Employee voice and engagement: connections and consequences

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Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between employee voice and employee engagement. Employee perceptions of voice behaviour aimed at improving the functioning of the work group are found to have both a direct impact and an indirect impact on levels of employee engagement. Analysis of data from two organisations confirms that the direct connection between perceptions of voice behaviour and engagement is mediated by both employee trust in senior management and the employee–line manager relationship. Key concepts are outlined, and the implications of the findings for future research and for the management of engagement are discussed.

Introduction

Employee engagement is rapidly becoming central in the senior management lexicon within an increasing number of organisations, concerned as they are to maintain a competitive edge in ever more demanding financial and market conditions. Reflecting the normative dimension to human resource management (HRM), it has long been argued that added value derives not merely from competing on price or product quality, but also from the ability to extract a greater degree of willing employee commitment to corporate objectives. Hence, what matters is the way in which employees *choose* to undertake their jobs and, crucially, the extent of 'discretionary effort' they are prepared to expend. In these terms, raising levels of employee engagement is the latest in a long line of managerial strategies aimed at releasing employee discretion and aligning employee interests more closely with managerial goals, predicated on the assumption that this will in turn boost organisational performance.

Initiatives to increase employee engagement are now widespread in both the private and public sectors in the UK, and it has become a key performance indicator for many organisations, which quantify engagement levels through annual staff opinion surveys, looking for improvements that will feed through into performance and customer service. The concept has been endorsed by the UK's professional body for human resource managers, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), and has been the subject of a central government review conducted within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which led to the MacLeod Report (MacLeod and Clarke 2009) and the subsequent establishment of a 'guru group' to explore how the report's recommendations might best be implemented.

Academic support for the benefits of an engaged workforce appears to be growing. Employees who are more engaged with their work are said to be more likely to behave in positive and cooperative ways, to the benefit of both the firm and themselves (Salanova and Schaufeli 2008). It is also argued that engaged employees outperform others by showing heightened interest in their work and being prepared to 'go the extra mile' for their organisation (Bakker and Xanthopoulou 2009; Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees and Gatenby 2010; Rich, Lepine and Crawford 2010). The claim has also been made that engaged employees see their work as more meaningful and fulfilling, and appear to experience increased job satisfaction (Truss et al. 2006; Balain and Sparrow 2009).

Our concern in this paper, however, is not with the potential individual or organisational benefits that appear to follow from an engaged workforce, but rather with the *antecedents* of employee engagement, and in particular with the extent to which employee voice has an impact upon engagement levels. We discuss the impact of a broader range of so-called 'high-performance HR practices' on employee engagement elsewhere (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees and Gatenby, in press), but our particular concern here is to assess the impact of employee voice,

and we are unaware of other studies that have done this. This is an important omission, given it is established in the employee voice literature that employees who perceive themselves to have opportunities to effectively communicate their concerns to management are likely to elicit more positive attitudes and demonstrate higher levels of performance (Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton and Swart 2003; Robinson, Perryman and Hayday 2004). Hence, the central aim of our paper is to bring together two streams of literature by exploring the relationship between employee voice and engagement.

Specifically, we propose that there exist both (1) a direct relationship between employee voice and engagement, and (2) an indirect relationship between employee voice and engagement, mediated by the exchange relationships the employee experiences. In exploring these various connections, our approach is consistent with social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Emerson 1976), which posits that employees engage in reciprocal relationships that can develop into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments if certain 'rules of exchange' are followed. It is claimed that employees are motivated within the employment relationship to demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours when they perceive that their employer values them and their contribution (Saks 2006; Kuvaas and Dysvik 2010). Organisational practices send overt and implicit signals to employees about the extent to which they are valued and trusted, giving rise to feelings of obligation on the part of employees, who then reciprocate through demonstrating positive behaviours (Gould-Williams 2007; Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). In these terms, we can assume that if employees perceive their work environment to be one in which they can share their opinions, ideas and concerns, they will in turn be more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement.

The particular exchange relationships we consider are twofold: first those with senior management and second those with the employees' immediate supervisor or line manager. Social exchange theory implies that if employees have trustful relationships with their senior managers, and believe they are supported by their line manager, they will likely respond with positive behaviour, and hence their levels of engagement will rise. Whilst both of these aspects form part of the broader set of social exchange relationships between employees and employer (Balain and Sparrow 2009), research has also demonstrated that trustful relationships with senior managers and employee–line manager relationships differentially relate to individual attitudes and behaviours (Settoon, Bennett and Liden 1996). In light of these differential effects, the present study aims to enhance our understanding of the social exchange relationships that underpin the voice–engagement link by exploring the relative contribution of trust in senior management and the employee–line management relationship in mediating the way employee voice is associated with employee engagement.

In doing so, we focus on one particular aspect of employee voice, namely individual employees' perceptions of the extent to which they engage in voice behaviour aimed at improving the functioning of their work group. We do this for two reasons. First, the importance of effective work groups is well established, and the group is a prominent aspect of work organisation for many employees (Cohen and Bailey 1997; Ilgen 1999). Second, previous research has demonstrated that voice is especially important within work groups (Van Dyne and LePine 1998). As work groups are characterised by high interdependence, shared responsibilities and common goals and objectives, being able to share ideas about the functioning of the group is likely to be relevant for individual levels of engagement. Previous research has largely focused on voice behaviour directed towards a higher authority. However, as Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar (2011) argue, these findings might not be generalisable to voice behaviour within work groups. More research is therefore needed to

explore the consequences of voice behaviour within groups for individual attitudes and behaviour (Morrison et al. 2011; Takeuchi, Chen and Cheung 2012). Hence, the final aim of our paper is to extend current knowledge on employee voice by exploring the outcomes of voice behaviour directed towards the functioning of work groups.

To confirm the structure and contribution of the paper, we first examine the association between employees' perceptions of voice behaviour directed towards improving the functioning of their work group and self-reported levels of engagement, and then consider the mediating effects on this association of both trust in senior management and the employee–line management relationship. We find that both of these relationships mediate the way in which employee voice is associated with employee engagement, and as such we more clearly understand both employee voice processes and the dynamics of broader organisational exchange relationships. In the following section, we outline the key concepts – engagement, voice, trust in senior management, employee-line manager relations – in more detail, and advance associated hypotheses. We then introduce the two case study organisations and provide an outline of the methodology. After presenting the results, we end with an acknowledgement of the study's limitations and a brief consideration of the consequences of the findings – for managers, for employees and for broader policy debates.

Key concepts and propositions

Employee engagement is conceived in the extant literature as a foundational variable that influences work-related attitudes and behaviours (Christian, Garza and Slaughter 2011). Definitions of engagement vary, but, as Macey and Schneider (2008) note, a common thread is the assumption that 'pro-social' employee activity can lead to desirable effects, with mutual benefits for employees and organisations. Currently, there are several measures that relate to different conceptual models, and most researchers agree that engagement is best understood as a multidimensional construct. For example, Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006) describe three interrelated dimensions of vigour, dedication and absorption as creating an internal state of engagement. Dvir, Eden, Avolio and Shamir prefer 'activity, initiative and responsibility' (2002, p. 737). We also see engagement as multidimensional, and our conceptualisation builds upon the seminal work of Kahn (1990) and May, Gilson and Harter (2004). Kahn defined engagement as the 'harnessing of organisational members' selves to their work roles' (1990, p. 694), later adding the concomitant notion of psychological 'presence' as the outcome of employees feeling attentive, connected, integrated and focused in their role performance (Kahn 1992). May et al. (2004) developed Kahn's work by defining engagement as a psychological state in which employees are completely immersed in their work.

We build upon these notions of 'presence' and 'immersion' in work by defining engagement as 'being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort and experiencing both positive emotions and meaningful connections to others' (Alfes et al. 2010). Furthermore, we distinguish between three facets: (1) intellectual engagement – the extent to which individuals are absorbed in their work and think about ways role performance could be improved; (2) affective engagement – the extent to which employees feel positive emotional connections to their work experience; and (3) social engagement – the extent to which employees talk to colleagues about work-related improvements and change. We discuss the development and application of this measure in considerable detail elsewhere, using data from two studies to demonstrate the internal reliability of both the scale and its sub-scales (Soane et al. 2012). We also draw the important

conceptual distinction between the state of engagement and behaviours that might follow from this state, a view reflected in other recent research (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter 2011; Parker and Griffin 2011).

Whilst much of the recent literature attempts to demonstrate a link between engagement and organisational performance (Rich et al. 2010; Christian et al. 2011), our concern is not with the performance implications of engagement, but rather with the *drivers* of engagement, i.e. with the causes rather than the effects, with the antecedents rather than the outcomes. As Purcell argues, in many ways it is helpful to see employee engagement itself as an *outcome*, as 'something that flows from the practice of good employment relations' (2010, p. 8). One well-established constituent of effective employment relations is employee voice, and we examine the extent to which perceptions of voice directed towards the work group constitute one of the essential antecedents of engagement.

When it first emerged, the concept of employee voice tended to be equated firmly with trade union membership and collective bargaining, following the pioneering work of Freeman and Medoff (1984), but it is now more frequently seen as referring to a broad range of ways in which employees 'have a say' about what goes on in their organisation, whether through formal systems of indirect, collective representation, or through more direct, individual channels (CIPD 2010). Morrison et al. (2011) refer to voice as the discretionary verbal communication of ideas, suggestions or opinions with the intent to improve organisational or unit functioning, a view consistent with several other recent studies (Burris, Detert and Chiaburu 2008; Greenberg and Edwards 2009; Takeuchi et al. 2012; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2012). Van Dyne and Le Pine similarly define voice in terms of employees 'making innovative suggestions for change and recommending modifications to standard procedures even when others disagree' (1998, p. 109). We follow this view in seeing voice as referring specifically to employees' actual behaviour in 'speaking up' with constructive ideas that aim to improve or change the *status quo*.

Our focus on perceptions of voice is gaining increasing recognition in the literature, and as Budd, Gollan and Wilkinson (2010) note, research on employee voice has thus significantly broadened, expanding well beyond its earlier industrial relations focus on collective representation. Batt, Colvin and Keefe (2002), for example, found that the more effective employees perceived voice mechanisms to be, the more likely they were to advance their own opinions and ideas. Benson and Brown, summarising recent research in the area, suggest that 'it will be the employees' perceptions of voice, rather than the existence or features of a voice mechanism, that will determine whether employees will try to voice their concerns to management, remain silent and/or exit the organisation' (2010, p. 82). Research also suggests that where employees believe they are able to influence decisions, and perceive they have opportunities for voice, this has the potential to result in increased levels of organisational commitment (Korsgaard, Schweiger and Sapienza 1995; Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher and Hope-Hailey 2011).

So far, no study to our knowledge has directly analysed how employee perceptions of voice are related to engagement. However, there is other broader literature that confirms the role of employee involvement and voice mechanisms in encouraging engagement. For example, when Purcell et al. (2003) found a number of factors to be strongly associated with high engagement, they were all related to an employee's involvement in a work-related practice. Work by the Institute of Employment Studies also points to a 'sense of feeling valued and involved' as a major driver of engagement (Robinson et al. 2004). Truss et al. (2006) likewise argue that one of the main drivers of engagement is employees having the opportunity to feed

their views upwards. All this would suggest that there is likely to be a link between employee perceptions of voice and engagement.

As noted above, we are specifically concerned with voice behaviour that is aimed at improving issues at the work group level, and other studies have used a similar approach (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Morrison et al. 2011). Because groups are characterised by interdependence, shared responsibility, diffuse expertise and divergent perspectives, their effectiveness depends not only on members sharing knowledge but also on their willingness to speak up with suggestions and opinions (Nemeth, Connell, Rogers and Brown 2001; Detert and Burris 2007; Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch 2009). The group is also an appropriate level of study in our two organisations, as a significant number of employees work in either workplace or remote teams, and the measure we use here allows us to capture this aspect.

Building on this literature, and following Van Dyne and LePine (1998), our focus is on the extent to which employees perceive that they actively elicit voice behaviour directed towards improving group functioning and outcomes, and we suggest that these perceptions are positively related to individual levels of engagement. Our first hypothesis is thus:

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of employee voice will be positively related to employee engagement.

Whilst research has generally supported the notion that employee voice behaviour is associated with positive individual and organisational outcomes, more recently commentators have sought to explore more closely the mechanisms involved. As Farndale et al. (2011) explain, exchange relationships at work take various forms, and employees will distinguish between exchanges with senior managers, with their line managers and with other members of the organisation. Employees can thus form social exchange relationships at multiple levels. In this study, we are interested in the potential mediating effect of two particular exchange relationships: the extent to which an employee trusts senior management and the relationship an employee has with his or her line manager. These two constructs were chosen because they exemplify two key aspects of the broader social exchange relationship between employees and their employer (Settoon et al. 1996; Hofmann and Morgeson 1999; Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson and Wayne 2008).

Following Farndale et al. (2011), we argue that as voice allows employees the opportunity to communicate their opinions, and engenders the belief that their contributions are valued, it creates a level of respect towards the leaders of the organisation, and there is thus a direct connection between employee voice and the development of employee trust in senior management. Moreover, where employers deliver on their commitments, this reinforces employees' sense of fairness and engenders greater trust in the organisation. 'Relational trust', in turn, fosters reciprocity, and reinforces the emotional bond. A higher level of trust in the employer will increase the assurance that they will fulfil their obligations in the future (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer 1998), so that employees are more likely to be engaged with their job.

Although no published studies, to our knowledge, have examined trust in senior management as a mediator in the relationship between perceived voice behaviour and employee engagement, research in other domains has proposed that trust in senior management may be a useful mediator linking a range of workplace phenomena. For example, Farndale et al. (2011) demonstrated that trust in senior management mediated the relationship between perceived voice behaviour and organisational commitment. Aryee, Budhwar and Zhen Xiong (2002) found that organisational trust mediated the relationship between employees'

justice perceptions and work attitudes such as job satisfaction, turnover intention and organisational commitment. Similarly, Klendauer and Deller's (2009) study revealed that trust in senior management acts as a mediator in the relationship between perceptions of justice and organisational commitment during corporate mergers.

Following this discussion, we expect that employees who have positive perceptions of their own voice behaviour will have higher levels of trust in senior management. Furthermore, we also propose that trust in senior management will be positively related to employee engagement and therefore be one of the mechanisms explaining the relationship between perceived voice behaviour and engagement. Thus:

Hypothesis 2a: There will be a positive association between employee voice and trust in senior management.

Hypothesis 2b: There will be a positive association between trust in senior management and employee engagement.

Hypothesis 2c: The relationship between voice and engagement will be partially mediated by trust in senior management.

A second key exchange relationship that employees experience is with their line manager. It is well established that opportunities for voice can encourage more positive employee attitudes towards management (Dietz, Wilkinson and Redman 2009), and that line managers who enable employee participation affect employee attitudes in positive ways because employees feel recognised and listened to (Korsgaard et al. 1995). These voice mechanisms enhance the perceived quality and strength of the employee–line manager relationship. Conversely, as Farndale et al. (2011) explain, if employees do not feel that they have opportunities to advance their views, or think the views they offer have little influence, this is likely to negatively affect their attitudes towards, and relationship with, their line managers.

More generally, research suggests that managerial processes are a significant influence on how engaged people feel (Macey and Schneider 2008). For example, the development and maintenance of engagement follow from perceptions that line managers are trustworthy and respectful (Kahn 1990; Dvir et al. 2002). Furthermore, Cufaude (2004) argues that when managers employ a philosophy of 'servant–leadership', where their primary role is supporting and serving those around them, the organisational environment becomes highly engaged. Purcell (2010) concludes that at the root of employee disengagement is poor management, where employees are denied the opportunity to communicate with or receive information from their line managers.

To date, we know of only one study that has analysed the mediating effect of the employee–line manager relationship on the link between individuals' perceptions of voice behaviours and their attitudes. Farndale et al. (2011) demonstrated that the employee–line manager relationship mediated the link between perceptions of voice behaviour and organisational commitment. We build upon this study and argue that employees who have positive perceptions of their own voice behaviour have a better relationship with their line manager. Furthermore, we also propose that the employee–line manager relationship will be positively related to employee engagement and therefore mediate the link between perceptions of voice behaviour and engagement. Hence:

Hypothesis 3a: There will be a positive association between employee voice and the employee–line manager relationship.

Hypothesis 3b: There will be a positive association between the employee–line manager relationship and employee engagement.

Hypothesis 3c: The relationship between voice and engagement will be partially mediated by the employee–line manager relationship.

Method

Research process

The paper is based upon quantitative primary data collected from two UK service sector organisations during 2009. Employees were asked to complete a questionnaire including independent, mediating and dependent variables as described below. They were informed about the purpose of the study and its confidentiality, and encouraged to complete the survey within two weeks. The paper is part of a wider study which also included interviews with line managers, senior managers and HR representatives (as reported in Alfes et al. 2010).

Participating organisations

Organisation A is a support services partner providing business solutions for clients across the local government, transport, education and defence sectors. A total of 2500 employees from different locations were asked to take part in the survey. From this sample, 1157 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 46%. The sample comprised 71.4% men, the average age of the respondents was 40.98 years (SD = 12.35) and the average tenure was 4.02 years (SD = 4.18). Respondents represented a range of occupational backgrounds including professionals (49.1%), administration (10.5%), managers or senior officials (14.4%), retail, customer and personal services (2.2%), skilled trades (6.4%), machine operators (9.6%) and elementary occupations (7.8%).

Organisation B is a recycling and waste management company, a leader of its type in the UK, and part of a larger global organisation. The sample comprised 2217 employees; 1153 questionnaires were completed, with a response rate of 52%. There were 22.6% female respondents within this sample. The average age was 41.55 years (SD = 11.63) and the average tenure 5.87 years (SD = 5.61). Again, respondents represented diverse occupational backgrounds including professionals (11.1%), administration (18.5%), managers or senior officials (16.4%), retail, customer and personal services (4.4%), skilled trades (4.5%), machine operators (37.9%) and elementary occupations (7.2%).

Measures

Response options on each measure ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's α for the scales are shown in Table 2, and the respective items with their factor loadings are shown in the Appendix.

Employee engagement:

As discussed earlier, we measured three sub-scales of engagement. Intellectual engagement focused on the extent to which people are cognitively involved in their work. There were three items, e.g. 'I get completely absorbed in my work'. Affective engagement measured the extent to which participants are emotionally involved with, and attached to, their work. There were three items, including 'I am happy when I do a good job'. Social engagement was also assessed with three items, and measured the extent to which employees talk to their colleagues about how to improve their work. Items included: 'I talk to people at work about how to improve the way I do my job'. Because we were interested in an overall measure of engagement, the three sub-scales were aggregated to form an overall measure of engagement.

Employee voice:

We measured voice using a six-item scale developed by Van Dyne and LePine (1998). A sample item was 'I speak up and encourage others in my group to get involved in issues that affect the group'.

Trust in senior management:

A four-item scale was developed based upon Cook and Wall (1980) to assess the extent to which individuals perceived their senior managers as trustworthy, fair and leading the company in a sensible way. A sample item was 'I trust my senior managers'.

Employee–line manager relationships:

The measure for employee–line management relationships was based on the scale developed by Cook and Wall (1980). The items asked employees about their perceptions of the relationship with their line manager. A sample item was 'My line manager treats employees with respect'.

Data analysis

Because all our variables were collected from a single source only, we had to deal with two concerns prior to proceeding to hypothesis testing: common method variance and discriminant validity. To control for the influence of common method bias, we followed established recommendations (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon and Podsakoff 2003; Sea-Jin, Witteloostuijn and Eden 2010). We used established scales only, explained the procedures to our participants and guaranteed anonymity. Furthermore, we separated the measurements of the independent and dependent variables by placing them in different sections of the survey. Finally, we used filler items and different instructions to create a psychological separation between both sets of variables. Moreover, to detect and control for the influence of common method bias through statistical remedies, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) on the data set. Following established recommendations (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham 2005), we calculated five fit indices to determine how the model fitted our data: x^2, goodness of fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). For GFI and CFI, values greater than 0.9 represent a good model fit, and for SRMR and RMSEA, values less than 0.08 indicate a good model fit (Browne and Cudeck 1993; Hu and Bentler 1998; Kline 2005).

We initially performed a CFA on the full measurement model, including all latent variables (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Mulaik and Millsap 2000; Hair et al. 2005). Overall, the measurement model exhibited good psychometric properties (x^2 = 1135; df = 113; GFI = 0.94;

SRMR = 0.05; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.96), and all standardised regression coefficients in the measurement model were significant at the 0.001 level. To further test for common method variance, we conducted Harman's single-factor test, which involves a CFA where all variables were allowed to load onto one general factor. The model exhibited very poor fit (x^2 = 11,439; df = 119; GFI = 0.47; SRMR = 0.16; RMSEA = 0.21; CFI = 0.54), which provided a good indication that a single factor did not account for the majority of variance in our data. Nevertheless, as no single agreed reliable test to detect common method bias exists, results of single-source data analysis should always be interpreted with caution.

In order to analyse whether all the variables in our study were distinct from each other, we further performed a series of nested model comparisons. Specifically, we compared the full measurement model comprising all latent variables with a range of alternative models. Three models were created to assess the distinctiveness of voice and engagement, given their conceptual similarity. In a three-factor model (A), voice and engagement were combined into a single factor. In three two-factor models, voice, engagement and trust in senior managers (Model B); voice, engagement and employee–line manager relationship (Model C); and voice, trust in senior managers and employee–line manager relationship (Model D) were combined into single factors, respectively. Given the possibility of a halo effect, we also assessed whether trust in senior managers and employee–line manager relationship were distinct from each other by combining them into a single factor (three factors, Model E). Finally, we compared the model fit for the one-factor model (F). Results of sequential x^2 difference tests (Table 1) revealed that the model fit of the intended model with four distinct variables was significantly better than all other models (all at $p < 0.001$). This suggests that all variables were distinct and therefore appropriate for inclusion in the analysis.

We included gender, management responsibilities and organisation as control variables. Gender has been found to be related to engagement, with women more engaged than men (Truss et al. 2006; Alfes et al. 2010). Respondents were asked whether they were male or female. Gender was coded 0 for 'male' and 1 for 'female'. Also, previous research has found that employees with management responsibilities show higher levels of engagement (Alfes et al. 2010), which could be attributed to differences in job content and task variety. In our study, we asked participants to indicate whether they had management responsibilities. Management responsibility was coded 1 for 'Yes' and 0 for 'No'. Finally, we included organisation as a control variable.

Findings

Table 2 presents the Cronbach's α, the mean and standard deviation for each scale, and inter-scale correlations for all study variables. The inter-scale correlations show the expected direction of association and are all significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

We used stepwise ordinary least squares regression analysis to test our hypotheses. Preliminary analysis indicated that the regression results given below were not affected by multicollinearity, as the highest VIF value was 1.603. We followed the three-step procedure described by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test for the mediating effect of trust in senior management and the employee–line manager relationship on the relationship between voice and engagement. We first examined the association between the independent and dependent variables.

As shown in Table 3, our results show that voice was significantly related to engagement (β = 0.511, $p < 0.01$, R^2 = 0.307). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported: employee voice was

positively related to engagement. In the second step, our analysis revealed a positive relationship between voice and trust in senior management (β = 0.392, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.155), and between trust in senior management and engagement (β = 0.361, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.196), which gives support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b. Moreover, we found a positive significant association between voice and the employee–line manager relationship (β = 0.345, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.135), and between the employee–line manager relationship and engagement (β = 0.332, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.174). Therefore, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were also confirmed.

In the third step of the mediation procedure, we analysed changes in the effect of voice when trust in senior management and the employee–line manager relationship were added to the regression predicting engagement. The results showed that the impact of voice on engagement was lower, but still significant (β = 0.431, p < 0.01, ΔR^2 = 0.036), when trust in senior management was added to the regression equation. Therefore, Hypothesis 2c is supported: the relationship between voice and engagement is partially mediated by trust in senior management. When the employee–line manager relationship was also added to the regression, we found a further decrease in the influence of voice on employee engagement (β = 0.414, p < 0.01, ΔR^2 = 0.09), giving support for Hypothesis 3c: the employee–line manager relationship partially mediates the relationship between voice and employee engagement.

Finally, we aimed to compare the mediating effects of trust in senior management and the employee–line manager relationship. As shown in Table 3, the partial mediating effect of trust in senior management (β = 0.145) was larger than the partial mediating effect of the employee–line manager relationship (β = 0.116). Moreover, we conducted additional tests to check for the robustness of our findings. Sobel's test was employed to identify whether the indirect effect of voice on engagement via the mediating variables employee–line management relationship and trust in senior management was significantly different from zero. Our analysis revealed that although the indirect effects through trust in senior management (β = 0.392 × 0.145 = 0.057, Sobel's test = 8.701, p < 0.01) and employee–line manager relationship (β = 0.345 × 0.190 = 0.066, Sobel's test = 8.074, p < 0.01) were significantly smaller than the direct effects (β = 0.431, p < 0.01; β = 0.414, p < 0.01), Sobel's test was significant, and therefore gave further support to Hypotheses 2c and 3c.

With respect to the control variables, they explained 7% of the variance in the independent variable employee engagement. As suggested above, both gender (β = 0.122, p < 0.01) and management responsibilities (β = 0.212, p < 0.01) were a significant and strong predictor of engagement. Our results therefore indicate that women are more engaged than men, and that employees with management responsibilities demonstrate higher levels of engagement than non-managers. Moreover, we found that the organisation had a significant, but admittedly small, effect on engagement (β = - 0.093, p < 0.01), with employees in Organisation A showing slightly higher levels of engagement than those in Organisation B.

Conclusions

Our data reveal positive relationships throughout: between voice and engagement, voice and trust in senior management, trust in senior management and engagement, voice and the employee–line manager relationship, and the employee–line manager relationship and engagement. Moreover, the relationship between voice and engagement is partially mediated by both trust in senior management and, to a lesser extent, the employee–line manager relationship. The results have several theoretical and practical implications.

In terms of theoretical implications, our findings add to our understanding of employee voice processes within organisations, and specifically voice behaviour directed towards improving work group functioning. The data show that employees who perceive themselves as speaking up with opinions and suggestions are more likely to be engaged with their work. Moreover, the results show that trust in management and, to a lesser extent, the employee–line management relationship are important in achieving this outcome. In terms of management implications, our study highlights the value of a greater focus on facilitating employee voice to enhance employee engagement. Employees build reciprocal relationships with both senior and line managers, wherein their perceptions of opportunities for voice encourage them to respond with heightened engagement. Engagement is likely to be higher in organisations with high-quality social exchange relationships. Trust in senior managers and strong employee–line manager relationships thus constitute two key aspects of the social exchange relationship required for engagement to flourish.

Despite these robust conclusions, however, the paper has limitations, both methodologically and conceptually. First, we collected data within two organisations only. Future research could be extended to a wider range of organisations, for example exploring sector effects in more detail, or comparing union and non-union settings. Second, we relied upon individuals' self-reports on all variables. Although common method bias did not cause a problem in our data set, we encourage future researchers to collect data from multiple sources. Third, we collected data in each organisation at one point in time. Longitudinal or experimental research designs to substantiate the causality of our hypotheses are therefore welcomed. Because of the cross-sectional design of the study, it was not possible to measure the development of reciprocal exchange relationships over time, and so causality cannot be unequivocally determined. It is quite possible, for example, that employees would be afforded the opportunity to articulate voice in situations where they have better relationships with line managers, and hence causality might operate in either or both directions. Fourth, we examined voice behaviours directed towards improving the functioning of the group as an antecedent of engagement, and yet the data collected did not allow us to assess which team individuals belong to. Future research could therefore examine these relationships using multilevel research designs. Voice behaviours may be mutually reinforcing within employee teams, and exert a unique influence on how team members see their line manager and their organisation as well as their extent of engagement with their jobs.

It is also important to acknowledge that our study used an indirect measure of voice, exploring perceived voice behaviour rather than examining actual voice mechanisms. In other words, we have considered perceptions of voice, not the reality of voice. Other aspects of voice are of course in play within organisations, and future research could explore the actuality of workplace voice mechanisms in more detail. Lawler and Worley (2006) suggest that voice will only impact on engagement if employees are given power, making decisions important to their performance and to the quality of their working lives, and this power can range from a relatively low level of influence, as in providing input into decisions made by others, to having final authority and accountability for decisions and their outcomes. Purcell et al. (2003) likewise suggest that engagement is only meaningful if there is a genuine sharing of responsibility between management and employees over issues of substance. Further work could be done to look at different types of voice mechanism, at different levels, and examine how these link to varying levels of engagement and decision-making power. Determining which types of voice mechanism are the most likely to encourage voice behaviour, and in which organisational contexts, would be a significant advance.

Aside from the role of voice in influencing employee engagement, we further found that the organisation had a significant, albeit admittedly small, effect on engagement outcomes. The issue of organisational context is one that future qualitative research could usefully explore. Different organisational settings will present a variety of diverse challenges for managers in their attempts to improve engagement levels. The focus of this paper has been on individual-level self-report data, and so we have not explored these contextual issues. Clearly, more in-depth case studies could reveal far more about the nuances of engagement within varying organisational contexts.

Although beyond the scope of this particular study, and hence not part of our data, we feel there are also more fundamental issues to acknowledge regarding the nature of engagement, and its implications for employees, which remain important. We have taken engagement to be a generally positive and benign construct, but its worthy rhetoric can mask a reality where employees work harder and expend more effort, for example in unpaid overtime, for little or no reward. As reported by the Labour Research Department (2009), there are fears that engagement can drive work intensification, with employers coming to *expect* employees to 'go the extra mile' as a matter of course, overtime becoming normalised, and only over-performance being rewarded, thus leaving behind those who just routinely 'do a good job'. These concerns echo the long-standing critique of HRM more generally, encapsulated in the notion of 'willing slaves' (Scott 1994). Moreover, engagement does not, indeed cannot, eradicate the inherent tension between control and commitment at the heart of the employment relationship (Hyman 1987), and, like all similar management initiatives, it thus necessarily represents a form of what Delbridge (2007) calls 'conflicted collaboration'.

This leads us to reflect, finally, on employee engagement in the current economic context, in which rising levels of work effort, job strain and occupational stress comprise a challenging backdrop for employers attempting to boost engagement levels. We would echo the sentiments of David Coats of The Work Foundation, who, in praising the recent MacLeod review as 'a welcome intervention in the national conversation about work', nevertheless cautioned that engagement 'cannot be a panacea for all the problems found in British workplaces. Work intensification, widespread perceptions of unfair treatment, widening income gaps and poor relationships between employers and employees are beyond the reach of even the best engagement strategy' (Work Foundation 2009).

The study reported in this paper has empirically demonstrated the links between employee voice behaviour directed towards the group and engagement, showing that the relationship between both variables is mediated by trust in senior management and to a lesser extent by the employee–line manager relationship. However, in light of our reflections above, we would suggest that such micro-level quantitative findings need to be considered both within varying organisational contexts and within a specific macro-level political economy. Employee voice should be encouraged and enabled, but engagement initiatives must be based upon genuine reciprocal trust rather than used to mask work intensification, and policy debates should focus on how best to develop those managerial skills necessary to cultivate discretionary effort for the positive benefit of both organisations *and* their employees.

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TABLE 1

Measurement model comparisons

Models	$X^2(df)$	GFI	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	χ^2_{diff}	df_{diff}
Full measurement model, 4 factors	1135 (113)	0.938	0.051	0.066	0.958		
Model A, 3 factors[a]	1817 (116)	0.899	0.072	0.084	0.930	682	3**
Model B, 2 factors[a]	7072 (118)	0.619	0.141	0.168	0.715	5937	5**
Model C, 2 factors[a]	8163 (118)	0.592	0.149	0.181	0.670	7028	5**
Model D, 2 factors[a]	10,724 (118)	0.484	0.158	0.208	0.565	9589	5**
Model E, 3 factors[a]	5017 (116)	0.713	0.091	0.143	0.799	3882	3**
Model F, 1 factor[a]	11,439 (119)	0.468	0.158	0.214	0.536	10,304	6**

Notes: $N = 2310$; χ^2 = chi-square discrepancy; df = degrees of freedom; χ^2_{diff} =difference in chi-square; df_{diff} =difference in degrees of freedom; **p<0.001.

[a] Compared to full measurement model, 4 factors.

TABLE 2

Alphas, means, standard deviations and correlations for scale variables

	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Employee voice	0.90	3.57	0.63			
2. Trust in senior management	0.91	3.26	0.86	0.38**		
3. Employee-line manager relationship	0.93	3.57	0.90	0.35**	0.58**	
4. Employee engagement	0.84	3.67	0.55	0.55**	0.39**	0.38**

Note: n = 2310. ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

TABLE 3

Multiple regression results

		H1	H2a	H2b	H3a	H3b	H2c	H3c
	Employee engagement	*Employee engagement*	*Trust in senior management*	*Employee engagement*	*Employee-line manager relationship*	*Employee engagement*	*Employee engagement*	*Employee engagement*
	B	β	β	B	β	β	β	β
Control variables								
Gender	0.122**	0.077**	0.064**	0.084**	0.082**	0.082**	0.064**	0.058**
Management responsibilities	0.212**	0.074**	-0.021	0.182**	-0.005	0.184**	0.077**	0.077**
Organisation	-0.093**	-0.064**	0.047*	-0.100**	-0.057**	-0.066**	-0.074**	-0.065**
Employee voice		0.511**	0.392**		0.345**		0.431**	0.414**
Trust in senior management				0.361**			0.205**	0.145**
Employee-line manager relationship						0.332**		0.116**
R^2	0.068	0.307	0.155	0.196	0.135	0.174	0.343	0.352
ΔR^2		0.239		0.128		0.106	0.036	0.009
Adjusted R^2	0.066	0.306	0.154	0.194	0.133	0.173	0.342	0.350
F	47.462**	217.461**	90.241**	119.360**	76.711**	103.788**	204.893**	177.281**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

APPENDIX

Overview of scale items and exploratory factor analysis results

	1	2	3	4
I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect my work group	0.67			
I speak up and encourage others in my group to get involved in issues that affect the group	0.80			
I communicate my opinions about work issues to others in my group even if my opinion is different and others in the group disagree with me	0.81			
I keep well informed about issues where my opinion might be useful to my work group	0.74			
I get involved in issues that affect the quality of work life here in my group	0.78			
I speak up in my group with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures	0.81			
I trust my senior managers		0.81	0.34	
Senior managers are fair in their treatment of me		0.78	0.31	
Senior managers listen to my ideas and suggestions		0.77		
Senior managers have a clear vision for the organisation		0.72		
I trust my line manager			0.85	
I think my line manager is fair in his/her treatment of me			0.86	
My line manager treats employees with respect			0.86	
Line managers make employees feel valued		0.37	0.77	
I am happy when I do a good job				0.68
I feel positive about my job		0.36		0.67
I am energised by my work		0.39		0.68
I get completely absorbed in my work				0.62
I think about how to improve the way I do my job when I'm not at work				0.53
I focus hard on doing my job well				0.67
I talk to people at work about how to improve the way I do my job	0.32			0.60
I talk to people at work about how to develop my skills and knowledge	0.30			0.58
I talk to people at work about how to improve the way the team or department works	0.45			0.54