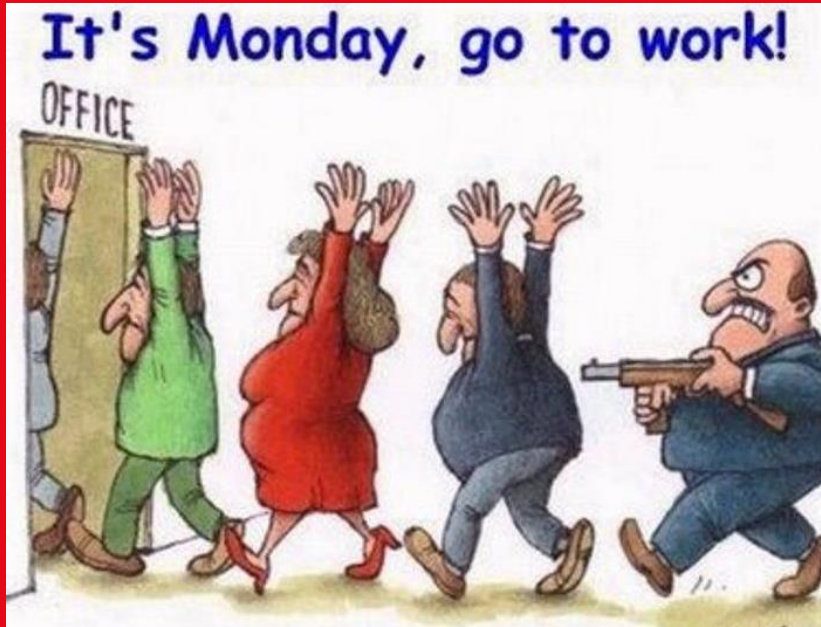


Photo credit: Pinterest

- Creating voice opportunities for all workers including those who work in the informal economy.
- How the motivators and outcomes of voice might be different for non-traditional workers, and what this might suggest for designing effective voice mechanisms?
- Examine appropriate structures for non-traditional workers to have voice, in light of the barriers they may face such as low status and isolation from other workers.

# Moving Forward: Learning from Practice

## Voices from Below...

- Role of social media in relation to voice
- Uber drivers have set up their own online groups to facilitate voice. Interestingly, these workers are not only concerned about traditional IR issues such as working conditions and pay, but are also sharing suggestions useful for the company, such as better placement of markers for airports pickups. (Kaine et al., 2018)
- We are seeing an emergence of collective action and solidarity as a means to exert influence over working conditions (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2019).



# Some Final Thoughts

- Voice is “messy and full of heartbreak” (Hirschman 1970, p. 10)
- Diversity and Voice
- ‘Thunder in the silence’ (Lao-Tzu)
- Social media
- Peer to peer voice?
- Re-enchantment of work ?



You have options. You can either continue to be miserable or you can just accept the way things are (Ghost Town, 2008).

# Who Really Wants Voice?

“The question that managers frequently asked revealed the nature of their interest: ‘how can we make the workers feel that they are participating?’ We sought to explain that, in the long run, workers would not feel that they were participating unless they had some real impact upon decisions important to management as well as to workers. This generally ended the conversations”.

(Whyte)



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