

The impact of social media on employee voice in the UK

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Abstract: *The employee voice plays an important role for both employees and employers and can largely determine the sustainability of the organisation. With the increasing use of social media, it is playing an increasingly important role in the voice mechanism at work. As a result, understanding how social media is changing workplace voice from the perspectives of employees, employers, and unions is critical for the future of employee voice and how employers can properly respond to it.*

Keywords: *Social Media Impact; Employee Voice; Collective Bargaining; Workplace Communication*

1. Introduction

By combining the characteristics of social media, this paper illustrates how social media has changed individual voice and collective bargaining behaviour from the perspective of employees, employers and unions respectively. Using the case study approach and incorporating existing research findings, two conclusions were drawn:

Social media has provided employees with a wider reach and more timely communication in the individual voice. It can encourage employees to voice their ideas and increase their participation in organisational decision-making.^[1]

Social media complements traditional channels of voice in collective bargaining, making union voices more widely available and changing the way in which some disputes emerge, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the voice of the union.

As social media comes into the limelight, an increasing number of people started to use it. According to the Global Digital Overview 2022 report, social media is used by 4.7 billion people worldwide, accounting for 59% of the global population, with 57.6 million people using social media in the UK, representing 84.3% of the UK population. Data on social media use appears to be increasing in all databases. As a result, more than half of the world's population uses social media, and the figure is growing. Social media is even more prevalent in the lives of the majority of people in the United Kingdom. It appears that organisations will incorporate social media into the workplace. New technologies facilitate communication at work, allowing people to share information, communicate instructions, exchange ideas, etc. It provides cross-departmental, functional as well as geographical communication channels, which is an important way for employees to make their voices heard.^[2] Previous research on social media and voice mechanisms at work has focused on the advantages and potential negative effects they bring to organisations. However, there is a paucity of research on how social media has changed employee voice mechanisms at work. The aim of the research in this article is therefore to build on existing research and analyse the ways in which growth using of social media has changed the way voices mechanisms at work to complement current research.^[3]

In this paper, social media is defined as a process on the internet that supports users to create content and to publish and share it.^[4] Examples include Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, WhatsApp, MS Teams, etc. It provides a more convenient platform for one-to-one and many-to-many communication.^[5] In this paper, "voice" refers to employee voice, which refers to employees' ability to express their opinions and participate in organisational decisions, which can influence organisational decisions. The employee voice can be directly reacted to by the employee to employees, or indirectly through the union. Voice mechanisms are therefore divided in this discussion into individual voice and collective bargaining.^[6]

2. Changes in Individual Voice

2.1 Wider Coverage and Real-time Communication

Due to the popularity and timeliness of social media, it provides a platform for real-time communication and encourages more employees to speak up by making vocalisations quicker and more responsive. This will boost the voice of employees and reduce organisational hierarchy. In the traditional personal voice model, suggestion boxes, staff hotlines, face-to-face meetings and employee surveys are the more common methods.^[7] These channels are mostly created and controlled by management, so that, in many instances, employees are passively rather than actively heard.^[8] The employee survey is the method most commonly utilised by businesses. Despite the fact that surveys enable management to hear the voices of employees so that adjustments and modifications can be made, the results of these surveys are not always acted upon.^[9] Meanwhile, assessing employees on a Likert scale using nearly the same questionnaire each year does not allow management to recognise the uniqueness of employee feedback. Moreover, each of these ways is time-consuming for both the employee and the employer, making it impossible for the manager to capture the employee's voice and deliver feedback in real time.^[10] The advent of social media has compensated for these shortcomings in communication. Because it has the characteristic of interactive, democratic and immediate. Employees can express their views directly on the online platform provided by the company when expressing their grievances or making constructive comments.^[11] Klaas suggested that social media allows employees to voice their grievances to their superiors in an anonymous manner, which increases democracy in the vocal process and avoids escalating conflicts with their superiors.^[12] Obviously, if the complaints are genuine or the points are valid, comments and replies may be received quickly, sometimes from colleagues and sometimes from company directors.^[13] Best buy, for instance, has created a wiki for its employees to suggest improvements, a democratic move that has resulted in broader and more engaged communication and, eventually, beneficial outcomes. In this approach, the management learns firsthand what the employees truly believe and, with timely feedback, is able to take the next step in accordance with the current situation as soon as feasible. Additionally, it makes it simpler and faster to speak up, and employees become more engaged in doing so.^[14] When interacting in real time, social media makes it easy to capture the entire conversation so that crucial details may be extracted and analysed afterwards.^[15]

Social media also plays a very important role in employee participation in organisational decision-making. It brings personnel from various levels, departments, and geographical locations closer together. Moreover, quicker replies make it more efficient to incorporate diverse viewpoints and allow the organisation to concentrate on strategic decisions.^[16] IBM Jam is a good example. As one of the world's most influential research institutions, IBM began encouraging its employees to use social media back in the 1990s. In 2001, IBM executives introduced a "massively parallel conference" online, called Jam, as a way to encourage employees to post innovative ideas. Executives wanted to collect employee voices through Jam—a set of noticeboards linked to IBM's internal website, as a way to quickly address some Crucial issues. In that year, there were more than 50,000 posts in Jam, focusing on topics such as 'How to get IBM consulting into the highest levels of management' and suggesting solutions. In the 2006 innovation, 15,000 people participated in the discussion. But because not all the voices on Jam come from technical professionals, executives and staff often spend a lot of time filtering out the uninformative information. While additional innovation is required for the Jam system, it has undoubtedly increased staff engagement. On the one hand, it enables more people to hear from those who have creative ideas and viewpoints, and to develop those ideas through the addition of others. On the other hand, it accepts the 'less significant opinions' and permits them to be viewed and potentially included into the organization's new strategy.

It can be seen that social media provides more employees with the opportunity to make their voices heard, and let those voices be heard by more people. The usage of social media has improved management's comprehension of employee voice, resulting in superior problem-solving compared to traditional employee voice models. It has also made employees feel more integrated and involved in the organisation, which has greatly improved the quality of individual voices. However, because it is too pervasive and information flows too quickly, it might have detrimental effects on the organisation.

2.2 Devastating Effect on Employer Reputation

When employees' voices are not responded to in a timely manner or their expectations are not met, they may utilise social media to voice grievances or distribute false information, which can harm an employer's brand. As Miles and Mangold observed, the voice of employees on social media is a ticking

time bomb for a company's reputation. This is because any employee can express discontent with their job at any time via social media sites. As an alternative to established channels such as appealing to a representative body, a large number of people already share their workplace misfortunes on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Once such voices gather on social media platforms, it can create bad publicity for the employer's image. This is why employees and managers often argue about what can and can't be posted on social media. Nevertheless, this voice of dissent against the organisation might occasionally serve an important function. Because voices on social media are as ever-present as they are in print, employers will not ignore discontent when it snowballs and has a deleterious effect on the organisation's reputation, and will take steps to quell it. Walker have retrieved over 2,000 posts from the uber people.net forum complaining about the state of their jobs, and their spontaneous social media attacks on the company's practices have brought to light the unfair treatment they receive at uber. As a result, sometimes 'hot topics' on social media can be more powerful than traditional collective voices. It can also be seen that social media enhances the impact of employees' voices by gathering individual voices, despite the impact it may have on employers' reputations.

Consequently, social media has changed individual voice mainly by providing an easier-to-reach, more timely and wider-reaching platform for individual voices to be heard. It has largely encouraged employees to voice their grievances and suggestions for organisational development. The distance between hierarchies and geographies has also been removed, allowing everyone to have a fair voice. Although the speed at which information spreads on social media can lead to loss of control causing damage to an organisation's reputation. However, this deficiency can be rectified in light of the role it plays in the organization's development toward sustainability. To ensure that their opinions are heard and that they make a difference, it will be crucial for employees to use social media effectively in the workplace in the future.

3. Changes in Collective Bargaining

3.1 Provide new channels for internal communication

The social media have the capacity to expedite the organisation of persons from diverse organisations participating in collective bargaining. It enhances the collective voice by augmenting traditional routes of communication. The East Lindsey Refinery dispute is an example of an event that was organised primarily through social media. Comparable to individual voices, collective bargaining is a means of bringing together a bigger group of individuals to express their issues regarding salary, employment conditions, and management practises. This is an excellent way for employees to have a voice, as through the union they may express opinions more firmly that they would not normally dare to speak. Nevertheless, as a result of the current reduction in union density and union membership, the actual significance of collective bargaining appears to be diminishing and is being gradually supplanted by alternative mechanisms. The emergence of social media has made it easier for unions to provide information to their members and opened up new lines of communication amongst unions. It has made trade union collective action more effective. According to the findings of Kerr and Waddington, there was an increase in the number of visits to local websites and a discernible rise in union solidarity when it came to voicing grievances.

The importance of social media in intra-union communication and the promotion of internal unity is significant. In 2016, Moore and Taylor investigated the British Airways Flight Attendants' Association strike. They discovered that union members were using social media, such as Facebook and blogs, to exchange information in real time throughout the strike and to involve union members from various geographic locations in the action. This constant output and real-time responses gave the union members more confidence and removed fears, making them better able to take the next step. It is evident that social media as a complement to traditional communication methods in collective bargaining has led to greater solidarity among members. Although platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have increased union members' participation in speaking out, there is no evidence that social media has led to more frequent communication between unions and their members. As stated by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), although the use of Twitter to communicate within unions is very common, there is no significant difference between this approach and traditional communication. Therefore, additional research is required to determine the best approach to use social media to improve contact with members and to further encourage their participation in order to strengthen the function of collective bargaining and revitalise unions.^[17]

3.2 Making the Voice of Union Spread More Widely

Unions can use social media to broadcast messages encouraging more individuals to join their organisations and advocate for employees to have their voices heard in collective bargaining. More individuals are able to see and comprehend unions as a result of their ability to disseminate information extensively. According to studies, the use of social media has the ability to reach individuals who are less likely to join a union, such as part-time working women and young people growing up in the internet age.^[18] Unions can reach out to these people through social media.

Social media allows different unions around the world to support each other in order to expand their ability to have a voice internationally. For example, Liverpool dockers used the non-union website LabourNet to spread the message of the strike and contacted dockers' unions in other countries around the world.^[19] Moreover, the new communication technologies offered by social media enable national unions to share information and allow national union members to express their views simultaneously, gaining a stronger voice for workers.

Social media has also raised awareness of topics by making their voices heard outside of union members and employers. For instance, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) uses YouTube to educate people about pro bono work and familiarise them with its participants.^[20] Social media saves unions a fortune in advertising, which union members use this way to increase the impact of their voices.

3.3 Changing the Conduct of Disputes

The widespread use of social media has also changed the way some collective bargaining is conducted. Recalling the previously mentioned The East Lindsey Refinery strike, after using the website to organise the bargaining campaign, social media quickly spread the event to dozens of different areas of the country, gaining more supporters online. A German trade union representing retail employees staged a flash mob in a shopping centre in Aschersleben. The event was organised via the internet for 150 strangers who did not know each other. The 150 members took many items from the mall and put them in their shopping carts, but when they finally paid for them, they did not swipe their cards or pay cash but instead gave the cashier a card with "fair wages" written on it. The mall spent a lot of time and labour trying to get these shopping cart items back on the shelves. This new sort of strike, organised via the use of social media, drew more attention to the event.^[21]

At the same time, more transparent information may fundamentally change the bargaining capacity of the negotiating parties. This is because negotiations are essentially based on organisational policies, terms and conditions compared between those within and outside the organisation. Social media and the internet can give unions more favourable information and data to support their vocal behaviour. And if employers publish policies that are not in line with norms or receive controversy over the transparency of information, this can further lead to controversial behaviour.^[22] Likewise, if important information within a union is leaked, it can lead directly to the failure of collective bargaining.

Reviewing the changes that social media has brought to collective bargaining, as mentioned above, it can be seen that it has mainly increased the impact of collective bargaining by complementing the channels of communication within the union, making the collective voice more widely available and to some extent changing dispute behaviours. Unlike individual voices, the use of social media in collective bargaining can increase the cohesion within the union that is crucial to collective bargaining. As a result of the decline of trade unions, an increasing number of people have lost faith in them. The emergence of social media is both a challenge and an opportunity for unions. Perhaps unions can use social media to attract more people to join them to raise their voices.

4. Suggestions for Future Use of Social Media on “Voice” Mechanisms at Work

It is obvious that social media has had a positive effect in changing the voice of employees at work, both from the perspective of employees, employers and unions. However, if social media is not used correctly in the employment relationship, it can also spell disaster. In addition to the potential damage to an employer's reputation mentioned above, this new voice can have a limiting effect on employee voices if managers restrict employees from speaking out on social media or fail to provide timely responses to those speaking out. The challenge for unions in using social media for voice is that new technology has made individual voices faster and more effective and collective bargaining is likely to be forgotten.^[23]

Accordingly, however, if unions use social media wisely to amplify their advocacy efforts and the impact of their collective voice, they are likely to receive more attention.^[24] The following discussion will focus on how social media can be used appropriately in the workplace to be vocal in order to maximise the impact of employee voices, whether individual voices or collective bargaining.

Firstly, both individuals and trade unions must abide by rules when using social media to make their voices heard. The rules can be negotiated between the employee and employer, the union and the employer, and serve to define the 'boundaries' of the use of social media. This boundary refers to the confidentiality, privacy and security that must be observed in the use of social media.^[25] When setting rules, both parties must be clear and agree on the meaning of using social media for vocal purposes and the risks that may arise. This action has important implications for the spread of public opinion and group fears caused by the misuse of social media. It is also important that both parties agree and that unnecessary argument can be avoided if one party later breaks the rules (e.g. an employee being fired for posting 'sensitive' information).

Secondly, ensure multidirectional communication and effective use of social media. Multidirectional communication means that when an individual makes a statement, others in the organisation can see the message and have the right to comment, which can effectively ensure that everyone in the organisation feels safe,^[26] and contributes to the elimination of hierarchy. Reviewing the previous article, it has been explored that prompt responses from employers can encourage employees to speak up, and this also illustrates the importance of managers responding and acting on employees' voices as soon as possible. If employers ignore or respond negatively to grievances, social media is likely to become an 'internal discussion forum' for employees or union members, potentially exacerbating a bad situation and spreading negative feelings among employees or union members.^[27] When management is aware of employee grievances through social media, it is essential to find the cause and announce a solution in the first instance. Similarly, employers and unions need to ensure that employees and members are motivated to speak out by providing timely feedback when employees provide constructive suggestions to the organisation.

Thirdly, ensure fairness in the use of social media for voice. On the one hand, it means that managers must treat every employee and every voice with equity and not give feedback selectively or with emotion because of position, gender, race, etc. On the other hand, it means that each individual has the same right to speak out and be heard, so that all people can put forward their true ideas without fear and thus guarantee that the voice is meaningful.^[28]

5. Conclusion

This study examines how social media has altered the mechanisms of voice in the workplace from the viewpoints of employees, employers, and unions in the context of the increasing usage of social media in the workplace. Focus primarily on both individual and collective voices to investigate how social media has altered how voices are heard.

In the study of how social media has changed the voice of the individual, examples from Best Buy, IBM Jam and Uber are used to illustrate how social media has given employees a broader platform for their voices to be heard and responded to in a more timely manner. This makes employees' voices more authentic and active in organisational decision-making, and through their voices on social media, employers can see and react quickly to their employees' real ideas and efficiently harvest more creative ideas when making decisions. However, employees' voices on social media can also be detrimental to an employer's reputation, but this is proof that employees' voices on social media do have a more powerful impact. As long as organisations are able to respond in a timely manner, it can be beneficial for both employees and employers to have a voice on social media.

In analysing how social media has changed collective bargaining, cases such as Liverpool Dockers and Aschersleben's shopping centre are cited to demonstrate how social media has made the collective voice of trade unions (both union and non-union members) heard by more people and how it has influenced the way disputes are conducted in certain situations. It is also suggested that unions need to seize the opportunities that social media presents to them in order to extend the impact of their collective voice.

The paper finally reviewed the changes social media had made to the voice mechanism at work above and suggests that in the future, both individuals and unions would need to establish robust rules when using social media for voice, to ensure the effectiveness of multi-way communication and the fairness.

Only the correct use of social media for voice can ensure that the changes made to employees, employers and unions are positive.

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