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Positioning paper

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Have your say: *alternative* forms of workplace voice

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Introduction

'Modern working practices are constantly evolving and increasingly diverse, raising questions about whether everyone is able to and should have a say at work.'

Employee voice is one of the most studied concepts in the management literature. It is defined as *'the ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these to influence decisions at work'* (Dromey 2016, p4). Creating opportunities for workers to have a say on matters that affect them in the organisation is a fundamental element of treating them as legitimate stakeholders in the employment relationship – making them feel valued. In turn, people are more likely to stay in the organisation and to contribute more. Sharing views on how work should be carried out also allows people to better use their skills and knowledge, leading to higher productivity, greater innovation and solutions to problems, and thereby improving organisational effectiveness.

At the same time, modern working practices are constantly evolving and increasingly diverse, raising questions about whether everyone is able to and should have a say at work. One example of this concerns new types of employment relationship driven by technology, such as online bidding platforms where contractors look for temporary assignments. Employers may view these workers as separate from their core workforce, and therefore not provide opportunities for these 'giggers' to express their views, as they would their regular employees. On the other hand, because of the contingent nature of work, and the competitive nature of bidding for tasks, the contractors may themselves not

feel able to speak up to control the parameters of their work.

In this paper, we argue that we need a new framework for voice that would enable workers and employers to fully benefit from sharing of expertise, ideas, and opinions in the context of modern working practices. Traditional approaches to employee voice have been limited in their scope, informed by the view that the purpose of management is to benefit the business as the ultimate goal. Within this paradigm, employee voice – just like any other management tool – is only a means to an end of improving organisational performance. Because of this, only such types and metaphors for voice that contribute to the desired end have been considered: this comprises behaviours that have potential to impact performance, and mechanisms for managing those behaviours, but ignores potentially damaging outcomes for the workers themselves.

For example, employee involvement and participation is a key element of high-performance work systems (HPWS), which rely on employee voice mechanisms. The overarching goal of such HR systems is to benefit individual and organisational performance – based on the assumption that these two rationales occur simultaneously, and voice will improve both performance and employees' experience of work. However, it has been argued that by shifting responsibility for decision-making from managers to employees, voice practices can

lead to work intensification, and greater stress (Harley 2014).

While they have contributed to positive organisational practices with regard to employee involvement in decision-making, the current definitions of employee voice in the management literature are constrained at least in four ways:

1 Employee voice is typically defined either as a behaviour (for example communication), or as a system (for example mechanisms for contributing ideas in an organisation). People's needs (for example for self-expression) or emotional states (for example frustration) aren't always supported by an organisational system for voice, yet can influence attitudes at work. A practical example of this is the conversation 'around the water cooler', where employees may be sharing their views and concerns, bypassing the formal organisational channels. Such conversations have also been linked to knowledge transfer and enable employees to help each other solve problems. The increase in 'virtual offices' threatens to reduce this important form of voice (Davenport and Prusak 1998).

2 As a type of behaviour, employee voice exists for a particular purpose, which is contributing to or shaping solutions to organisational problems and influencing decision-making. However, voice behaviour can pursue other purposes, for example, when people use their voice to build a personal profile for themselves, gain influence with their peers and superiors, and enhance their career prospects. This behaviour does not contribute directly to organisational goals, and, in fact, may contradict those, but it is

meaningful for the individuals involved. Research has shown that people who feel their work is meaningful report greater well-being and job satisfaction, and are more committed to their work (Steger et al 2012). Effective voice contributes to people's experience of meaningful work (Yeoman 2014).

3 Further to this, the purpose of voice can be non-work-related. After all, the workplace is just an arena in which people play out their lives. More often than not, personal lives are not left at the door but remain important in the workplace, and the ability to express those can serve as a basis for fostering human connection and having fun at work. Research shows that work relationships not only help people to cope with problems, but also support personal development and well-being (Colbert et al 2016). On the flipside, personal views shared in the workplace can also give rise to conflict, prompting organisations to set some boundaries around the types of views that are appropriate to be shared. For example, last year's US presidential election created tensions in some organisations, with conflicting political views leading to hostility and harassment (Meinert 2017).

4 Finally, implied in the definitions of voice is the power paradigm, where one party – the management – dispenses opportunities for the other – the employees – to participate in decision-making. This issue has recently come to the fore with the growth in atypical ways of working, where workers with a particular employment status (those on zero-hour contracts or gig economy workers, for example) are formally limited

by their employer in the amount of say they can have in the way they work. In reality, these workers may be relying on various other forms of voice to have a say without waiting for 'permission' from their employer. This can include withdrawal from performing work, both in terms of absence from work and presenteeism. Active silence, such as choosing not to speak up as an act of protest, can be equally as or more important than speaking out (Wilkinson et al 2014).

As part of the CIPD's campaign for a future of work that is human-centred, we wish to highlight the human nature aspects of voice – for example, by looking at the alternative purposes for and forms of voice that are not currently accounted for in organisational voice systems. For example, voice can be a means to the personal ends of people working in an organisation, such as their well-being, fulfilment, and so on. Voice can also be an end in itself – if having voice has intrinsic value to an individual, for example, as an expression of individual identity or freedom of choice, without pursuing any further goal for that person or the organisation (Yeoman 2014). We argue that this approach will lead to shared value-creation for organisations and their people, in contrast to the traditional approach of prioritising business needs over individuals'.

1 Perspectives on voice

In this section, we describe seven lenses or perspectives on voice in the literature, and compare them with the current definition of employee voice, to test how evolved the employee voice thinking is against this framework. We then apply each lens to an organisational context, outlining what considerations should be made for employee voice and the challenges this raises for the future world of work.

Self-expression

Discovering and defining *self* is one of the fundamental questions of human psychology. Self-identity represents our personality, values, and beliefs that make us unique. At the societal level, our values are collectively expressed in norms, helping us identify our common purpose, and shaping social institutions (such as religions, governments, cultures, and others). Defining our identity is underpinned by a fundamental need for autonomy and freedom.

Voice can satisfy the need for autonomy in two important ways. The first is the ability to freely express one's needs, beliefs, choices, and preferences. Self-expression allows people to distinguish themselves from others, and validate their beliefs about who they are. In the arts literature, self-expression is viewed as a means of signalling one's thoughts, attitudes, or emotions. In this way, it can be seen as a channel for individuality and freedom. The second is the ability to have choice,

Figure 1: Lenses

Self-expression	Morality
Relationship-building	Power
Well-being	Service
Commodity	
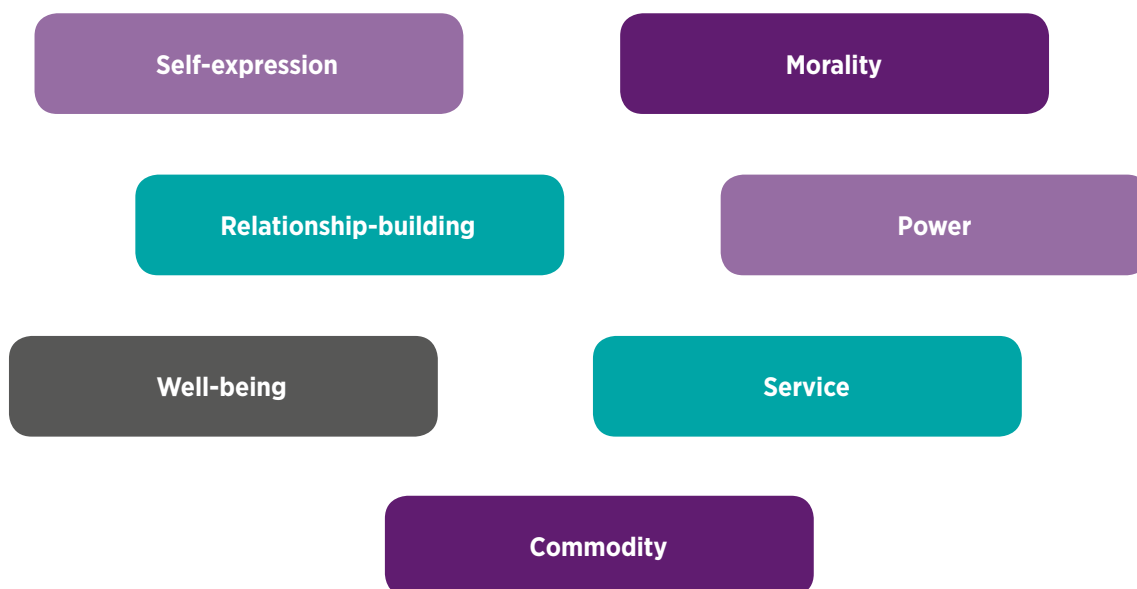
informing behaviour by your own motivation. Self-determination theory advocates people engaging in actions voluntarily, rather than being coerced by others influencing and controlling their motivation. The World Values Survey[1] shows a greater emphasis on these types of values with the development of democratic institutions in a society, as people gain greater freedom of choice in how to live their lives.

The way in which employee voice has been interpreted in workplace settings has left little scope for the forms of voice that carry primarily intrinsic value – such as self-expression – to the individual involved. While employee voice is about expression of one's beliefs, these beliefs are only seen to be valuable if they are constructive and positively contribute to organisational goals (Maynes and Podsakoff 2014). Yet, it is very likely that individual workers may be interested in expressing other types of views, and for purposes that serve their own needs.

However, the concept of self-determination is not alien to management literature in principle. Recent focus on behavioural science in HR has brought to the fore the role of intrinsic motivation in performance. As a result, there is an interest in managing employees in such a way that allows them to set their own goals and have control over the way in which they achieve them (Guest 2017). This is a key element of high-performance work systems, which aim to enhance employee attitudes and behaviours, and thereby increase performance. However, these practices treat employee outcomes such as autonomy and voice as a means to achieving improved performance, rather than as an end in themselves (Guest 2017; Harley 2014).

Widening the scope of self-determination beyond autonomy in achieving pre-set performance goals can be a problem for management. For example, there have been recent cases following the EU referendum and US election of employees expressing antagonistic political views in the workplace, which can morph into bullying and harassment if left unchecked (Meinert 2017).

Why voice as self-expression matters for organisational practice
According to the self-expression lens, employers need to think about creating environments for people to freely make their own choices, without having views or rules imposed on them. This could be achieved by, for example, abolishing the company dress code or empowering employees to choose their own working hours. However, this approach raises the question of where the boundary lies between issues open for individuals to make independent judgement versus those where the company wants to have the final say. For example, Starbucks struck a balance following a petition to allow employees to show tasteful tattoos, but not on the face or neck. They said, *'treat tattoos as you would speech – you can't swear, make hateful comments or lewd jokes in the workplace; neither can your tattoos'* (Tadeo 2014). Therefore, there needs to be some alignment between how individuals express themselves at work and the organisation's values.

Similarly, the rapid rise of social technology has been driven by the need for people to openly express themselves. This has inevitably increased employees' expectations of its use in the workplace (Greene 2015). Many employers have

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set up gated enterprise social networks (ESNs) as a platform for employees to express their views, allowing increased employee control over issues discussed as well as opportunity for informal networking with colleagues. They also provide opportunity for individuals who are less comfortable expressing their views in face-to-face meetings to get involved in discussions through a less direct mechanism. As Gifford (2015) suggested, *'social media to some extent challenges traditional notions of voice. The question of how employees make their views clear to their employers starts to merge with how they network, exchange ideas and directly influence colleagues'* (p41).

While ESNs have the potential to liberate employee voice and increase transparency by facilitating real-time conversations between managers and staff, they can be viewed with cynicism if managers do not respond to the issues being raised, or if they're felt to be too heavily controlled by management. Employees' use of social media in organisations in a socially constructive manner is therefore influenced by how free they feel to speak up (Martin et al 2015). As technology rapidly changes the voice landscape, it would be unrealistic for employers to completely shut themselves out of using social media – but rather, they need to be prepared for it, and responsive and prudent in how they use it. Furthermore, the younger generation entering the workplace may have greater expectations around using social media at work, or at least more informal ways of expressing themselves (Diercksen et al 2013) – although such generational differences are debatable.

Since there are still no real universally accepted norms around using social media, there is the potential for people to post comments that are damaging to the organisation or its reputation. Sites such as Glassdoor provide space for people to anonymously voice their views about their employer, which raises the question for organisations of whether and how to engage with negative comments. There have also been incidences of employees behaving ill-advisedly on Facebook and Twitter, which poses the challenge of how free employees should be to speak out about their organisation on personal sites, and to what extent organisations should be able to intervene. For example, some employers are looking at organisational constraints on the type and content of online comments (Greene 2015). Acas[2] recommends that employers should develop a policy for the use of social media with clear guidelines for staff on what they are able to share about the organisation, including a clear distinction between business and private use of social media.

Clearly, enabling self-expression in the workplace is challenged by the management's preference for control. Allowing individuals the freedom of expression and autonomy holds the risk that they won't always do what the organisation needs, or that they harm the organisational interests through pursuit of their own goals. Therefore, disallowing these forms of expression altogether is seen as a 'safer' approach. The question is: how realistic is it for organisations to exercise control over people's voice and choice? With increased voice in the wider society, employees are likely to expect to

have similar opportunities when they come to work. Furthermore, organisations should focus on enabling a culture of trust and empowerment, rather than one of surveillance and fear (CIPD 2017a).

Relationship-building

In addition to self, another side to identity is the way we relate to others – or *social identity*. In psychology, this relates to the fundamental human need for belonging to a larger collective, helping people better understand who they are depending on how they are similar to or different from others. Relating to others provides primarily an intrinsic value to the individual. The basis for the human need for belonging is the resulting feeling of being loved. Acceptance into a group can also provide people with a sense of validation, feeling valued – which is linked to the concepts of employee involvement and engagement in workplace settings. However, at the group level belonging has instrumental value in terms of maintaining social order and creating cohesion – for example, in teams. In turn, this can support feelings of inclusion, perceptions of justice (where group norms are maintained), and organisational citizenship behaviours.

Communication is the form of voice that allows people to establish the way they relate to one another. This includes both verbal (words) and non-verbal (behaviour) forms. Communication can also be divided into active and reactive. Active communication describes an individual's expression of emotional and motivational states, both through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. In contrast, reactive communication is a response to the cues received from others. Importantly, the theory of reciprocal determinism, put forward by Albert Bandura

(1978), suggests that individuals' behavioural responses are shaped both by personal factors and social environment. For example, someone disliking a particular group or environment is likely to act negatively towards it, develop a negative perception of themselves in the social group, and trigger another negative reaction, creating a vicious circle of perception and behaviour.

In employment settings, voice is typically viewed as verbal communication – representing views and opinions expressed by employees to contribute to management decisions. Recently, non-verbal forms of communication, such as withdrawal or employee silence, have become part of the debate, although in management literature these are seen as non-constructive forms of employee voice. For example, according to Maynes and Podsakoff (2014), *'not all expressive behaviour is voice. To be considered voice, it must be openly communicated, organisationally relevant, focused on influencing the work environment, and received by someone inside the organisation'* (p2). Communication between peers at work is, therefore, not considered voice if it's not expressed to management. However, this type of communication may hold value for individuals as a means of building social relationships at work.

There is, on the other hand, a movement towards collaborative cultures in organisations that value relational or emotional intelligence. This has been driven by the increasingly changing and uncertain wider operating context, in which competitive cultures do not promote survival. Work environments that are characterised by high-trust relationships between the employer and their people can

encourage employees to speak up. In particular, leaders' emotional states and the quality of the relationship between leader and employee can influence how safe individuals feel to express their views (Liu et al 2017).

Why voice as relationship-building matters for organisational practice

How can organisations tap into voice that's communicated between individuals (that is, not 'officially' communicated to management)? Many companies have created open-plan offices with more informal meeting spaces, to foster collaboration in recognition of the value of interpersonal relationship-building. Some creative companies have removed desks altogether in their offices and replaced them with collaborative spaces, with the aim of driving innovation (Dybis 2015). However, this can be problematic for introverted individuals who work more effectively in quiet spaces, away from other people. Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, employers must recognise different individual needs and create environments for them to interact with others in the way they choose.

The current increase in remote working, with some workers never actually meeting their employer or colleagues in person, is limiting the opportunities people have to connect with others at work on a personal level. As a result, they may not feel part of the organisation or part of a collective group of workers, which may lead to feelings of isolation and threaten their well-being. This could be an issue in particular for workers in the 'gig economy', who access temporary jobs via online platforms rather than working for an employer, therefore lacking a sense of collective identity.

'Enabling human connection, in addition to the current focus on policies and processes, can give important insight into particular issues in the organisation.'

The rise in 'fragmented work', with more people taking on temporary work or being remote from the organisational vision and goals, is challenging the locus of employee engagement. While traditional engagement-building mechanisms such as opportunity for progression or staff benefits may be missing in modern types of employment contract, interpersonal relationships could be the answer to engagement at work. For example, short-term contract workers may need to form social bonds with colleagues in order to feel motivated and satisfied with their job, when there is no opportunity to achieve longer-term goals in the company.

Well-being
In addition to expressing self, voice can also be used by individuals to express their emotional states – not with the purpose of communicating to others how they feel, but instead to reduce the intensity of the emotional experience.

Different forms of therapy have been developed based on the idea of putting feelings into words or behaviours. Talking therapy, or 'venting' in everyday life, is one of the ways of dealing with stress, although there is mixed evidence on whether talking about it actually increases the negative feelings by making people focus on the source of frustration. Other forms of therapy use play or art (painting, dance, and so on) as forms of self-expression that help people both engage in a pleasurable activity and find a way to process their emotions.

In employee voice theory dissenting voices and psychological withdrawal are often seen as defensive or destructive, as they are believed to undermine organisational policies (Maynes and Podsakoff 2014), and should, therefore, be discouraged. Yet,

in a pluralist perspective, where the outcomes for people are considered alongside the outcomes for the organisation, such forms of voice can be beneficial for workers as a coping mechanism.

Furthermore, voice can itself be used as an instrument to reduce the emotional stress of *others*. This perspective on voice as therapy – which consists of empathic listening and speaking – represents the role of it in caring for others. Co-operating with those who differ requires 'dialogic skills' of listening well, finding points of agreement and managing disagreement, and responding to other people in an attentive way (Sennett 2012). Some people may not express themselves in a clear manner, but the important element of listening is interpreting and making sense of their intent. Both sympathy and empathy are required at different times to foster co-operation. This describes voice as dialogue and emphasises the role of the listener, in being open to and genuinely caring about other people's perspectives.

Why voice as well-being matters for organisational practice
Some employers already provide opportunities for employees to express their concerns about the workplace or any personal issues via dedicated employee helplines. However, the uptake of these is typically low, likely resulting from the lack of trust in the confidentiality of such systems. Employee networks are another popular workplace mechanism for people to express their emotions (alongside opinions and concerns), and receive an empathetic response from people of similar backgrounds. At the same time, management is likely to encourage 'constructive' use of such networks, so as to contribute

to organisational goals through generally positive attitudes and suggestions on improving workplace processes. There is also a question over how accessible these routes are to non-permanent, non-full-time workers.

Listening is often associated with effective management and leadership (Lewis et al 2014), and further research has added emotional intelligence as one of the necessary characteristics of managers (Goleman et al 2013). There have been calls for leaders to show greater empathy with employees and to understand the impact of organisational decisions on individuals, enabling more inclusive decisions to be made. It is possible that similar relationships can be encouraged among peers beyond the informal colleague support and workplace friendships, proactively allowing time and space for people to express their emotional states and listen to each other at work. Enabling human connection, in addition to the current focus on policies and processes, can give important insight into particular issues in the organisation.

Most senior organisational leaders are increasingly seen getting involved in listening to front-line staff to address their concerns. For example, Dame Carolyn McCall joined easyJet as CEO at a time when the organisation was facing serious difficulties and not delivering on its customer promise (Hollinger 2014). To identify the root of the problem, she spent time with front-line staff instead of relying on the version of reality portrayed by managers, which built people's trust in her as a leader and immediately highlighted what needed to be done to solve the issue.

However, an opportunity to speak to a senior leader or even line manager is not available to all workers, especially within the new technology-enabled organisational models. People working for Uber or Deliveroo are more likely to be interacting with a piece of software rather than a human employer, and therefore might not be able to benefit from human contact or empathic listening. This can have a negative impact on well-being, with remote workers often struggling to switch off from their work devices and experiencing anxiety (CIPD 2017a). On the other hand, social media appears to be helping gig economy workers to connect with each other – creating a sort of 'virtual network' to discuss work issues and exchange advice (Osborne and Butler 2016).

Morality
One of the types of voice considered by the psychological literature is the *inner voice*, or internalised dialogue, a concept stemming from the Freudian theory of super-ego and Jungian idea of primary moral reaction in the unconscious. The inner voice is the moralising voice of consciousness, telling us how we ought to be, and representing an internalisation of cultural rules.

The moral component of employee voice is relatively unexplored. The conceptualisation of employee voice represents one stakeholder perspective – a voice of an individual worker or collective voice of workers. As a result, it is possible that some individuals frame their opinion in terms of solutions that would benefit all parties, while others will be informed primarily by self-interest. Similarly, depending on the mechanisms used to arrive at collective voice and the way its representatives communicate with management, collective voice may convey an intent for the entire organisation and its wider stakeholders to benefit, or simply represent the interests of, the workforce.

Why voice as morality matters for organisational practice
With the increased scrutiny of organisational ethics, companies are interested in ways of eliminating unethical employee behaviours. Yet, understanding of the drivers of these behaviours is poor, and most current approaches focus on increased regulation and policing of conduct (CIPD 2016a), which are not always effective.

At the broader level, there are questions about collective values and purpose espoused and enacted by organisations, and many companies work to articulate and publicly state what they stand for. Some also choose to translate these into specific policies and practices, for example, when selecting and rewarding people based on an assessment of their values and ethical behaviours.

On the flipside, organisations can also use voice to deal with the breach of values. For example, organisations put in place whistleblowing policies to ensure that any non-compliance with legal and ethical standards is reported and addressed. While companies should adhere to good practice, some may see whistleblowing as a non-constructive behaviour as it exposes gaps in organisational standards, and can disclose sensitive information about the employer. There is, therefore, a tension between supporting whistleblowers in addressing non-compliance and avoiding damage to organisational reputation.

To become more effective, companies need to develop new ways to achieve clarity on the expected ethical behaviours and embed those across the organisation. In this sense the organisational narrative, such as its vision and values, can act as

an 'inner voice' guiding people on how to behave on behalf of the organisation.

Power

Sociological theories dealing with the interaction of groups raise an issue of an uneven balance of power, with limited *participation* of minorities or the oppressed in governance and decision-making. It is common that the dominant culture, whose power may stem from being the majority or from other sources, such as class or wealth, controls which opinions and views are acceptable and unacceptable in a society, while the non-dominant group is silent.

Here a distinction can be made between being silent and being silenced. While being silent represents a free choice not to have a voice, or the lack of need for voice (because there is a shared understanding between individuals or groups), being silenced is imposed, signifying a lack of power. Similarly, in employment settings employees can choose to be silent because they simply lack an opinion, or don't believe that they would be listened to, in a variant of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In some contexts, remaining silent can carry a stronger message than speaking out, such as when employees engage in an active silence as a form of protest (Wilkinson et al 2014). However, they may also be prevented from speaking up by controlling supervisors, or fear of losing their job if they voice dissent.

In the political science literature, the basic assumption of democracy is that people should govern themselves, and that there are no power asymmetries. Every member of the group has equal authority to participate in decision-making for the group (Clark 2015). Individuals have freedom to decide, rather than decisions being imposed on them. However, there are fundamental differences between the full democracy of authority, the partial democracy of influence, and the pseudo democracy of appearance (Pateman 1970, in Yeoman 2014). Full democracy implies that each individual has equal decision-making power; partial democracy describes participatory practices whereby individuals have influence but not power over decision-making; and pseudo democracy describes strategies of communication that generate the illusion, rather than the substance, of democratic control. Therefore, there is a difference between having a share in participation (such as taking part in consultation) and having a share in power as actual influence in decision-making. Employee voice processes tend to enable the partial democracy of influence and appearance, rather than an equal share in participation (or the full democracy of authority).

One form of democracy is 'deliberative democracy', whereby justified reasons are given for decisions and consensus is built. The reasons given should be mutually acceptable and accessible (that is, understandable) for everyone in the group involved. This approach is characterised by reciprocity and mutual respect, on the basis that people should not be treated as passive subjects, but as autonomous agents who participate in the governance and decision-making of their group. Since there is an asymmetry of power of information in organisations, there need to be some preconditions for voice to be effective. Employee voice therefore cannot be separated from other activities such as communication, otherwise people will not be informed and the process becomes dysfunctional.

The Aristotelian concept of citizenship questions the extent to which people should be involved in decision-making, if at all (Timming 2015). Aristotle advocated the 'polity', which is *'neither democracy nor oligarchy, but something in a mean between them',* for example *'the contributions of the many are combined with the contributions of the few such that neither is in complete control'* (1996). This suggests advocating a political system that offers some participation, but not too much. The delegation of decision-making is seen as having instrumental value in maintaining power in the hands of the leaders, rather than having a moral basis. This perspective suggests that only those who are deemed to be in possession of 'excellence', or the right qualities to be able to make decisions, should participate.

This challenges the assumption that everyone has equal opportunity to participate in decision-making. People are not automatically free and equal agents, but they must negotiate and come to terms with imbalances of social power. In an organisational context, the approach to participation and decision-making is underpinned by the inherent belief held by the organisation about the nature of voice: is it a fundamental right that individuals have in all circumstances, or is it a right to be given to individuals by the management, depending on the context? Many organisations have a selective approach to dispensing voice based on the value attached to maintaining the relationship with the individual employee. For example, CIPD research (2016b) found that 46% of HR practitioners said some employees participate in workplace decisions, based on the value they can offer the organisation.

Why voice as power matters for organisational practice

The definition of employee voice does not address the degree of voice or influence that people should have, or the means by which they influence decisions at work. Despite increasing workforce diversity, most mainstream literature on employee voice tends to assume that employees are homogenous, and conventional voice mechanisms are not representative in terms of who is participating. Participation in decision-making is therefore often unevenly distributed across different groups of employees, which can lead to alienated or missing voices in the organisation. Moreover, participatory democracy can favour those who are most confident to speak up.

This often plays out in organisations as employees only having a say or influence in workplace decisions if they are believed to have the right knowledge and skills to be involved, that is, if they're viewed as the 'top talent'. Within conventional voice mechanisms, recognising and accepting different voices can pose a challenge to existing power hierarchies. The unrepresentative nature of such traditional voice mechanisms in terms of those participating is an important issue, since *'who is at the bargaining table affects what is on the bargaining table'* (Greene 2015, p76). Moreover, participatory democracy can favour those who are most confident to speak up.

Some organisations have implemented a flat structure, removing all hierarchy between staff and management. Equally, companies such as Cougar Automation have adopted the philosophy of full democracy by giving employees the power to elect their own leader and to vote on major organisational decisions (CIPD 2015). As another example, John Lewis has an employee-owned partnership model, characterised by a democratic structure involving the workforce in key decision-making (CIPD 2014). This way of working requires management to give up some of the power, and for there to be high levels of trust between managers and employees. Increasingly, these forms of working are likely to be an expectation of all employees, who will not want to rely on their bargaining power to claim the right to have voice from the organisation.

There may be scenarios where individual employees can take the power away from the employer, such as those viewed as 'top talent' in the organisation who may be threatening to move to competitor organisations in pursuit of other opportunities. If these individuals have rare skills that are highly valuable to the organisation, they may hold the upper hand in exercising power to negotiate their working conditions.

Service

Another critical dimension for voice in the context of power imbalance is *representation*. Certain intermediaries can take the role of making the voices of others heard. Both in society as well as in organisations these are, first, leaders – individuals with courage and capability to voice the views of a group, and, second, independent media platforms (such as online employee platforms), which can facilitate greater understanding of the issue by reaching out to a wider group of people involved and giving visibility to underrepresented groups. Social media platforms are increasingly used by organisations to facilitate employee voice, although the effectiveness of these may be limited by the degree to

'Within conventional voice mechanisms, recognising and accepting different voices can pose a challenge to existing power hierarchies.'

which the management intervene in the running of these platforms, as well as by the employees' ability to access them, for example, when they work remotely or on a temporary basis without access to the organisational network. Both of these examples use voice as a way of serving others.

With increasing workforce diversity driven by factors including the ageing workforce, and more workers on non-traditional employment contracts (CIPD 2015), it will be increasingly important for employers to consider the needs and opportunities for voice of the diverse groups across the organisation. For example, while zero-hours contracts and the use of agency staff are on the rise, employers are struggling to create structures that enable meaningful voice for contractors (Grant 2017). Greene (2015) warns that some new forms of voice such as social technology can become dominated by the standard worker, rather than offering space for those who are commonly marginalised. On the flipside, there's also a risk that these voice channels become predominantly utilised by minority groups, while the 'main' voice mechanisms sit in other parts of the business.

As another challenge for voice as service, questions are being raised around the role of trade unions in representing workers in the gig economy. The CIPD's survey (2017c) shows that only 10% of gig workers would approach a trade union if they wanted to complain or seek compensation about their experience of working in the gig economy. They are more likely to approach Citizens Advice Bureau, a professional body, a solicitor/lawyer, their local authority, or their local MP before approaching a trade union.

While most trade unions are rightly concerned about the conditions 'giggers' are operating under and make public statements about the need for change, very few trade unions seem to be keen to tackle the issues 'head on' with the companies. This could be due to the lack of clarity around the employment status of those who work in the gig economy, or the lack of transparency around the individuals who are accountable for company wrongdoing – as work is largely conducted through an online platform in the absence of human interaction. Furthermore, resource and cost pressures could act as barriers.

Why voice as service matters for organisational practice
If workforce diversity continues to increase, employers need to consider the needs and opportunities for voice of diverse groups. For example, when creating an employee voice mechanism such as an enterprise social network, they need to think about individuals who may not find it accessible, including remote or part-time workers. As Syed (2014) points out, *'the underpinning philosophy of paying attention to the missing voices of diverse employees is the pursuit of social justice as well as efficiency'* (p434).

British workers are currently experiencing *'a rapid decline in living standards with the biggest squeeze in workers' pay since 2014'* (ONS 2017). This is while employment rates in the UK are rising. Since the role of trade unions has traditionally been to balance the power between employers and employees, one could say that the current economic and social climate provides trade unions with the 'fertile ground' they need to retain existing members and attract new ones. However, they are struggling

to do this, with trade union membership shrinking by 4.2% between 2015 and 2016 (DBEIS 2016).

One challenge for the relevance of trade unions is the shift in recent decades from indirect and representative voice towards direct and individual voice (Dromey 2016). The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey showed a notable preference for direct employee voice, *'with four in five employers (80 per cent) preferring to consult directly with staff, rather than through trade unions'* (van Wanrooy et al 2013).

The primary reason for promoting the view – amongst managers – that individual voice is better than a collective one is the belief that the barriers between employers and employees will decrease when they are dealing with each other in a direct way instead of through an intermediary. The second reason seems to be that managers feel they are better able to respond to the 'heterogeneous interests' of employees when workers are treated as individuals rather than as a collective (Storey and Bacon 1993). In contrast, union voice may be preferred above individual voice because of its independence and ability to address issues that impact a large group of the workforce (such as organisational change) (Pyman et al 2006).

As another example of workplace representation, the UK Government's new Corporate Governance reforms (DBEIS 2017) require listed companies to ensure that employees' interests are better represented at board level. One of the recommended options for achieving this is to include an employee representative on the board. This is normal practice across Europe, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach. For

example, First Group has had an employee representative on their board since the company was created in 1989. Each division in the organisation elects their own employee director, and this group then elects the employee director for the main board (Williamson 2013).

While this can encourage a culture of long-termism and provide diversity of thought, there is a risk that the lone worker voice on the board becomes isolated and feels under huge pressure. It may be unrealistic to think that such a voice channel can represent the views of the whole workforce, but it's about consensus-building and reaching a mutually accepted outcome to take to the board. The CIPD welcomes the options put forward by the UK Government to raise awareness of employees' interests at board level, but acknowledges that there is no single solution to creating meaningful employee voice (CIPD and High Pay Centre 2017).

Commodity

From a purely instrumental perspective, voice can be conceptualised as something of economic value that one party has and another desires. The two may then agree to trade voice for another commodity of value. A practical example of this is paid-for endorsement of goods by celebrities in exchange for money, products, or brand value.

In the unitarist paradigm there is an implied commoditisation of voice, as management trades off employee involvement in organisational decision-making for expected greater performance. On the other hand, trade-offs of voice and silence by employees are sometimes studied in the context of ethical dilemmas, where voicing an opinion or a concern can either be costly or beneficial to the employee themselves, or to other stakeholders. For example, Schwappach and Gehring (2014) show that concerns about patients can be a factor in medical professionals' decisions to speak up about a safety concern.

Interestingly, while management literature discusses the exchanges and trade-offs within the employee–organisation relationship through the lens of the psychological contract, provision of employee voice is not called out as one of the expectations that workers have of the employer. In contrast, (non-constructive) voice is seen as an outcome of a psychological contract breach by the employers themselves (for example, Turnley and Feldman 1999). This approach implies once again that voice is not seen as something that has intrinsic value for a worker – something they may desire or expect in an exchange with their employer. As an outcome of psychological deal breach, voice is simply an instrumental way to signal discontent.

Why voice as commodity matters for organisational practice

In employment settings, voice can similarly be traded by employees for security of contract – for example, when workers' ability to voice their dissent by quitting is bound by notice periods. In turn, silence can be 'bought' by promises of reward or promotion, for example, when workers see speaking up as a career-limiting move. In addition, companies can enforce silence contractually by specifying garden leave and confidentiality clauses to prevent workers from taking business-sensitive information to competitors.

'Trade unions will have to consider carefully what part they see themselves playing in the future.'

The commodity aspects of voice are brought into sharp focus by the growing use of technology in the workplace, which can act as a means for employers and individuals to trade voice, but also to intrude on information about individuals without their permission. Some organisations are now providing staff with wearable technology devices to track their health and well-being, creating uncertainty over how that data is used and whether employees' interests are protected. In a sense, data collected through these devices allows employers to 'eavesdrop' on their staff. These are important considerations for the future world of work, as the increased use of technology raises more data protection and privacy issues.

Traditionally, the purpose of trade unions has been to represent the views of the many. However, there has been recent questioning over the extent to which they truly represent the interests of their members, and their relevance in the future world of work. The WERS survey (2011) asked both union and non-union members who they think best represents them in the workplace over a range of work-related issues. Over matters of pay, making a complaint about work, and disciplinary, the respondents believed that they were likely to represent themselves. Interestingly, most, but not all, union members thought that their union representatives were effective in representing them. This suggests that even trade union members are uncertain about the effectiveness of their representatives.

Trade unions have a delicate balancing act in representing the views of the many while still remaining relevant to the needs of individual members – something that is difficult to achieve at an organisational level. With the rise in technology and an appetite amongst employers and indeed employees to use more direct and individualistic channels of communication, trade unions will have to consider carefully what part they see themselves playing in the future. This might mean a dramatic shift in how they see themselves in the workplace environment, and more generally within the labour market.

# 2 How can we start thinking about new forms of voice?

In the current social climate characterised by a dissociation between the establishment and the elite – and an increasing erosion of trust – hearing people's voices is more important than ever before. Amongst calls for greater transparency in organisations following numerous public scandals, voice is crucial in keeping organisations honest. It's also fundamental to ensuring job quality in the context of changing working practices, where alternative types of employment contract limit individuals' ability to express voice.

In order to imagine new ways of thinking about voice in organisations, we have reviewed a range of perspectives on voice, comparing those with current approaches to employee voice in management literature. Based on our analysis, we have mapped each of the lenses onto two dimensions (Figure 2):

• having intrinsic value (that is, as an end in itself) vs. instrumental value (that is, as a means to an end)
• driving individualistic value vs. collective value.

The first dimension represents the distinction between the different purposes of voice, from intrinsic to instrumental. The intrinsic perspective reflects the treatment of voice as an end in itself – for example, if freedom of expression has intrinsic value to the individual without any other motive, such as pursuing social status or bargaining power in the organisation. At the other end of the spectrum, the instrumental perspective views voice as a means to an end, such as personal gain or improving organisational performance. For example, the

Figure 2: Dimensions of voice
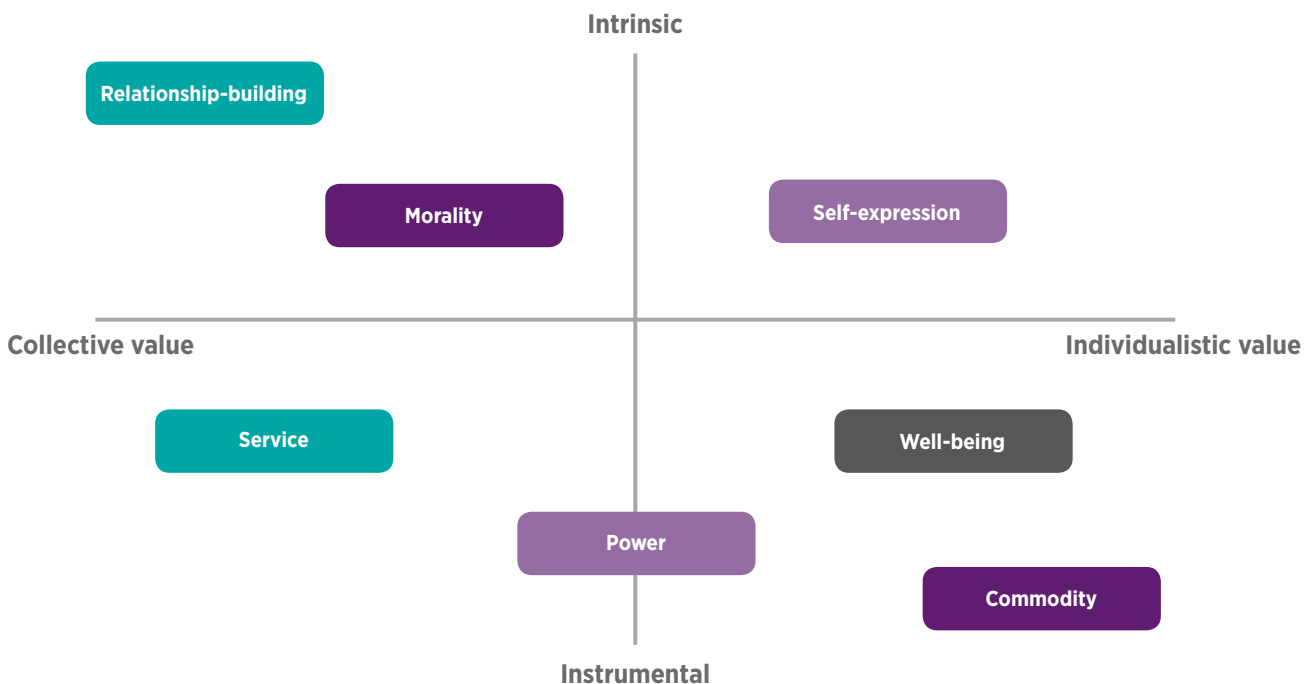
'Amongst calls for greater transparency in organisations following numerous public scandals, voice is crucial in keeping organisations honest.'

well-being lens is positioned in the bottom right quadrant because it describes the instrumental role of voice in reducing the feelings of stress for individuals themselves.

The second dimension represents the outcomes of voice in the workplace, from voice that creates value to one party, compared with ways in which voice can create collective value for multiple stakeholders. For example, power is positioned across the collective/individualistic value dimensions because the value created by voice depends on who is in control. In a democratic organisation where all workers have a voice, this process can create collective value. However, in a situation where the employer makes decisions without considering the voices of the workforce, only one party – the business – stands to benefit from it.

What does this look like in an organisation?

The way voice is currently viewed in organisations primarily sits in the bottom right quadrant – that ultimately, its purpose is to increase business effectiveness and therefore it creates value for the organisation (with the interests of employees being of secondary importance). However, if other forms of voice are taken into account, this more holistic approach would have potential to create value not just for the organisation, but also for its people.

It is not clear whether organisational leaders debate the 'philosophy' of employee voice underpinning the specific practices present in the organisational context. Yet, it is inevitable that each of those individual leaders holds some personal beliefs about what 'voice' is, and the organisation as a whole has some sort of a narrative on 'employee voice' (that is, its contribution or value to the

organisation). Without going deep into the perspectives underpinning organisational approaches to voice, there is a risk that actual practices are either inconsistent or not inclusive of the different forms of voice that can be meaningful both for employees and the business.

HR can play a fundamental role in guiding the discussions on the philosophy of voice, and building the systems that reflect that philosophy. However, the current management discourse is heavily influenced by the dominant unitarist paradigm, where employees are viewed as means to achieve organisational goals, and so HR are often brought in to police the 'appropriate' use of employee voice, rather than being enablers of its various forms. A change in approach will be required if organisations are to move from the paradigm of control to one of viewing voice as having intrinsic value for employees.

Current HR systems do not support this type of model for employee voice, since they focus on how practices can drive organisational performance. While there has been significant progress in the field of HR, the ultimate focus of HR theory has been to improve organisational outcomes, with worker outcomes of secondary importance or as a means to driving performance (Guest 2017). In contrast to the dominant assumption that what is good for the organisation and its shareholders is also good for employees, an alternative approach could prioritise HR practices that enhance well-being (including voice practices) and a positive employment relationship. This is based on an assumption that both of these elements are essential and will, in turn, have both direct and indirect effects on performance – thereby achieving mutual benefits (Guest 2017).

How can organisations evolve their approach to voice?

The key debate is around where the boundary lies between the purpose of voice as creating value for individuals versus for the organisation. Organisational values will determine how voice is viewed against this framework, and therefore where the boundary is drawn in a particular organisational context. As Johnstone and Ackers (2015) suggested, *'how we view the basic employment relationship will shape whether we think employee voice is important, the rationale for voice, and the forms of voice we deem preferable'* (p1). For example, if it's viewed from the purely instrumental perspective of driving employee engagement and performance, employee voice may be more closely controlled by policies. On the other hand, in an organisation that places high value on employee voice as a fundamental right of individuals to have a say at work, a more liberal approach to voice may be appropriate.

Organisations that are focused on short-term gains and have a transactional relationship with their staff might use employee voice practices such as engagement surveys and all-staff briefings, with the primary goal of driving employee engagement. However, this only provides part of the picture of voice and focuses on delivering value for the organisation. A more holistic view would also include, for example, the openness of managers to listen and take on board individuals' views. In contrast, organisations with a longer-term view that treat their people as fundamental stakeholders might promote mechanisms such as 'dialogic conversational practice' – with the intended outcome that *'employees are given an equal chance to engage in a democratic process of communication with their line managers whereby they are free to express their (voice)'* (Francis et al 2013, p2718). Whereas in the first approach the philosophy of voice is about achieving organisational gains, the second aims to achieve value for workers and therefore mutual benefits.

Another question is what role individuals should play in drawing the boundary between voice for their own self-interest and for the benefit of the organisation. What is their responsibility? In current practice, voice is approached as something that is 'given' to staff by management, not as something that individuals have the power to exercise. What would HR practice look like if voice is viewed as a shared responsibility between the organisation and its people, rather than as just the responsibility of the organisation?

Organisations can create the environments for people to have a say, but this should be a two-way relationship in which individuals are accountable for speaking up. For example, employers can provide the resources for remote workers to be involved in conversations and decisions, such as through remote access to meetings – while the workers ensure they take the opportunity to contribute and connect with people. In the case of freelancers who may not be able to participate in employee surveys, their line managers can facilitate open conversations with them on a regular basis and listen to their thoughts and concerns. But rather than relying on their manager to ask them the right questions, the individual should take responsibility for speaking up.

'Organisations can create the environments for people to have a say, but this should be a two-way relationship in which individuals are accountable for speaking up.'

Table 1: Questions for people professionals to consider in developing a more holistic approach to employee voice

Lens	Purpose of voice	Key question	Outcomes	Key challenges
Self-expression	A channel for autonomy and freedom, and establishing identity	How can organisations create an environment that balances freedom of self-expression with organisational values?	The ability to freely express oneself at work is connected to the argument that diversity of perspectives drives innovation and organisational effectiveness (Østergaard et al 2011). Creating environments where employees can be their authentic selves in the workplace is likely to improve well-being and job satisfaction (Steger et al 2012).	There need to be some boundaries in place to avoid reputational damage to the organisation (Greene 2015). These boundaries should be aligned with the organisational values.
Relationship-building	Relating to others and building social bonds	How can employers tap into views and concerns that are communicated between employees and not 'officially' to management?	People may be more honest about their concerns or organisational issues when having conversations with their co-workers, as opposed to when expressing them in a meeting or employee survey. These views may provide important insight into the current attitudes of the workforce, and uncover issues that would otherwise be unnoticed.	Responding to all employee feedback may help individuals feel that their voice is being taken seriously. However, the volume of voices to be captured presents a challenge of accessing those and managing responses. Creating flatter structures and developing managers to foster trustful relationships with their teams can also encourage more open conversations.
Well-being	Expressing emotions as a way of reducing stress	How can individuals' listening skills and empathic leadership be developed?	Understanding individuals' points of view can enable better, more balanced decisions to be made by avoiding assumptions being made about their circumstances. It can also reduce feelings of isolation, which has implications for well-being.	Listening and empathising with people's day-to-day experiences is crucial to building trustful relationships between employees and their managers, but is a skill that does not come naturally to everyone (Rane 2012).

Lens	Purpose of voice	Key question	Outcomes	Key challenges
Morality	A sense of right and wrong	How can employers embed ethical values across the organisation and provide clarity around the expected behaviours that align with these values?	Because of the subjective nature of ethics, it's important for employers to communicate the accepted shared norms, and for employees to understand what they mean in context. This can provide a frame to shape people's thinking and actions, for example, when faced with difficult decisions where there is no obvious right or wrong answer.	Organisational leaders are responsible for role-modelling organisational values. Personal ethical values influence the way individuals enact the organisation's values (CIPD 2017b).
Power	Democracy or participation in decision-making	How can organisations benefit from involving different categories of workers in workplace decisions, while remaining efficient?	Giving all workers equal opportunity to have a say in decisions that affect them in the organisation can help more balanced and fair decisions to be made (CIPD 2015).	Creating the illusion that employees can influence key decisions by providing opportunities for them to input, but then not taking their feedback into account, is likely to be counterproductive. Enabling people to have genuine voice requires a supportive organisational culture and leadership.
Service	Serving others, for example through representation	Should organisations provide channels for voice that include all workforce groups to the same extent? How would this work in practice?	Not addressing alternative points of view (no matter how challenging they are) can lead to homogenous thinking and ignorance of what's important.	Hearing and accepting diverse voices challenges traditional structures and voice mechanisms such as trade unions (Greene 2015). Despite increasing workforce diversity, existing voice processes do not necessarily meet the needs of all employee groups.

Lens	Purpose of voice	Key question	Outcomes	Key challenges
Commodity	Something that's traded (with an expectation of something in return)	How can technology be utilised in a way that empowers people but minimises negative impact on individuals or the organisation?	Technology is creating opportunities for people to work much more flexibly, such as through remote working and 'gig' work. Securing short-term assignments via online platforms can provide autonomy and boost earnings. However, such forms of work are also linked to income insecurity and questions over worker rights (CIPD 2017c).	Decisions about the use of technology in organisations need to take into account ethical considerations about the impact on people, rather than solely focusing on the improvement of organisational efficiency. Without these considerations, the rise of email and social media use in the workplace can lead to negative outcomes, such as burnout from information overload or distraction from tasks.

In the context of the modern world of work, existing approaches to employee voice are limited in scope. Technology is driving non-standard employment contracts that, while empowering people to have greater flexibility and autonomy in their work, can also undermine their opportunities to have a voice (CIPD 2017c). The traditional way of conceptualising employee voice primarily focuses on the instrumental value that is created for the organisation in giving workers a voice, rather than the intrinsic value that is created for individuals. Understanding alternative forms of voice can positively impact the organisation and its people, driving trust, well-being, and better solving of business issues. HR professionals can lead conversations on developing a new approach to employee voice by considering which lenses fit their culture, then designing practices that will enable those forms of voice to surface.

What's next?

The CIPD is developing a new Professional Standards Framework to create a clear standard for people professionals at every level in which the profession and wider society can have confidence. At the heart of the framework is our principles for better work and working lives: Work Matters, People Matter, and Professionalism Matters. As part of the People Matter principle, we believe that people deserve to have a meaningful voice on matters that affect them.

You can find out more about the Professional Standards Framework at **cipd.co.uk/news-views/future-profession/framework**

We are currently engaging with people professionals, business leaders, thought leaders, and workers to understand the enablers and barriers of meaningful voice. To help us shape our point of view and share effective ways to incorporate different forms of voice, join the debate at **cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/future-voice**

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