

**IS VOICE ALWAYS EFFECTIVE? TESTING FOR  
COMPLEMENTARIES BETWEEN VOICE MECHANISMS AND HRM  
PRACTICES**

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**TOPIC: PEOPLE: Human Resource Behaviors & Practices**

# **IS VOICE ALWAYS EFFECTIVE? TESTING FOR COMPLEMENTARIES BETWEEN VOICE MECHANISMS AND HRM PRACTICES**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The HRM and industrial relations literature on employee voice has grown enormously over the last decades. More specifically, within the most recent development of the debate on employee voice and performance three broad trends can be identified. First, due to the declining role and power of unions in western economies, a shift of the focus of the analyses from the collective and indirect to the individual and direct dimensions of employee voice can be registered (Bryson, 2004; Pyman et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2010); second, the emergence and success of the High Performance Work System (HPWS) approach favored a tendency to analyze (direct) employee voice as a part of the wider HR system and to devote much less attention to its role as a single practice (Combs et al. 2006; Wood and Wall, 2007); third, as a consequence of the first two trends, researchers are now focusing more and more on the emergence of different mixes of employee voice mechanisms in the same workplaces and on their potential outcomes (e.g. Dundon et al., 2004; Benson and Brown, 2010; Holland et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2010)

This paper extends existing HRM and industrial relations research on employee voice and performance by examining how collective employee voice mechanisms and their interactions with other high performance work practices affect organizational productivity. In so doing, it contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it accounts for the different impacts of distinct collective voice mechanisms (namely, task-related and union voice), thus offering new evidence on whether the general shift of the attention from indirect to direct voice

mechanisms as a key ingredient of organizational success is empirically justified or not. Second, given the growing interest in the emergence of mixed employee voice mechanisms at the workplace level, it contributes to the understanding of their potential outcomes for organizational performance. Third, following the original formulations of the High Performance Work Systems approach (Lawler, 1986; Appelbaum e Batt, 1994; Appelbaum et al. 2000), it includes the neglected role of workplace industrial relations in the analysis of the relationships between HR practices and organizational performance, thus responding to some claims advanced by the literature (Wood and Wall, 2007; Brown and Warren, 2011). By focusing on the interactions between different voice mechanisms and other HR practice, this paper also contributes to the lacking literature which analyzes the effects of individual high-performance practices on organizational performance. Finally, given the predominance of Anglo-Saxon research on the topic, it offers new evidence from an under-explored and institutionally intriguing research context, i.e. the Italian manufacturing firms.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Employee voice can be broadly defined as “any formal mechanism by which workers can communicate their views to managements” (Bryson et al. 2006, p. 439) with the aim to “raise concerns, express and advance their interests, solve problems, and contribute to and participate in workplace decision making” (Pyman et al. 2006, p. 543).

Employee voice mechanisms have been classified as direct or indirect, individual or collective, organization- or task-based. The focus of this paper is on collective voice, and particularly on task-related voice and union voice.

The reason for focusing on this two forms of employee voice relies on the lack of research about the impact that these mechanisms (individually, jointly, and in combination with other HR practices) may have on organizational performance. Indeed, despite the HPWS approach

places great emphasis on the strategic role of employee involvement and participation (Lawler, 1986; Appelbaum et al., 2000), it has been argued that the practices related to employee participation to the decisions that affect their work and the organization are often neglected in the empirical research (Wood and Wall, 2007). Moreover, HRM research tends to adopt unique indexes to measure the adoption HPWS, which are unable to account for the specific effect that different voice mechanisms have on the outcome analyzed, and the contribution of union voice is often completely absent from the theoretical model adopted.

The scant attention to union voice can be attributed to two main factors. First, all the advanced countries record declines in union density (Verma et al., 2002, Visser 2006). As a consequence of this pattern, research from those countries (which dominates the debate) has moved the attention to the emergent non-union mechanisms of employee voice (Willman et al., 2009; Kaufman and Taras, 2010; Dobbins and Dundon, 2014). However, not all the countries have recorded the same substantive trends in union density. In Italy, for example, the unionization rate decreased constantly in the 1980s and 1990s (it stood at 49.6% in 1980), while in recent years it has stabilized at around 35%, which is the same level of the late nineties (OECD, 2014). Moreover, even in the Anglo-Saxon contexts, research findings report that workers still demand for more union voice at the workplace (Boxall et al., 2007).

Second, the HRM literature tends to consider trade unions as irrelevant and unnecessary (Guest, 1987), and typically treats them simply as an element of the organizational context which should be controlled for (e.g. Huselid, 1995; Guthrie, 2001). However, the presence of collaborative relations between management and unions is theorized as an important element for the success of the HPWS, not least because they give managements greater guarantees concerning the support by workers in the adoption of the new practices (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994). The ‘pro-union’ attitudes of the promoters of HPWS are indeed among the features that distinguish the HPWS approach from human relations theories (Godard and Delaney,

2000), and the presence of workplace collective bargaining and joint committees mechanisms (i.e. union voice) are among the main forms of union formal involvement that management can pursue. In this view, unions are seen as potential agents of change, so that HPWS and union voice can coexist and have synergic effects (Wood, 1996; Verma, 2005; Machin and Wood, 2005).

This paper contributes to this stream of the literature by analyzing the relationship between different mechanisms of collective employee voice, other HRM practices and organizational performance.

## **METHOD AND RESEARCH CONTEXT**

### **Sample**

The sample on which the analysis is conducted consists of 223 manufacturing enterprises in the area of Milan and enrolled with the Lombardy Industrial Association (*Associazione Industriale Lombarda, Assolombarda*), the largest regional association of the General Confederation of Italian Industry (*Confederazione Generale dell'Industria Italiana, Confindustria*). The questionnaire was sent to the HR managers of around three thousand firms, and the replies amounted to 416, of which 311 from manufacturing firms and 105 from services. Given the small number of services firms, in this paper it was decided to analyze only the manufacturing firms. Careful selection of the quality of the replies and matching with AIDA database to obtain data on labour productivity reduced the field of analysis to 223 firms. The distribution of firms by sector and size class shows that metalworking firms represent around 50% of the sample, and those with fewer than 50 employees around 60%.

### **Measures**

Table 1 reports the operationalization and the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis.

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Table 1 about here  
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In order to increase the validity of our results, as a measure for organizational performance we use an objective, third-party measure of firm productivity. Indeed, a large part of the literature on employee voice adopts subjective measures of productivity (e.g. Sako 1998, Bryson 2007, Wood et al. 2012). The information about labor productivity was obtained through the balance sheet data provided by the AIDA (Analisi Informatizzata delle Aziende Italiane) database of Bureau Van Dijk, which is the Italian section of the AMADEUS database collecting information on more than 500,000 Italian companies. Both the value added generated by the firm and the number of employees were drawn from the balance sheet data, thus reducing the risk of presence of common methods bias in the results.

A total of 16 independent variables were considered in the analysis. In order to make the analysis more fluid and interpretable, but also in order to test the correspondence of the constructs underlying the behaviors of our sample with those present in the literature, the 16 independent variables were analyzed and reduced by means of Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This is a methodology often used in studies of this type (e.g. Huselid, 1995; Gooderham et al., 2008; Katou and Budhwar, 2006). We decided to insert all the variables in a single PCA in order to reduce discretion in the construction of the bundles of practices to the minimum.

Table 2 shows the final results of the PCA performed with the varimax rotation criterion. The PCA identified 6 factors which together explained 67% of the variance of the 16 variables, coherently with the results obtained by similar studies (Gooderham et al., 2008; Katou and Budhwar, 2006), and the measure of sample adequacy was satisfactory (KMO=.701) (Hair et al., 1992).

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Table 2 about here

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## **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The relationships described in the first part of the paper are tested through hierarchical OLS regression. Table 3 reports the results of the regression analysis of employee voice mechanisms, HRM practice and labor productivity. Starting from union voice, both in Model 2 and Model 3 union voice shows a significant positive relationship with labor productivity.

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Table 3 about here

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The moderation effect of union voice is significant and positive for variable pay and (weakly) significant and negative for training. We plot the patterns of the interaction between union voice and variable pay and union voice and training in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The results of the significance tests for the slopes suggest that the effects of training on productivity are higher when union voice is low, while those of variable pay are higher when union voice is high.

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Figure 1 and 2 about here  
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With regard to direct voice, Table 2 shows that across all the models direct voice does not shows any significant direct relationship with labor productivity. When the interactions with the HRM practices are considered (Model 4), a significant positive relationship emerge with regard to training. Figure 3 shows the pattern of the interaction and the significance test revealed that the slope for high direct voice is significant, while that for low direct voice is not. Finally, Model 5 shows that the interaction term between union voice and direct voice is not significant.

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Figure 3 about here  
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## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results described in the preceding section offer interesting evidence for the debate on employee voice. First, union voice is positively associated to labor productivity, while direct voice seems not to have any significant relationship with it. This results support the view that voice mechanisms, on their own, are not enough to generate positive results in term of performance. The same holds for the results about the non-significant interaction between union and direct voice. Consistently with what theorized by Freeman and Medoff (1984), in order to have positive outcomes voice mechanisms should be accompanied by a collaborative



approach to employment relation, as employees tends to reciprocate the managerial approach (Bryson 2006, Holland, 2014). Moreover, contrary to other research (Kim et al., 2010; Campioletti et al., 2013) our results exclude the presence of a substitution effects of direct voice for union voice, at least in terms of organizational performance. From the managerial perspective, this suggests to managers that strategies based on the adoption of employee involvement practices with the aim to reduce their need for union and, in turn, to reduce union voice, may result in very poor outcomes in terms of organizational performance.

Second, union voice positively moderates the relationship between variable pay and performance. It is interesting to note that variable pay has not direct relationships with labor productivity; it is only in presence of high level of union voice that performance-related pay become significantly and positively associated to productivity. In presence of structured and participatory industrial relations at company level, it is highly likely that variable pay schemes are negotiated collectively (Brown and Warren, 2011). Studies in the HRM field generally treat industrial relations variables simply as controls (e.g. Huselid, 1995, Guthrie, 2001; Wood et al., 2012). Our results show that union voice is a key variable in explaining the variable pay-productivity relationship therefore suggesting to future HRM research to better consider the role of the industrial relation system at company level in explaining the HRM-performance relationship. In addition, because our results are partially explainable with the characteristics of the Italian institutional context, a promising line of inquiry is the comparative analysis of how different voice mechanisms interact with HRM practices in influencing organizational performance according to the different institutional context in which they are embedded.

Third, the moderation effects of direct and union voice mechanisms are the opposite when training is considered. The association between training practices and organizational performance is stronger when direct employee voice is high and when union voice is low.

With respect to the effects of direct voice, the results confirm the existence of synergies (Huselid, 1995; Delery, 1998) between training and employee involvement suggested by the existing theoretical and empirical literature (e.g. Combs et al., 2006; Felstead et al. 2006; Boxall, 2013). Providing employee with opportunity to participate to the decisions related to their tasks increases the return of investing in training activities, because employees use the skills and knowledge acquired through training to improve the effectiveness of their work activities. Managers should therefore pay great attention to the increasingly convergent literature that affirms the existence of such synergies. Investing in training activities without giving task-related autonomy to the employees could result in lower returns of training investments in terms of employee productivity. With regard to union voice, the results may be explained by the fact that unions and managers may have different agendas in terms of training activities (Heyes, 2007), with unions mainly concerned with increasing the employability of the employees (e.g. through the development of general skills) and the extension of training activities to disadvantaged occupational groups (e.g. older workers), and managers more concerned with the professional development of core employees through the acquisition of firm-specific skills. More research is needed to better understand the way training and union voice interact each other, but our results seem to suggest that unions and managers are still not able to negotiate effective collective agreements when training is the subject of the negotiations.

There are several limitations in this study. First, our data are cross-sectional, which prohibits making assertions of causality based on our findings. Second, the measures of employee voice we adopted were not able to capture the full range of voice mechanisms that could be adopted at the workplace level. Finally, the focus of the study is restricted to the Italian manufacturing context. Future research should be able to overcome such limitations.

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**TABLE 1 Variables and descriptive statistics**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Description and measures</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. dev.</b>
<i>Controls</i>			
Total employees	Number of employees	191	478.4
Part-time	% of part-time workers	5.5	7.4
Temporary	% of temporary workers	4.3	6.4
Managers	% of managerial workers	4.6	6.1
Blue collars	% of blue collars workers	42.1	28.8
Graduates	% of graduate workers	15.3	15.8
Network	Partnership and other forms of cooperation with other firms (0-10)	3.3	2.7
Technology	Relevant technological innovation in the last three years (dummy)	1.4	0.5
Market	Degree of competitiveness of the market (1-5)	2.3	0.7
<i>Dependent variable</i>			
Labor Productivity	Value added per employee in 2008 (thousands of Euro)	96.4	98.2
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Welfare and W/L balance	Number of welfare and work life balance practices (introduced with union involvement-agreement) (0-9)	1.2	0.4
Company level agreement	Number of topics covered by company level bargaining (0-9)	1.2	1.8
Joint committees	Number of topics discussed in the joint committees (0-4)	0.1	0.4
Training hours per employee	Training hours per employee	6.8	11.7
External training	% of employees involved in training activities outside the firm	20.9	25.7
On the job training	% of employees involved in on the job training	6.0	16.2
Decentralization of decision-making	Presence and intensity of use of the practices related to the delegation of responsibilities (1-3)	1.4	0.6
Autonomous teamwork	Presence and intensity of use of autonomous teamwork (1-3)	1.3	0.7
Semi-autonomous teamwork	Presence and intensity of use of semi-autonomous teamwork (1-3)	1.5	0.6
Multitasking	Presence and intensity of use of multitasking (1-3)	1.8	0.7
Job rotation	Presence and intensity of use of job rotation (1-3)	1.6	0.7
Training for multiskilling	Presence and intensity of use of training for multitasking and job rotation (1-3)	1.5	0.6
Performance appraisal systems	Presence and intensity of use of performance appraisal systems (1-3)	1.8	0.8
Potential appraisal systems	Presence and intensity of use of potential appraisal systems (1-3)	1.5	0.7
Variable pay	% of variable performance-related pay on annual gross salary	3.1	4.3
Merit pay	% of fixed performance-related pay on annual gross salary	15.1	11.3

**TABLE 2 Principal components factoring of independent variables**

Observed variables	COMPONENTS					
	DIRECT VOICE	MULTITASKING	UNION VOICE	APPRAISAL	TRAINING	VARIABLE PAY
Welfare and W/L balance				<b>,587</b>		,332
Company level agreement				<b>,777</b>		
Joint committees				<b>,861</b>		
Training hours per employee					<b>,709</b>	
External training					<b>,717</b>	
On the job training					<b>,758</b>	
Decentralization of decision-making	<b>,762</b>					
Autonomous teamworks	<b>,770</b>					
Semi-autonomous teamworks	<b>,724</b>					
Multitasking	,301	<b>,750</b>				
Job rotation		<b>,839</b>				
Training for multiskilling		<b>,671</b>				
Performance appraisal systems				<b>,839</b>		
Potential appraisal systems				<b>,869</b>		
Merit pay						<b>-,560</b>
Variable pay						<b>,800</b>
Cum. var. explained (after rotation) %	12,7	24,6	36,3	48,0	58,6	66,8
Initial eigenvalues	3,6	1,9	1,6	1,4	1,2	1,0

Method for extraction: Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation (Kaiser normalization)

Factor loadings lower than .30 are not shown; factor loadings higher than .50 are in bold

KMO test : ,705

Barlett's test: Chi-squared 280,8; p-value < .001



**TABLE 3 OLS regression analysis of employee voice on labour productivity**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b><u>Controls</u></b>					
N. of employees	,10	,06	,02	,06	,06
Part-time	-,04	-,05	-,05	-,07	-,05
Temporary	,03	,04	,04	,04	,04
Managers	,12	,09	,11	,11	,09
Supervisors	-,06	-,12	-,12	-,12	-,12
Blue-collars	-,27 **	-,27 **	-,25 **	-,28 **	-,27 **
Graduates	,00	-,04	-,06	-,06	-,05
Network	-,10	-,17 *	-,18 *	-,17 *	-,16 *
Technological innovation	-,01	-,04	-,01	-,02	-,03
Market competitiveness	-,14 *	-,14 *	-,14 *	-,12 †	-,14 *
<b><u>HRM practices</u></b>					
APPRAISAL		,15 *	,15 †	,16 *	,15 *
VARIABLE PAY		,07	,08	,11	,07
MULTITASKING		-,03	,00	-,01	-,03
TRAINING		,18 **	,15 *	,14 *	,18 **
<b><u>Voice Mechanisms</u></b>					
UNION VOICE		,16 *	,24 **	,16 *	,18 *
DIRECT VOICE		,03	,04	,02	,03
UNION VOICE * DIRECT VOICE					-,05
<b><u>Voice Mechanisms * HRM</u></b>					
UNION VOICE * APPRAISAL			,13		
UNION VOICE * VARIABLE PAY			,22 **		
UNION VOICE * MULTITASKING			,02		
UNION VOICE * TRAINING			-,16 †		
DIRECT VOICE * APPRAISAL				-,06	
DIRECT VOICE * VARIABLE PAY				-,07	
DIRECT VOICE * MULTITASKING				,08	
DIRECT VOICE * TRAINING				,19 **	
Obs.	223	223	223	223	223
Adj. R2	,08	,12	,14	,15	,12
Δ F	3,02 ***	2,48 *	2,47 *	2,8 *	0,6

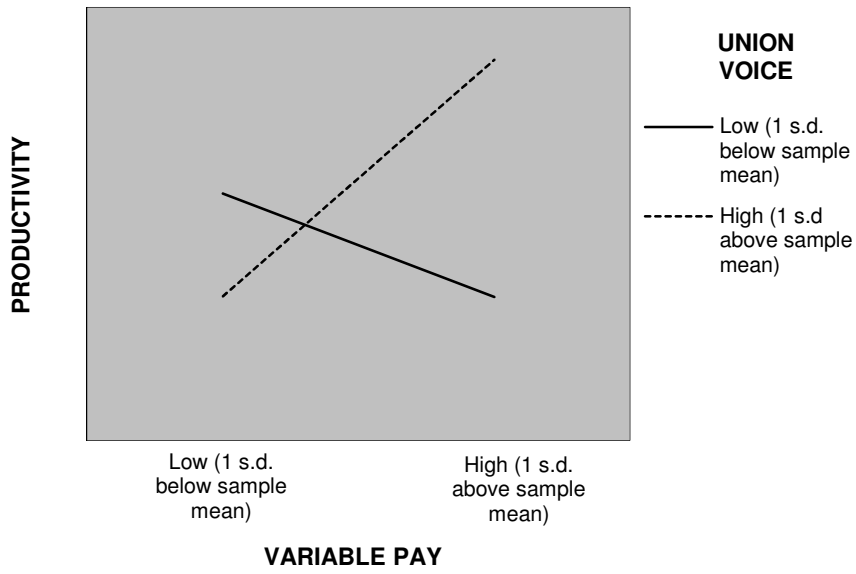
Standardized Beta coefficients in column.

† significant at .10 level

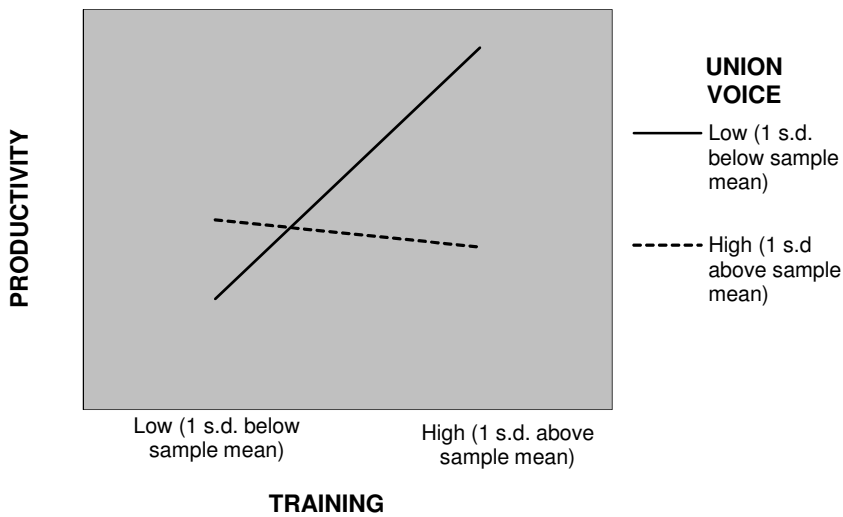
\* significant at .05 level;

\*\* significant at .01 level

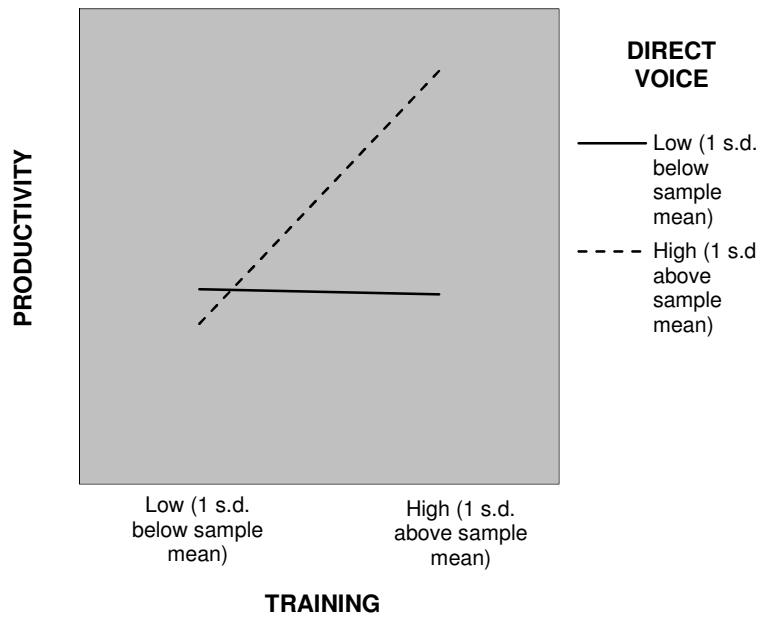
\*\*\* significant at .001 level



**Figure 1.** Relationship between Variable Pay and Productivity for different levels of Union Voice



**Figure 2.** Relationship between Training and Productivity for different levels of Union Voice



**Figure 3.** Relationship between Training and Productivity for different levels of Direct Voice