



Employee voice and work engagement: Macro, meso, and micro-level drivers of convergence?



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ABSTRACT

Direct forms of individual employee voice are potentially important yet underexplored antecedents of work engagement. Based largely in job demands–resources theorizing, we develop a conceptual multi-level framework that explores how individual employee perceptions of voice practices affect their level of work engagement. We argue that the extent to which voice practices might converge as ‘best practice’ to create work engagement is influenced by factors at three levels: macro-level national culture (the degree of power distance), meso-level organizational climate (the extent of empowering leadership and participation), and micro-level relationship quality between employee and supervisor (leader–member exchange). Positioning this framework in the human resource management convergence/divergence debate, we develop propositions for future research linking direct employee voice and work engagement.

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1. Introduction

The debate whether the human resource management (HRM) practices adopted by organizations across the world are converging to a ‘best practice’ model, or are diverging based on contextual factors that encourage local responsiveness is well rehearsed in the international HRM literature (see, for example: [Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012](#)). One area of strategic HRM that has received little attention in this debate, however, is employee voice. More frequently addressed in studies of labor relations on a cross-national scale (e.g. [Frege & Kelly, 2013](#)), HRM researchers have largely ignored this significant area of practice that is of fundamental importance to the effective operation of any organization ([Wood & Wall, 2007](#)). As an Economic Intelligence Unit ([EIU, 2014, p. 15](#)) report claims, “if employees are valued and their voices are heard, then they will be much more willing to provide their full commitment and stay in the firm”. Employee voice, as we argue, is no longer reserved for the domain of collective representation through worker bodies, but is a daily people management task and hence a cornerstone of HRM.

Employee voice refers to employees either receiving information, being consulted, or being part of joint decision-making within the organization ([Wood & Fenton-O’Creevy, 2005](#)). The employee relations literature defines employee voice as a broad concept that includes both indirect and direct mechanisms ([Kaufman, 2015](#)). Historically, more emphasis has been placed on voice practices involving *indirect* mechanisms such as collective bargaining through trade unions. More recently, organizations have adopted *direct* voice mechanisms such as attitude surveys, suggestion schemes, teams and individual employee–manager meetings ([Lavelle, Gunnigle, & McDonnell, 2010](#)). Although not to diminish the relevance of indirect, collective mechanisms today ([Wood & Fenton-O’Creevy, 2005](#)), we focus here on the less-explored direct individual-level employee voice practices provided by the employing organization, often implemented through line management.

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Direct voice typically is a matter of individual choice rather than being part of a formally required collective voice process. The increasing emphasis in many organizations on direct voice may have significant implications for workplace outcomes in terms of employee attitudes and behaviors, as it raises the question of whether these practices are perceived by employees as facilitating involvement in the organization's decision-making process. In addition, direct voice mechanisms are primarily implemented by supervisors, whereby individual employee experiences of voice practices are influenced by the quality of interaction with their supervisor. We argue therefore that the role of supervisors plays an even greater role in direct employee voice than in indirect voice.

Taking a direct, individual-level perspective, we define employee voice practices as organization practices that create opportunities for employees to be involved in the organization's decision-making process, particularly regarding issues related to work. This definition is based on the 'AMO' (Ability/Motivation/Opportunity) model (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000), whereby 'Opportunity to participate in the organization is considered a critical element for improving performance in organizations. In particular, we are interested in how direct employee voice affects the individual-level performance outcome of work engagement. Work engagement as a construct has become popular among practitioners and academics alike, yet in practice, it continues to pose significant organizational challenges (The State of HR survey, 2013). This is perhaps unsurprising as it promises much in terms of performance outcomes (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Although initial studies demonstrate that employees who believe their opinion is listened to and valued will be more engaged, particularly in Western contexts (Beugre, 2010; Cheng, Lu, Chang, & Johnstone, 2013; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013), there are still many unanswered questions regarding this relationship especially in different cultural contexts.

Firstly, there is a lack of research exploring the relationship between the intended employee voice practices of an organization and how employees perceive these practices. Although implementing a specific practice may result in employees perceiving that the practice provides a welcome opportunity for involvement (with employees having the option whether or not to actually use the practice), it is likely that this only happens for those employees where there is convergence between the practice and their own values (Nishii & Wright, 2008). Many factors may be involved in creating this sense of convergence (Luthans, 2011), including socio-cultural values (Rowley & Benson, 2002) and organizational climates created through senior leadership (Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008).

Secondly, we do not have a clear understanding of the basic relationship between voice and work engagement in different cultural contexts. As multinational corporations (MNCs) expand globally, the implementation of standardized 'best practices' for employee voice embedding Western values in different cultural contexts has been increasing (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007). In particular, direct, individual-level voice practices have been found to be preferred by these MNCs to avoid involvement in local institutionalized collective voice processes with which they are unfamiliar (Loise & Drucker, 2002). However, such convergence of best practice across countries is challenging due to cultural constraints (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000; Rowley & Benson, 2002). Each country has a unique national culture that may impact an individual's reaction to voice activity. Among the multiple dimensions of national culture identified to date, Landau (2009) argues that the level of power distance is the most relevant to employee voice. Power distance is defined as "the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). People from low power distance cultures tend to be less favorable toward limited voice in the decision-making process than people from high power distance cultures (Brockner et al., 2001).

Thirdly, we need to shift our attention from macro-level national cultures and meso-level organizational climates to the micro-level of the supervisor–subordinate relationship to understand the voice–engagement relationship. This final level is a necessary condition, as it is at this level that the individual employee's experiences in the workplace are translated into attitudes and behaviors. Although acknowledging that there are potentially multiple collective voice channels within an organization (e.g. through trade unions or worker associations), our focus here is on direct voice mechanisms in which the line manager plays an active role. The quality of the supervisor–subordinate relationship has previously been found to mediate the outcome of perceptions of voice practices in terms of organizational commitment (Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher, & Hope-Hailey, 2011), and is therefore interesting to explore in the context of employee voice and work engagement.

In summary, we present a theoretical overview linking direct individual-level employee voice and work engagement in the context of organizations operating in high and low power distance cultures. We develop a conceptual multi-level framework and related propositions, contrasting the spread of best practice through MNCs with the demands of socio-cultural values to contribute to the convergence/divergence debate in the international HRM field. We start by exploring the concept of work engagement, then develop each element of the framework, including employee voice practices (intended and perceived), power distance, organizational climate, and supervisor–subordinate relationships. We conclude with a discussion of the context-free and context-dependent interactions among the elements of the proposed framework, providing suggestions for future research and practice.

2. Employee voice and work engagement

Many studies have explored work engagement as an antecedent to elicit positive organizational outcomes such as high performance, high customer loyalty, low turnover, and low absenteeism (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Saks, 2006; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008), hence its value as a subject of study. Khan explains that engaged employees "express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance" (1990, p. 694). Engagement operates not only at the state level, including "feelings of enthusiasm, focus, and being energized" (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009, p. 5), but also as a behavior, including "working proactively, role expansion, working beyond expectation, persistence, and adaptability"

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