

Employee Voice : More Than a Whisper in the New Workplace?

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ABSTRACT

There is much discussion in government, industry and higher education circles about the need to graduate students with 'employability' skills in order to meet the needs of global and sustainable organisations in a knowledge economy. These skills include: the ability to communicate clearly, to use initiative, to solve problems and to manage self. Given such requirements, new graduates can assume that they will be employed in workplaces in which they are encouraged to use these skills. However, the history of 'employee voice' suggests that this is not as certain as may be supposed. Indeed, what is interesting is that industry demand for graduates with this broad range of skills has not been accompanied by significant change to organisational decision-making processes to ensure that the voice of these new skilled graduate employees is heard. This is particularly important in the global economic crisis as graduates become less confident about their future employment situation. The question that needs to be asked is: what is needed to enable the 'voice' of employees who have graduated from higher education with higher level employability skills to be heard in the decision making process of their employing organisation? This paper explores this from a conceptual perspective and concludes there is need for a renewed focus on, and research into, the elements required to enable graduate employee voice to be heard¹.

INTRODUCTION

Despite discussion on what constitutes global, sustainable, high performance organisations and how these organisations nurture and utilise the knowledge that exists in the heads of their employees, there has been less discussion on what new employment relationship is needed to enable employee voice in organisational decision-making. What discussion has occurred has focused on the use of technology to support knowledge networking and the role of teams, consultative committees and, more recently, Communities of Practice, as the means to increase employee motivation and trust to share of their knowledge. While this discussion has focussed on the flattening of managerial hierarchies and the increase in management direct consultation with employees, there is little evidence that this has led to a fundamental dilution of the managerial decision-making process.

At the same time, the need for continuous development of knowledge and skills is resulting in industry demands on universities to graduate students with not only content knowledge but also broad 'employability skills'. A recent report into graduate employability skills claimed that "the graduate workforce is a key part of the talent pool businesses draw on to further these *[competitive, effective and innovative]* objectives" (Precision Consultancy, 2007, p.1). It is also recognised that this new wave of 'Net

¹ It should be noted that in focusing upon graduate employees it is not be assumed that this is dismissive of the need for voice of non-graduate employees. Rather the paper aims to give 'voice' to the largely neglected graduate employees.

Generation' graduates deal with information differently "they develop hypertext minds, they leap around...a linear thought process is much less common than bricolage...they piece information together through multiple sources" (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005, p.2.4-2.5). This is leading universities to new approaches to student learning that are more learner-centred and provides students with real-world authentic learning experiences in which students make more decisions about their own learning.

Interestingly, despite the increase in the graduate workforce in most Western developed countries and the decline in the collective voice through trade unions, there has been little focus on re-opening discussion on employee voice, or employee participation, that one might expect would be associated with the demand for graduates with broader 'employability' skills. Given the lack of any empirical studies of graduate employee work experience in regard to their voice being heard, this paper aims to present a conceptual argument as the basis for further empirical research into what is needed to enable the 'voice' of employees who have graduated from higher education with higher level employability skills to be heard in the decision making process of their employing organisation. While not part of the focus of this paper it is recognised that a sub-question requiring further exploration is what do trade unions need to do assist the voice of graduate employees to be heard, and, in so doing, to potentially increase their attraction to graduates. The paper first presents an overview of the conceptual link between employability skills and employee voice in the workplace.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

As organisations realise the importance of 'human capital' (the knowledge, skills and motivations embodied in people) to economic output, a premium is being placed on the development and continual upgrading of the skills and competencies of the workforce (OECD, 1996, cited in ACER 2001). This has led to an industry push on governments to encourage higher education agencies to adopt new approaches to education that emphasise the development of graduates with a broad range of skills. In the early 1992 the Conference Board of Canada (a forum for leaders from business, education, government and community) identified an Employability Skills Profile (cited in ACER 2001), the European Round Table of Industrialists proposed a list of generic employability skills and urged greater attention to be given to generic skills for employability and civic participation (cited in ACER 2001). By the turn of the century the Confederation of British Industry was a prime mover in seeking to have an initial set of core skills recognised in the UK (ACER 2001). In Australia a number of government reports in the late 1990s and early 2000s noted the key role of education and training providers in graduating students with the skills required to create "a community equipped to understand and participate in ongoing change" (DEST, 2002, p.17). Employability skills were defined as "...skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions" (DEST, 2002, p.14). These skills include: communication, team work, problem-solving, initiative, planning and organising, self-management, technological know-how and the ability to engage in learning as a life-long activity. Associated with these skills are a number of personal attributes such as loyalty, commitment, honest and integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation and commonsense.

The effect of this focus on 'employability skills' on universities has been a change in emphasis from graduating students from higher education with a 'liberal education in which the prime purpose was knowledge acquisition as an end in itself, to graduating students with skills required by industry. This has placed the onus on universities to provide graduates with "professional training and acquisition of a credential" (Coaldrake and Stedman 1999, p.3). This is leading more universities to develop

greater emphasis on providing students with learning environments that are activity-based, situated in real-world authentic challenges in which 'knowing' and 'doing' are not separated into abstract knowledge (theory) and actual implementation (practice)' (Brown & Duguid 2000). This has led to a move to develop real world of work learning opportunities such as industry placements, 'sandwich' year(s) and internships in organisations. In the UK significant government funding has been allocated to support universities to establish Centres of Excellence for workplace learning and to a range of publications on how to develop employability skills of students (HERC 2004-2005, 2006, 2007). In Australia, since the first framework for generic graduate attributes was developed in the late 1990s, there have been numerous reports and policy developments aimed at "strengthening the link between education and the labour market, and stimulating the development of training and learning cultures within the enterprise" (ACER 2001, p.viii). Universities have increased their focus on graduating students who are work-ready by designing work-related and work-integrated learning opportunities for them to gain employability skills (for examples see Precision Consultancy 2007).

While the focus of discussion has been on the ability of universities to graduate students with these skills there has been little discussion on the challenge for industry that such students may bring. This is partly explained by perceptions that industry has already introduced new forms of work organisation which have flatter management structures dependent on teamwork and creativity for high productivity. This is illustrated in the a statement made as a result of case studies of industry changes (Field, 2001, p.20):

there has been... substantial shift in the structure of organisations, both vertically (less layers of management) and horizontally (less walled-off silos)...lower level employees are more likely to work more closely with middle-and senior-level managers....impacts both on core attributes such as self-confidence, and on skills such as communication and leadership

However, while there is recognition of the need for organisations to develop managerial competence in "facilitat(ing) ongoing skill development...to get the best out of people" (McLeish, 2002, p.14) there is little research into where (and how) this is occurring. Indeed the UK Higher Education Academy has stated that 'professional education' is likely to pose a challenge for both employers and learners:

For employers, it is challenging to have professional learners who will be more critical of the way things are done and may seek to change things, rather than employees who simply absorb how to apply conventional methods (UK Higher Education Academy, 2008, p.4)

Questions that require answers include how will managers, steeped in notions of management decision-making, manage the expectations of highly skilled graduate employees who have the skills to be able to self-manage, problem-solve, plan and organise and be innovative? The challenge is further compounded when recognition is given to the fact that these new graduates are also 'Net Generation' youth who have been described as "learn(ing) better through discovery than being told...able to shift their attention rapidly ... (who) may choose not to pay attention to things that don't interest them ...and expect rapid responses in return" (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005, 2.5). In other words, the question that needs to be addressed is: what is needed to enable the 'voice' of employees who have graduated from higher education with higher level employability skills to be heard in the decision making process of their employing organisation? To commence this discussion there is need to place this question in its historical context.

EMPLOYEE VOICE

Employee voice has been defined as "the ability to have meaningful input into decisions" Budd (2004, p.23). The history of 'employee voice' in the workplace is

principally one that has focussed around three concepts of voice - political, human-relations and economic.

The political concept commences with an argument for industrial democracy that is "rooted in political theories of self-determination, and employee decision-making that stems from autonomy for human dignity" (Budd 2004, p.23). Initial claims for greater employee voice emerged from the industrial relations school in the late 1800s when the Webbs (1897) argued that Industrial Democracy was only possible through unions collectively bargaining from outside an organisation with managers inside the organisation. By the 1960s, while agreeing that collective bargaining from outside the organisation by trade unions was necessary, Clegg (1961) argued that it was possible for workers to be involved within the organisation at lower levels of management where they have specialist knowledge. Flanders (1968) stated that encouraging worker voice inside the organisation would extend the ability of employees to be heard on issues that included economic, labour market matters of power and control and labour process matters. This argument was reiterated in the 1970s and 1980s as unions began to explore the role of joint consultative committees and autonomous work groups within organisations as a means to reduce the frontiers of control between managers and workers (Edwards 1979; Batstone 1988; Millward et al 1992; Sisson 1987). Indeed Poole argued that participation within organisations had the potential to give workers more control over their working lives (Poole 1975). A number of frameworks and matrices of workforce participation were developed at this time that included concepts of:

- degree of participation - from partial participation through joint consultative committees of elected representatives influencing managerial decision making to full participation through shop-floor work groups in which each member had equal power over the outcome - (Pateman 1970).
- form of participation - shop-floor, departmental, organisational and corporate - ; type of participation – from information sharing, consultation, joint decision-making to self-management - and form of participation - executive and administrative - (Wang 1974).
- degree of employee involvement in decision-making - scope or range of managerial functions in which employees take part; degree or extent to which employees influence managerial functions; extent or the proportion of employees who participate; areas of authority in which employees participate; extent to which employees participate through profit making and forms of participation - (Walker 1975).
- elements of participation - the extent to which employees influence final decisions; the form of participation – direct or representative; level – task work-area, department, establishment, division/region or corporate/national, and subject matter – basic employee rights and conditions, production decisions and strategic decisions - (Marchington 1990).

During the 1980s discussion on employee participation turned from a political perspective to a 'human dignity' approach and even further to an economic argument by employers for whom employee voice was regarded as a means to improve productivity performance through integrated business processes based on higher levels of employee commitment (Kochan & Dyer 1992). Initial experiments in redesigning jobs to enrich the quality of work life (Davis & Taylor 1972; Kanter 1984) gave way to work redesign based on socio-technical systems in which decisions about work tasks were devolved to semi-autonomous-workgroups (Dunphy 1981; Trist; 1981, Dunphy & Stace 1992; Trist & Murray 1993). Thus by the late 1980s leading edge companies had developed less hierarchical and compartmentalised organisational structure accompanied by an organisational cultural change that promoted continuous learning, teamwork, participation and flexibility (Dertouzos, Lester & Solow, 1989), through Teams and . Quality Circles (Jones 2000).

In the political context, however, there was debate over whether these economically motivated initiatives to increase employee involvement made any substantial change to the governance structures in organisations (Marchington et al. 1993). Consultative Committees, for example, often remained essentially advisory to management rather than decision making, with issues discussed principally confined to basic employee and process matters rather than company strategy (Jones 2000).

In the new workplace of the twenty-first century, as knowledge has been increasingly recognised as the competitive advantage of high performing organisations, research into employee voice has tended to continue to focus on the economic aspects of employee voice. Pyman et al (2006) reference the plethora of literature upon employee voice that ranges from the link between employee voice and organisational performance, climate and commitment (Dundoon et al 2004), employee satisfaction and industrial citizenship (Bishop and Levine 1999) and high performance work systems (Boxall & Purcell, 2003).

New forms of employee voice, through direct employee participation (defined as “two-way communication between management and employees without the mediation of representatives), (Bryson, 2004) continue the emphasis on management communication directly with individual workers rather than through union representatives (Forth & Milward 2002). This includes employee voice in regular meetings with staff or committees of employees that discuss problems of management on a regular basis. Communities of Practice (CoPs) are the latest example of opportunities created by management to enable employees with a common interest to meet together to share their knowledge (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2004). However the question of the extent to which CoPs actually provide greater employee voice has been questioned. Tjiersen (2003, p.6) warns of examples of corruption of COPs such that they become ‘little more than formalised communities that, although emergent, have strong top-down directives’. Contu and Wilmott (2003) have argued that CoPs have been used as a new tool of managerial prerogative to gather employee knowledge for the fulfilment of corporate objectives. This led Huzzard (2004) to rename this concept ‘Communities of Domination’.

Thus there is evidence of the design of new ways by which management can access employee voice for the economic benefit of the organisation. However, there is little research into employee response to this. Bryson et al (2006) argue that the focus on comparing the economic effectiveness of various different forms of employee voice emphasis is misplaced, and what is needed is more research on employee perceptions of managerial responsiveness to their voice. In so saying they refer to the earlier work of Freeman and Medloff (1984) who found that the effects of employee voice practices are more dependent on managerial response than on the form that voice takes. Jones (2000) concluded similarly in her study of workforce participation practices in Australia in which she found:

the key condition for success, however, was managerial commitment to employee involvement in change rather than a redistribution of power between management and workers....this has less to do with whether workforce participation adopted a direct or representative form and more to do with the degree of managerial commitment to both workplace reform and workforce participation (Jones 2000, p.309)

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND GRADUATE EMPLOYEE VOICE

From this overview of the two concept of industry pressure on universities to graduate students with deeper ‘employability skills’, and history and recent experience of employee voice in organisations, it is apparent that there is need for further research into how these two concepts are, or need to be, linked. It requires a focus on employee perceptions of the extent to which they are able to utilise these skills in the organisations that employ them. This requires research into graduate employee perceptions of managerial responsiveness to their voice and to what extent they have

control over their jobs and influence over their job rewards (Pyman et al 2006). While any of the models and matrices of employee participation outlined above could be used to underpin this research, the model developed by Marchington (1990) would appear to be most relevant to apply to graduate employees. The model enables exploration of the extent to which employees influence final decisions, the form of participation, the level of participation and the subject matter upon which employee voice is heard.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at re-opening the debate on employee voice by focusing on industry demands for higher level 'employability skills' of the increasingly large number of graduate employees. The paper presented a conceptual argument of the largely to date un-discussed relationship between the two concepts of graduating new entrants to the workforce with 'employability skills' and employee voice and the implications of this relationship for the development of a new framework of employment relations. The conclusion that further empirical research is needed on this link identifies a political perspective to the largely economic argument for employee voice by identifying the need to research the perspective of graduate employees on the extent to which management is utilising their skills. While the focus of this paper has been on the implications of this relationship for a new employment relationship within an organisation, there are also potential implications for how trade unions may seek to attract graduate employees into their ranks if they can identify the contribution that their representative 'voice' may have for graduate employees.

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