Voice at work . . . what do employers want?
A symposium summary

Alex Bryson, Rafael Gomez and Paul Willman

Rafael Gomez, Interdisciplinary Institute of Management, room G514, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE, UK

Correspondence: r.gomez@lse.ac.uk

Keywords: workplace voice, employers, unions
JEL classification: J50, L29, M54

From administrating payroll to providing incentives and opportunities for workplace involvement, the management of employees occurs across many dimensions. When employers treat these latter dimensions seriously, it can be said that a formal ‘voice regime’ is present at the workplace. The practices that form part of most formal voice regimes can be quite diverse (the papers in this symposium reflect this diversity). Typically, however, they involve two-way forms of communication between employers and employees, whereby management—in exchange for granting employees a meaningful ‘say’ at work—attempts to gain valuable information and improved worker performance with or without third-party (i.e. union) involvement. When unions are involved, one can think of this as an independent channel for delivering voice and due process to workers; one that also fulfils an agency function for employers. Unions, among other things, have been found to lower turnover, improve recruitment, develop promotional policies and codify job descriptions, all of which benefit the firm as much as the worker.

Whether employers ultimately adopt a formal (union or non-union) voice regime at work or not, can be thought of in the same way that Albert O. Hirschman envisaged voice more generally three decades ago—as a cost-benefit decision made by a firm under conditions of uncertainty and risk.

The framework above may appear strange for those versed in American or Continental style labour legislation. While voice is certainly an option for firms, the assumption in the United States is that no firm chooses to adopt union voice. Indeed firms are often portrayed as doing everything in their power to avoid unionization. It is employees who choose to unionize and it is federal law (i.e. the Wagner Act) that grants employees the right to force an employer
to recognize a union if they organize and win a representation election. Similarly, in Europe, most countries have statutory provisions that require voice in most establishments in the form of works councils or extensions of collective agreements.

Whilst we are in general agreement with these characterizations, we still feel that an employer can choose the extent to which it allows collective representation vehicles to emerge among its workers. An employer can also regulate how hard it might dissuade workers from exercising their right to union-ize (certainly in the US case) or how seriously it engages in discussions with employees via statutory works councils. Employers make choices about where to locate, some deciding to locate in regions where unions are not prevalent while others locate in union strongholds and hence make *de facto* decisions regarding the adoption of union voice. The employer, in other words, is not merely a passive vessel within which voice regimes flourish (or die). Rather, this symposium makes it quite clear that the employer—especially in countries like the US, UK and Canada where the choice of voice and its form is largely free of legal prescription—has decided preferences, as well as a stake in the outcome.

In the two labour law analyses that form part of this symposium (the papers by Michael LeRoy and Daphne Taras) it is evident, however, that employer choices within the Wagner-style model are not unfettered. Public policy is crafted so as to provide boundaries to the exercise of employers’ preferences. Unions themselves, as noted by Andy Charlwood in his critical reply to our paper in this symposium, also provide an important constraint on firm action, which is important in predicting where and when employee voice will probably emerge.

These insights provide the overarching framework for the five essays that form part of our symposium on workplace voice and the role of employers in that voice provision. Our intention is to provide a new way of viewing two issues that are of particular interest to readers of the *Socio-Economic Review*. The first key issue centres on employer demand for workplace representation and employee services of different kinds. The second issue deals more generally with the supply of these intuitional voice services by employers. The papers in this symposium do not take institutions for granted and instead question how voice institutions arise in the first place (see, for example, the paper by Paul Gollan).

In specific terms, the symposium attempts to account for variations in the adoption of voice-related employee management regimes across workplaces in a number of English-speaking countries. Differentiation in the nature and incidence of voice institutions across English-speaking countries is a function of government action, worker desires, union behaviour and employer choice. We feel that insufficient attention has been given to the last of these.
We also tackle the question of what drives the employer’s choice of voice regime. In the US we know that the legal framework plays an important role since labour law precludes unions from being formal productivity-enhancing voice generators (see Michael LeRoy’s paper). In Britain and Canada (see Daphne Taras’ paper), legal institutions are less deterministic and as a consequence there is more room for unions to operate as voice providers alongside management efforts.

One of the more perplexing questions addressed in this symposium is that despite the many advantages that formal voice provides, its intensity varies across employers and in a significant number of cases, is not found at all. Why should this be the case? (see the paper by Paul Willman et al.). This is a novel question that still lacks empirical examination, since the typical concentration in most studies is on the determinants of voice rather than on what we prefer to term, the determinants of ‘silence’.

Our answer is predicated on the observation that unless a workplace is linked to a parent company where voice practices are already well established, establishments typically begin life with no specific formal voice regime in place. The workplace either develops its own voice practices over time, adapts an existing form of non-union voice from head-office or a competitor, or becomes unionized and, therefore, has union voice imposed from the outside, which may or may not sit alongside in-house voice practices. The default position in all of this is ‘no formal voice’. That is, the adoption of a formal voice regime only occurs when a workplace decides to invest in one or when it enters into (or at least not actively oppose) a bargaining agreement with a union. Otherwise, if management does nothing to initiate voice, the workplace effectively remains a non-voice enclave. The choice of investing (or not) in a voice regime is, therefore, inherent to employment relations systems anywhere that employers have discretion in voice provision. Where union and other forms of voice are mandated by statute to all workers irrespective of workplace-level organizing, the approach adopted here is naturally of much less use.

Many of the concepts and concerns mentioned above have been addressed elsewhere, but with the central question(s) inverted. That is, the debate has usually been framed around employees and what they want in terms of workplace voice, rather than what the employer may desire. What makes these papers unique, therefore, is the drawing together of various experts from distinct fields of employment relations, to tackle the central question of what (if any) kind of employee management regime employers want and why they may (or may not) be providing it to their workers? The methodologies employed vary from legal analyses to case studies and to empirical research and the answers, in some cases, may challenge received wisdom. But in the end, to paraphrase a well-worn cliché, the proof of the pudding is in the eating or, in this case, the reading. Whether our
emphasis on employers and their choices offers a coherent explanation for the
distribution and incidence of voice at work is for the reader to decide.

Acknowledgements

The authors are, respectively, Principal Research Fellow, Policy Studies Institute
(London), Lecturer, Institute of Management, London School of Economics
and Professor of Management, University of Oxford. We would like to thank
Joel Rogers and Daphne Taras for their valuable comments on an earlier draft
and David Marsden for his editorial guidance and encouragement in organizing
this set of papers.