

Workplace Transformation: Strategies for Employee Voice and Communication in Organizational Management

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Abstract

Employee voice and communication in the workplace are crucial for allowing employees to express dissatisfaction, ideas, concerns, suggestions, or recommendations. This study focuses on the essential aspects of employee voice and communication in promoting a positive workplace environment among employees and management within organizations in Malaysia. The study aims to investigate organizational management's insights and perspectives on effective strategies for fostering employee voice and enhancing communication in the workplace. Effective employee voice and communication can significantly influence how employees feel about issues that directly affect them, such as miscommunication, discrimination, oppression, dissatisfaction, and lack of motivation. This study employed a basic interpretative qualitative methodology to gain insights and opinions from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) representatives including the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), and the Union Network International Malaysia Labour Centre (UNI-MLC) regarding the concept of employee voice and communication in the Malaysian context. Data were obtained through interview sessions, and thematic categorization was conducted based on the coding process. The findings of the study emphasized three important aspects: fundamentals, channels, and legal governance in improving employee voice and communication in the workplace. This study not only highlights the employees' right to voice their concerns but also underscores the importance of organizational management recognizing employee voice and communication as key to achieving productivity and maintaining strong working relationships at all levels of the organization. Additionally, incorporating TVET can further enhance these efforts by equipping employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively participate in and contribute to workplace discussions, thereby fostering a more inclusive and dynamic organizational culture.

1. Introduction

Voice in communication plays a vital role in daily life, serving as a means to express thoughts, emotions, feelings, and ideas effectively. The development of effective voice and communication refers to the lifelong learning skills

that require practice and commitment to be adapt in various situations (Bowen & Shume, 2020; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). In the employment world, successful organization require employees, as they are considered valuable asset to achieve the mission and vision of the organization. Some studies indicated that the existence of a positive workplace environment can improve the employee engagement, employee performance and motivation (Zacharias et al., 2021; Zhenjing et al., 2022). Based on the study by Adeyemi (2022), workplace issues or conflicts that faced by employees can influence their emotion, productivity and performance that later will lead to the employee turnover. Employee voice and communication at workplace is important for employees to raise any dissatisfaction, ideas, concerns, suggestions or recommendations. Job dissatisfaction can stem from issues such as feeling underpaid, lack of appreciation, lack of training and development options, negative workplace relationships or lack of work-life balance (Jahan et al., 2022; Khan, 2024).

The role of employee voice and communication in the workplace is essential to ensure that employees have the right to speak up, particularly when they feel oppressed by their peers or management. Employees should be able to express their concerns or suggestions confidently and without fear. Therefore, the implementation of employee voice and communication in the workplace is critical for the success of organizational management, fostering an inclusive leadership environment (Khan, 2024). The fundamental principles of employee voice and communication should be clearly addressed at the organizational level so that employees feel valued and understand their important role in the workplace (Prouska et al., 2023).

Management should focus on collecting employee insights and taking action based on the feedback, facilitated by platforms that support employee communication. Providing such platforms creates a sense of ownership and belonging among employees (Ghani & Malik, 2023). When employees feel that their voices are heard and there are responses to the issues they raise, they experience greater satisfaction and a stronger connection to their workplace. Moreover, integrating Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) into the workplace can further enhance these efforts. TVET programs equip employees with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in workplace discussions and contribute to decision-making processes (Smith et al., 2023). This integration not only boosts employee confidence in voicing their opinions but also promotes a more dynamic and inclusive organizational culture. Hence, this study explores the perspectives of organizational management on how employee voice and communication can be implemented in the workplace, emphasizing the critical role of TVET in this process.

1.1 Employee Voice

The concept of employee voice encompasses various definitions and interpretations based on different perspectives. Employee voice generally refers to employees' ability to communicate their issues, concerns, and suggestions regarding work-related activities through organizational channels such as speak-up programs, teamwork initiatives, or collective negotiation mechanisms (Freeman et al., 2008; Marchington & Suter, 2013). It is crucial for employees to have the right to raise these matters, provided that appropriate mechanisms or agreements exist between employees and employers. Dromey (2016) defines employee voice as the capacity of employees to express their insights, views, problems, ideas, and opinions that can influence decision-making within the workplace. Essentially, employee voice involves speaking out on opinions, suggestions, complaints, problems, or concerns related to work matters. However, the absence of open communication and the prevalence of silence can lead to significant workplace issues, such as fear of retaliation or perceptions that employees' voices will not be heard. Silence in the workplace often reflects a disengaged workforce that feels undervalued and disconnected. To address these challenges, organizations must create opportunities for employees to voice their opinions and actively contribute to the decision-making process. This approach helps break the silence, fostering a more dynamic and productive workplace environment where employees feel valued and connected. Vu and Fan (2022) emphasize that encouraging open communication can transform organizational culture, leading to improved engagement and productivity. Prihatsanti et al. (2021) define employee voice as the ability and preference to communicate ideas, suggestions, issues, or opinions related to the interests of the organization or individuals through formal or informal channels. Formal channels involve established structures or regulations, while informal channels allow for more direct or unstructured communication (Barry & Wilkinson, 2021; Klaas et al., 2012; Marchington & Suter, 2013). Both channels need to be properly managed to maximize the effectiveness of employee voice, which is crucial for both management and employees. Employees may prefer the channel in which they feel most comfortable raising their concerns. Some researchers suggest that human resource managers should play a key role in providing or developing employee voice channels that can be applied across broader sectors (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2018; Salleh & Sulaiman, 2016; Wan Muda et al., 2016).

Incorporating Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) into the development of employee voice channels can further enhance these efforts. TVET programs equip employees with the necessary communication skills and confidence to effectively utilize both formal and informal channels for expressing their ideas and concerns. Additionally, TVET can include training on the importance of employee voice and how to engage effectively in organizational communication, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic organizational

culture. Further research is required to guide management in planning and providing effective employee voice channels in the workplace (Smith et al., 2023). Su Yee et al. (2018) reviewed case studies of employee voice in the Malaysian context, revealing restrictions and limitations on how employees can express dissatisfaction to management when holding different viewpoints. This demonstrates a lack of awareness and available channels for employees to voice their concerns. Moreover, the benefits of employee voice influence organizational commitment (Prasadika & Nishanthi, 2018). For example, the relationship between employees, line managers, and senior management trust fosters better organizational commitment. Therefore, strengthening these relationships through proper channels is essential for increasing organizational commitment.

A lack of information on effective and comprehensive voice processes contributes to gaps in employee voice practices. Hosseini et al. (2022) developed a voice framework in Iran using semi-structured interviews to identify key themes that guide the development of such processes. Providing an employee voice channel or platform is one way to reduce or prevent employee burnout caused by work-related stress (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). Common causes of burnout include task overload, long working hours, poor workplace treatment, and a lack of support from management. The COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in workplace closures, also contributed to stress and burnout among employees (Hong et al., 2022; Li et al., 2019; Soelton et al., 2020). Employee burnout significantly impacts job satisfaction, performance, and health, leading to long-term demotivation in the workplace (Weiss & Zacher, 2022). Many employees leave their jobs due to emotional exhaustion. Kim and Lee (2021) found that effective and strategic employee voice and communication are necessary to prevent emotional exhaustion. Employee voice can reduce employees' intentions to resign and indirectly help resolve workplace issues (Van Gramberg et al., 2020). Hsu et al. (2019) recommend revising labor laws and regulations to align with the dynamic nature of work, aiming to minimize excessive working hours and improve work-life balance. Initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, time-off policies, childcare (especially for working mothers), elder care, healthcare, awareness programs, and counseling should be prioritized to create a supportive workplace environment.

Employees, employers, and management can enhance individual commitment, workplace productivity, and organizational success by implementing employee voice strategies (Arimie & Oronsaye, 2020). This practice is most effective when supported by positive relationships and two-way communication that is clear, effective, manageable, and responsive. For instance, in the hospitality sector, customer expectations regarding service quality are highly prioritized (Jolly & Lee, 2021). Employee voice is critical in this context, as employees frequently interact directly with customers, providing valuable insights into customer preferences, complaints, and suggestions. These insights can guide top management in future improvements and employee skill development.

2. Methodology

This study utilized an interpretive qualitative approach to examine organizational management perspectives on implementing employee voice and communication in the workplace. The research population consisted of expert human resource organizations in Malaysia, including the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), and the Union Network International Malaysia Labour Centre (UNI-MLC). The sample was selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, targeting industry experts with substantial experience and insights in this field to ensure the collection of rich, comprehensive data.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews centered on the theme of employee voice and workplace communication. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' experiences, backgrounds, and perceptions, emphasizing their understanding and practices related to employee voice and communication in professional contexts. To elicit meaningful and detailed responses, the researcher employed probing questions aligned with the study's objectives. The order of the questions remained flexible to facilitate a natural flow of conversation based on participants' responses. Ethical approval was obtained from the research center prior to data collection to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines and avoid potential issues. Additionally, informed consent was secured from all participants before the interviews were conducted. The researcher followed strict ethical protocols by avoiding sensitive or intrusive questions and maintaining participants' confidentiality and voluntary participation.

A total of seven participants from diverse professional backgrounds contributed to the study, with work experience ranging from 7 to 24 years. Data collection methods included audio recordings and field notes, which were later transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns emerging from the data. This approach facilitated the development of key themes that provide insights into effective implementation strategies for employee voice and communication in the workplace.

Recent studies further highlight the importance of employee voice and its influence on organizational outcomes. For instance, Men (2014) underscores the role of transformational leadership and strategic internal communication in enhancing employee satisfaction. Similarly, Purcell and Hall (2012) emphasize the need for structured channels to promote employee voice and foster a positive workplace environment. More recently, research by Smith et al. (2023) suggests that integrating digital communication platforms can enhance employee engagement and enable more effective two-way communication. By combining insights from experienced

4. **Relation (19):** "Relation" is often linked to "industrial relations," referring to the relationship between employers and employees. This frequency suggests a focus on how these relationships are managed and regulated.
5. **Voice (18):** The term "voice" relates to "employee voice," indicating discussions on how employees can express their concerns, suggestions, or opinions in the workplace. It highlights the importance of communication and feedback mechanisms.
6. **Law (14):** The frequency of "law" suggests that legal aspects, such as labor laws and regulations, play a significant role in the discussion. This could include compliance, legal rights, and obligations of employers and employees.
7. **Management (14):** This term signifies the role of management in addressing employee issues, implementing policies, and maintaining industrial relations. It underscores the importance of leadership in the workplace.
8. **Companies (12):** The term "companies" indicates that the discussion includes various businesses and their practices related to employees and industrial relations.
9. **Employers (12):** Similar to "companies," this term focuses on the role of employers in managing employee relations, compliance with laws, and addressing workplace issues.
10. **Act (11):** The term "act" likely refers to specific legislation or acts related to labor laws and industrial relations. It indicates discussions on legal frameworks that govern workplace practices.
11. **Training (11):** The term "training" suggests that employee development and training programs are also a significant focus. This could relate to skills development, compliance training, or leadership training programs.

In summary, Table 1 provides a comprehensive analysis of word count frequencies, highlighting key areas of focus in workplace dynamics, including employee concerns (56 mentions), industrial relations (20 mentions), legal frameworks (14 mentions), management roles (14 mentions), and training programs (11 mentions). These findings, synthesized with insights obtained from interview sessions using critical self-reflexivity perspectives, reveal recurring themes and emphasize the interconnectedness of these elements in fostering a productive and harmonious workplace. The data underscores the need for addressing employee issues, enhancing communication channels, and aligning management practices with legal and industrial frameworks to create a balanced and sustainable work environment.

Table 1 Analysis on word count frequency

Item	Frequency
Employees	56
Issues	29
Industrial	20
Relation	19
Voice	18
Law	14
Management	14
Companies	12
Employers	12
Act	11
Training	11

Table 2 indicated the description on the aspects of employee voice and communication at workplace as perceived by respondents, with a focus on three main categories. These categories include the fundamentals of employee voice and communication; channels for employee voice and communication; and legal governance that relate to the employee rights at workplace.

Table 2 Aspects of employee voice and communication

Aspects of Employee Voice and Communication	
Fundamentals of employee voice and communication	1. Employers and employees engaging in discussions for decision-making and problem-solving on the issues raised by employees.

Aspects of Employee Voice and Communication	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Transparencies are important for interactions between employers and employees to encourage trust and mutual understanding within workplace to prevent misunderstandings in communication. 3. Employee voice can be implemented through open communication, collaboration and mutual respect to each other. 4. Employees should be protected by providing right platforms for them to voice and communicate their issues without hesitation.
Channels of employee voice and communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formal, informal, direct, or indirect are the forms of voice and communication through individual and collective channels. 2. There is lack of action or response from the top management if the issues raised individually compared to the collective way. 3. Several issues can be resolved among employees without involving management. If the issues extend beyond their capacity, an alternative preference could be is to bring it to the government. 4. The platforms of employee voice and communication for knowledge sharing and employee engagement through social media have been increasingly used. However, raising issues on social media may not always benefit the employees or be actioned as desired.
Legal governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Legal provisions related to the rights of employees protected under the country's labour laws and regulations, aiming to ensure fairness for employees in various aspects of employment. 2. The main legislations governing employment such as Employment Act 1955 and the Industrial Relations Act 1967 play significant role in protecting the rights of employees. 3. Employers have the power to influence government policies or employment landscape, as well as they need to stay well-informed about the latest labour laws and regulations to implement best practices in long-term. 4. All laws or acts under the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) in Malaysia are refer to the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions to ensure the employment practices in country are aligned globally for employee well-being especially.

The fundamentals of employee voice and communication describe the characteristics and the rights of employees within an organizational setting. The employee voice at workplace can become effective if every individual understands the importance to communicate their thoughts and opinions related to the work. This is contingent upon the active inclusion of employees and management, especially in discussions where their inputs or feedbacks will be taken seriously. The involvement of employees not only acknowledges the valuable contributions of individuals in the organization but also strengthens the organizational culture and encourage confidence among employees to speak up.

“Employee voice is going to actually motivate more employees and also with employers. They all think there is self-belonging to the view from employees that can contribute to the company's performance in problem-solving at workplace”. (UNI-MLC, 275-277)

In the context of employee voice and communication, the various channels of voice at workplace should be provided based on its forms, mechanisms, platforms, or even individual preferences to ensure their concerns are being heard. Despite the availability of these channels, most employees do not raise their issues through the right channels such as through social media. Through exploring the diverse channels of voice and strategic communication, employees acknowledged to voice their opinions that later will prevent miscommunication or confusion in organization. This will create positive experience especially to the employees that work for the company. In the past, employees faced limitations in their ability to bargain collectively for their rights. It allowed

only for discussion of concerns without the formal mechanisms of collective bargaining, highlighting the evolving nature of employee rights over time. One of the respondents stated that:

“If the employee actually manages the situation properly then they shouldn’t have raise to the management and how to actually get things resolve by raising the issues to the management is something that should be explored but instead of doing that, they prefer to talk differently”. (MEF, 169-171)

The legal governance of employment involves policies, acts, laws, and regulations that encourage the implementation of employee voice and communication at workplace. The main reference of this employment landscape includes the Employment Act (EA) 1955, which outlines the important rights and obligations for both employers and employees. Employees need to be well-informed about their rights under the EA, serving as a basic guide for the terms and conditions of their employment. The EA provides benefits to the employees, addressing aspects such as working conditions, hours of working, leave entitlements, and various other aspects toward their well-being in the workplace. In matters governed by law, negotiation is not applicable as the law sets the standards that must be obeyed by all parties involved in the employment relationship. While negotiations may occur for certain aspects of employment falling outside legal governance, the core rights and protections established by the law are non-negotiable. Even in the case of employee dismissal, their voice can still be heard under Section 20 of the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) 1967, providing a legal avenue for expressing concerns. These laws not only safeguard employee rights but also enable them to organize and engage with management in addressing the workplace issues.

“If you look at the employment act, it talks about the basic, I would say terms and conditions actually. You don’t have to demand, it is granted for you because if your terms and conditions are less valuable than Employment Act provision, then the Employment Act shall apply. So, that’s I think it is a give and take. Any IR practitioners or even HR practitioners will have to understand that you cannot negotiate up of the law but of course there are so many practitioners that they thought they can actually negotiate to disagree with the law which I always say that to them, you cannot actually negotiate to disagree with the law”. (MEF, 243-252)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study provides an overview of three main aspects related to the implementation of employee voice and communication in the workplace: its fundamentals, the channels through which the voice and communication are delivered, and the legal governance protecting employees’ rights. It aims to encourage employees to speak up as they feel safe to acknowledge that their voices are taken seriously. The support system, such as government bodies, ministers, organizations, or management, is significant toward the awareness of employees’ rights that can lead to the meaningful changes. This involves recognizing the employees’ concerns, encouraging fair labour practices, and creating an environment where employees are aware of their rights and empowered to practice them. The Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) plays a pivotal role in this support system, shaping policies and regulations that protect and enhance employees’ rights to ensure a fair and equitable working environment for all. Stakeholders can improve the organizational ecosystem, particularly employee well-being, by emphasizing the importance of implementing employee voice and communication in the workplace. Employees may address their issues either individually or through departmental management if they feel dissatisfied with certain matters. However, the impact of individual efforts on decision-making within the organization is constrained, emphasizing the need for alternative channels. To overcome this limitation, employees must actively explore voice channels to raise concerns with management or seek representation to ensure their rights are not overlooked. (Adkins, 2020; Park et al., 2022). Furthermore, consultancy at the workplace can be a valuable resource in providing advice and guidance for both employees and employers in navigating various issues.

Employees face ongoing challenges, such as lower productivity, workplace conflicts, or strained relationships with employers and management (Badrianto & Ekhsan, 2020). These issues require a thoughtful plan to improve workplace conditions for the benefit of all, particularly employees. The primary focus is on identifying solutions that can enhance the efficiency of employee voice and communication or create a harmonious work environment (Tran et al., 2020). Recognizing the importance of having an effective employee voice and communication channels is integral to employee engagement. To achieve this, a crucial aspect involves the communication skills that should be prioritized, especially in minimizing the language barriers. The absence of language barriers further facilitates continuous communication contributes to an open and effective dialogue where employee concerns and feedback can be expressed. However, challenge may arise if employers hire migrant employees. This can have a

lasting impact on the overall environment of employee voice within the company. It becomes imperative to address the potential implications on the communication dynamics and ensure that the voices of all employees, regardless of their background, are considered and valued.

The negative implications if there is no employee voice and communication extend to the employees themselves, jeopardizing their working spirit, disrupting the emotions of employees, and oppression of employees' rights. Such consequences highlight the importance of maintaining a supportive work environment to reduce the feelings of depression impact on employees' well-being (Rasool et al., 2020). Strikes can serve as a method for employees to collectively voice their concerns and grievances. Frequent occurrences of strikes can indeed have significant toward the economic development of the country, leading to the closure of the company, job losses, or supply chain disruptions affecting multiple industries. A potential recommendation for implementing employee voice and communication in the workplace is the establishment of employees' committees in Malaysia. Various laws have also been amended to improve work conditions, as well as anti-discrimination and oppression at workplace. Therefore, future research should emphasize laws or regulations focused on employment scope to increase employees' awareness and understanding of their rights.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** MA Jamaludin, KM Salleh; **data collection:** MA Jamaludin; **analysis and interpretation of results:** MA Jamaludin, KM Salleh, NL Sulaiman, A Ahmed; **draft manuscript preparation:** KM Salleh, B Parasuraman, A Ahmed. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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