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Employee Voice and the Digitalisation of Work

Over the past four decades, scholars from employment relations, human resource management, organisational behaviour and labour economics have published a vast body of literature concerning employee voice (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). Employee voice is thereby understood as the opportunity to participate in organisational decision-making and to have a say in influencing the own work and the interests of managers and owners (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016) or – in the case of employee silence – to withhold these views and concerns (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Employee voice and silence have been linked to organisational performance and the development of competitive advantage (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016). They are a vital ingredient for the positive relationship between strategic human resource management and organisational performance (Wood & Wall, 2007), implying a link between employee voice and innovation (Rohlfer et al., 2022). Employees with the opportunity to communicate unique ideas to management and to participate in decision-making give them the possibility to express ‘creative ideas and new perspectives, increasing the likelihood of innovation’ (Grant, 2013, p. 1703; Zhou & George, 2001).

Recently, scholars have been paying more attention to current topics and relating them to employee voice. One research stream addresses the advancing technologies and considers the digital revolution and its impact on employee voice. Undoubtedly, digital technology fundamentally changes how we do business (Mennie, 2015) and, consequently, forms, tools and channels of ‘voice’. The few studies on employee voice and digitalisation mainly deal with social media at work and its opportunities for management to engage with employees. For instance, Holland, Cooper, and Hecker (2019) discuss conceptual issues and opportunities social media provides in developing employee voice. Similarly, Barnes, Balnave, Thornthwaite, and Manning (2019) show how a union’s use of social media might facilitate greater member participation and engagement. However, more empirical evidence and conceptual considerations are needed to better understand digitalisation and employee voice (or ‘e-voice’). Digitalisation does not only bring technical changes and innovations that only affect the activity and its organisation. Data and meta-data about work are

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also becoming available, which have hardly been taken into account in this form in co-determination (Pfeiffer, 2019).

Therefore, the aim of the special issue of management revue – Socio-Economic Studies is to focus on digitalisation at work and its challenges and opportunities for employee engagement, voice, and silence in cross-disciplinary discussions:

In the first special issue article, *Sophie Heim* and *Maren Gierlich-Joas* aim to contribute to an understanding of the interface between digital technologies affecting empowerment and employees affecting the innovation process during employee-driven innovation (EDI). Based on a well-structured literature review and in-depth case study of an employee-initiated augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR) sales tool, they show a solid mutual interaction between employee empowerment and digital innovation throughout the different organisational levels.

With social media, employees and organisations have new ways of speaking up. *Robin Stumpf* and *Stefan Süß* conduct a scenario-based experiment in which participants imagine themselves as managers evaluating a proposal to investigate the valuation of social media voice. They demonstrate that the voice valuation is higher when a suggestion is delivered by voicemail rather than social media, the proposal is based on an individual's viewpoint rather than a group, and the source is an authority.

Christoph Schank and *Eva Maria Spindler* address the topic of algorithm-based decisions. These decisions significantly impact general decision-making processes and those between the company and employee representatives. It examines how employee representation voice can be preserved in algorithm-based decision-making processes within an organisation. To avoid a culture of silence, this conceptual article proposes structural problem-solving approaches and employee representative qualification requirements for allowing employee representation voice to be included in algorithm-based decision-making.

Effective communication is essential in flexible work arrangements. It may be difficult for employees to voice critical issues when they are distributed across time and space and mediated by technology. These include providing ideas for improvement, expressing concerns about inefficiency, safety, and reporting errors. *Michael Knoll*, *Mirjam Feldt*, and *Hannes Zacher* use a process model of voice in their conceptual article to develop exemplary propositions for how technologically-enabled work arrangements to contribute to voice success factors when employees move through these stages.

According to *Alida Susanna (Suné) Du Plessis* and *Leon T. De Beer*, employee voice behaviour may be affected by work-related rumination. There may be some employees who are more comfortable speaking up about ideas or concerns, and there may be others who are more comfortable remaining silent. In their cross-sectional study of 332 employees, the authors investigate the connections between

work-related rumination, employee voice and silence, turnover intention, and job satisfaction.

Through content analysis of 118 South African first-instance social media misconduct dismissal decisions, *René Cornish* argues in his article that employees use social media to express dissenting employee voice. Despite laws and social media policies by businesses to limit dissenting speech, there is evidence of individual employee voice. Moreover, despite the legal ban on hate speech, employee voice in the form of racialised speech disparaging and cyber-critiquing employers persists online.

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