

Social Media: An Innovative Employee Voice Mechanism

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Abstract

The process of liberalization, privatization and globalization has reduced the participation in and importance accorded to trade unions. A decline in trade unions means a decline in employee voice because trade unions give employees a voice to protect and further their interests. At the same time from the human resource perspective employee voice is crucial to organizational growth. This paper explores the changes that have taken place with reference to employee voice due to technological advances specifically the rapid growth of the social media. It discusses the meaning and importance of employee voice and makes a comparison between traditional voice mechanisms and social media. It also discusses some of the initiatives taken by organizations to use social media to foster employee voice. It concludes that more such initiatives are required so that vibrant social media can be effectively used to capture the essence of employee voice.

Key words: Employee Voice, employee survey, trade unions, social media.

Introduction

The process of liberalization, privatization and globalization initiated in India more than two decades ago has brought about a sea change in organizations. These changes have created a situation where cut throat competition, rapid technological changes resulting in skill and technology obsolescence and increasing work force diversity are the order of the day. From the human resource perspective a significant change has been the decline in proportion of unionized work places. A decline in trade unions means a decline in employee voice because trade unions give employees a voice to protect and further their interests. This paper explores the changes that have taken place with reference to employee voice due to technological advances specifically the rapid growth of the social media. It discusses different ways in which social media can be used by employees to make their voices heard in the absence of unions. It also discusses how managements can also use social media to reach out to their employees and foster positive organizational outcomes.

Employee voice: Meaning, Purpose and Benefits

The term 'employee voice' was first coined by Albert Hirschman in 1970, who was describing those who '*suffer in silence, confident that things will soon get better*' (p38). Employee voice refers to giving employees a say regarding aspects of decision-making in their workplace (McCabe and Lewin, 1992). In general, the term employee voice refers to the extent to which employees are '*able to have a say regarding work activities and decision-making issues within the organization in which they work*' (Wilkinson and Fay 2011).

Employee voice is important to organizations because it helps organizations to understand the attitudes of employees towards their work, it also influences leaders' decisions on work-related issues and most importantly it highlights the reciprocal nature of the employee employer

relationship (Armstrong, 2006). Existence of employee voice mechanisms leads to improvement in employee attitude and behavior in the form of higher loyalty, commitment and cooperation, better productivity, lower absenteeism and improved team work (Wilkinson, et. al.2004). It also means organizations can benefit from employee ideas, knowledge and experience (Wilkinson, et al 2004). Another reason why employee voice is relevant is because it means employees are treated as stake holders. Employee voice is a representation of work place democracy and leads to skill and value enhancement among employee which then contribute to social development (Foley and Polyani, 2006). It also contributes to employee psychological and economic well being (Budd and Zagelmayer 2010). Farndale etal (2011) found that when employees believe they have a chance to express their opinions and influence decision making it results in greater trust in senior management and higher commitment. It also results in lower withdrawal cognitions which are an antecedent to actual employee turnover (Griffeth et. al 2000, Griffeth & Hom 2001). Research indicates that employee voice has beneficial outcomes for individuals and organizations alike.

Employee voice mechanisms: Traditional versus modern

Traditionally organizations used suggestion boxes, employee hotlines, face-to-face meetings and surveys as mechanisms to hear employee voice. Employee surveys were and continue to be a hugely popular employee voice mechanism in organizations. However despite their popularity with organizations they have a number of inherent problems .To begin with the same questions used year after year makes the whole process of answering surveys an extremely boring exercise from the view point of the employee. Moreover for the sake of convenience most surveys rely heavily on closed ended questions rather than open-ended ones as a result how much insight the survey gives into the mind of the employee is questionable. Moreover the whole process of conducting a survey is long drawn out and does not generate immediate feedback which is what managements will really find useful. According to Cvent (2011) organizational trends can develop quickly if left undetected, and no matter how frequently organizations conduct 'pulse' surveys, they will never be able to provide feedback in real time. Another issue is that the survey is perceived as a voice channel heavily controlled by management and to what extent it can capture an employee's creativity remains debatable. This is where modern information technology in the form of social media opens up new opportunities.

Social media is changing the way we exchange knowledge, opinions and ideas. Social media is a coming together of technology and human interaction. Social media is the use of online technology for *social interaction*. Social media has some inherent benefits over traditional voice mechanisms and in fact can enhance the functioning of traditional mechanisms like unions. Social media has a wide reach and can be used to communicate to a large number of people who may be geographically dispersed almost instantaneously. It can be effectively used by anyone who has access to a computer or even a smart phone. Social media gives employees a chance to state their opinions and feelings in an open forum thus making it richer and authentic. In social media people can read and rate each other's comments so we are able to identify comments that truly represent the larger voice of the group. This is in sharp contrast to an employee survey in which an analyst aggregates all the responses using statistical tools to arrive at the overall opinion of the group. When social media are used the total opinion that is projected to the management is not influenced by the person making the analysis rather it is shaped authentically by employees themselves. Social media can overcome the problems associated with traditional approaches like poor feedback mechanisms and lack of employee interest in participation. In fact even where unions exist they can use social media to organize and co-ordinate individuals.

Are Organizations using social media to listen to employee voice?

Organizations are not very forthcoming in the use of social media to listen to employee voice. Silverman and Newhouse (2012) outline some of the major barriers that organizations face. Organizations even today are grappling with issues of lack of knowledge and understanding. They are not clear about how social media can be implemented to their advantage in actuality. Another concern manager's face is the lack of control over communication and movement of power away from managers and towards employees. Organizations are not sure that they can trust employees to use social media in a responsible way especially when communication becomes multidirectional. Organizations are unable to handle the cultural shift from a hierarchical culture prevalent with traditional voice mechanisms to a culture of openness and transparency that social media fosters. Apart from these fears there are genuine risks involved for organizations. Cyber-bullying is a genuine concern. Another issue is that confidential information may be leaked to competitors. This means that there must be rules about the nature of information that employees can be permitted to put on social media. Social media is one of the main vehicles for collaboration and information-sharing today and, where possible, employees' engagement with it should not be hampered.

So organizations must encourage employees to participate in online discussions and express their voice. Senior managers play a significant role in creating the right conditions for employee voice, especially because they typically have the authority to choose which issues are addressed (Burriss 2012). Second, people will only speak up when they feel it is safe to do so. One way of making employees feel safe in speaking up through social media is to have platforms that allow anonymous contributions to be made (Burriss 2012). Acting on the suggestions received also encourages employee participation. Sometimes it may not be possible to act on all the suggestions given yet giving an explanation about why a particular suggestion cannot be implemented will make employees feel better because they feel their suggestions have at least been read and they have not wasted their time. Recognizing those who have given good ideas also encourages greater employee participation.

Some companies have realized the importance of employee voice and using modern technology to understand employee voice better. Vodafone has got a forum called, 'My Voice' to gather the opinions of new employees on various issues related to their work. The company also runs a website named, 'Idea Space' to encourage employees to share suggestions and ideas. SapientNitro is another organization which is encouraging participation of employees on social media, even organizing a Social Media Week, 'Soiree', to encourage employees to increase their digital quotient. Sapient also launched an internal social business platform called Vox (voice of people). In the words of Prashant Bhatnagar, director, hiring and staffing, SapientNitro India, "Vox has made intra communication easy and efficient as it allows our existing people and new joiners spread across geographies to share advice, opinions, solutions and information about technology, design, development, trends, processes and personal interests." Philips has tried to engage employees through initiatives like an internal social portal called 'Connect Us'. 'Connect Us' was launched about two years ago, and allows technology teams to post updates on their projects and other areas of interest. Infosys has an internal radio channel called, 'InfyRadio' which serves a twin purpose of keeping employees informed about activities within the organisation and ensures they are motivated. YES Bank has 'My Voice', a simple online platform to log inquiries or grievances with in-built tracking and escalation for monitoring and follow up. 'YES Connect' provides YES Bankers a platform to bond with colleagues and share best practices. Initiatives like 'New Joiner Feedback', 'Buddy Program' and participation in formal surveys help in transmitting employee voices. The 'Multi Source Assessment' 360 tool gives the company feedback about managers from reportees and peers. These initiatives indicate that at least a few organizations have woken up to the need to use social media to engage with their employees and listen to their voice.

Conclusion

The use of social media adds a whole new live dimension to the mundane activity of conducting an employee survey analyzing results and giving feedback. Social media is much more vibrant and makes a lot of sense in countries like India where the workforce is young. Young employees often have innovative ideas and it is important to tap these and use it to the advantage of organizations. These employees are also more techno savvy and engaging them on social media is not difficult. So organizations should use social media as an effective internal communication tool to listen to employee voice.

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