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How employee voice channels contribute to bottom-up innovation

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Overview

This research paper aims to understand how organizations can give a voice to their employees and thereby tap into their innovative ideas and suggestions. To do so, data has been selected from six case organizations in the UK, collected by the CPWOP in partnership with the CIPD. The findings show how organizations attempt to improve employee voice and illustrate which factors stimulate and constrain employee innovative voice. Moreover, the results reveal in what ways organizations deal with the tensions between human and promotive voice.

Research focus, rationale and questions

Bottom-up innovation represents a process where front-line workers have innovative ideas and thereby contribute to improving collective-level innovation. Many firms are facing an increasing pressure to be innovative, due to economic downturns, increasing competition and technological developments. These pressures have been amplified by the Covid-19 crisis, which has required deep-seated change in many aspects of organizational functioning, many of which require an innovative response. To become more innovative and attain competitive advantage, it is important that organizations manage their employees in a way that they are creative and can develop their innovative ideas (Barney, 1991; Mumford, 2000). Because in the end it is employees who come up with new ideas (Van de Ven, 1986). Their innovative ideas might eventually spur higher levels of innovation outcomes of the organization (Do & Shipton, 2019; Fu et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, research suggests that only a small proportion of the workforce takes part in innovation processes (De Spiegelaere, 2014). Moreover, a recent study into employee voice shows that a significant segment of employees feel unable speak up at work (Shipton et al., 2019), limiting their ability to share innovative ideas and suggestions. For organizations to remain innovative it is therefore essential to take ideas from the bottom-up seriously and to capture insights from front-line workers such as shop floor workers in construction, as sales employees in retail and hospitality,

and nurses in healthcare. Therefore, in this study we want to better understand how organizations can give a voice to their employees and thereby tap into their innovative potential.

Research methods

This research arises from data collected by the Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice (CPWOP) in partnership with the CIPD. Following a qualitative interpretivist research design, we conducted six case studies in the UK to answer this research question. These cases include larger and smaller companies and reach across different sectors such as construction, healthcare, education and hospitality. Data analysis was based on 71 interviews, and include interviews with senior management, HR, middle managers, and work-floor employees.

Research findings or argument

The literature suggests that managers develop voice channels and mechanisms to encourage and facilitate employees to speak up in their organizations (Morrison, 2014). Understanding the processes how organizations develop voice channels to encourage innovation is therefore important. Employee voice has mostly been studied with an employee perspective (Hickland et al., 2020). However, in this paper we add to the literature by linking employee voice to bottom-up innovation as *perceived by managers* of organizations. This is essential, as research shows that leaders greatly influence employee voice behaviors (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Thereby we combine the micro-level individual actions with the meso-level organizational context (Nechanska et al., 2020) and explore how organizations attempt to improve employee voice and illustrate how they deal with the tensions between employer and employee interests. Specifically, we show how managers need to find a balance between employee voice that is good for the organization (promotive) and voice related to personal issues and concerns of their employees (human). By doing so, we use the term *employee innovative voice*, which represents a state in which voice channels are used to influence work through innovative suggestions, and combines the promotive and human voice. Innovative voice can be related to promotive voice and deplete resources, while it can also be related to human voice and thereby create resources. We illustrate how employers cope with these tensions and our findings further highlight factors that stimulate and constrain organizations to make use of employees' innovative ideas and suggestions.

Practical importance and implications of research

This study offers a number of practices implications. First, it shows how organizations attempt to improve employees voice and deal with the challenges involved in this quest. Second, this research uncovers in what ways organizations manage the tensions in creating employee voice, particularly the balance between human voice and promotive voice. Third, this research describes several ways in which employee voice is related to innovation and highlight how managers can use voice to stimulate innovation. To encourage innovation, voice channels should be configured such that they can combine human and promotive voice. The research

shows that it is not sufficient to introduce voice channels; they need to be managed actively.

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