CIPD

Championing better work and working lives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | *February 2019*

Talking about voice: employees' experiences

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The not-for-profit organisation champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

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Acknowledgements

① **About the research**

Creating opportunities for people to have effective voice at work is a fundamental aspect of ensuring job quality. Major changes in the modern work environment including new types of employment relationship and digitalisation are challenging individuals' ability to have influence over their working conditions. In this context, there is a need to evolve our thinking on what it means to have a voice in the workplace, in order to address power imbalances in the employment relationship and create value both for organisations and their people.

To explore how employees experience different forms of voice at work, and the factors that enable or inhibit their ability to speak up, we surveyed 2,372 employees across the UK. The survey was conducted online between 9 August and 3 September 2018 and respondents were drawn from the YouGov panel.

We used the findings from the survey to understand:

• how individuals' experience of voice influences broader feelings of job satisfaction
• the main channels for voice in organisations, and what issues are commonly raised by employees
• whether various types of voice are experienced differently across workplace settings and workforce groups
• the contextual barriers and enablers of employee voice.

The aim of this first phase of the research was to highlight the key insights that people professionals should consider to drive better people management practice. It also contributes to the growing agenda around creating 'good work' led by the UK Government, by providing evidence of the factors affecting individuals' ability to shape their working conditions.

② **Findings**

Voice and job satisfaction

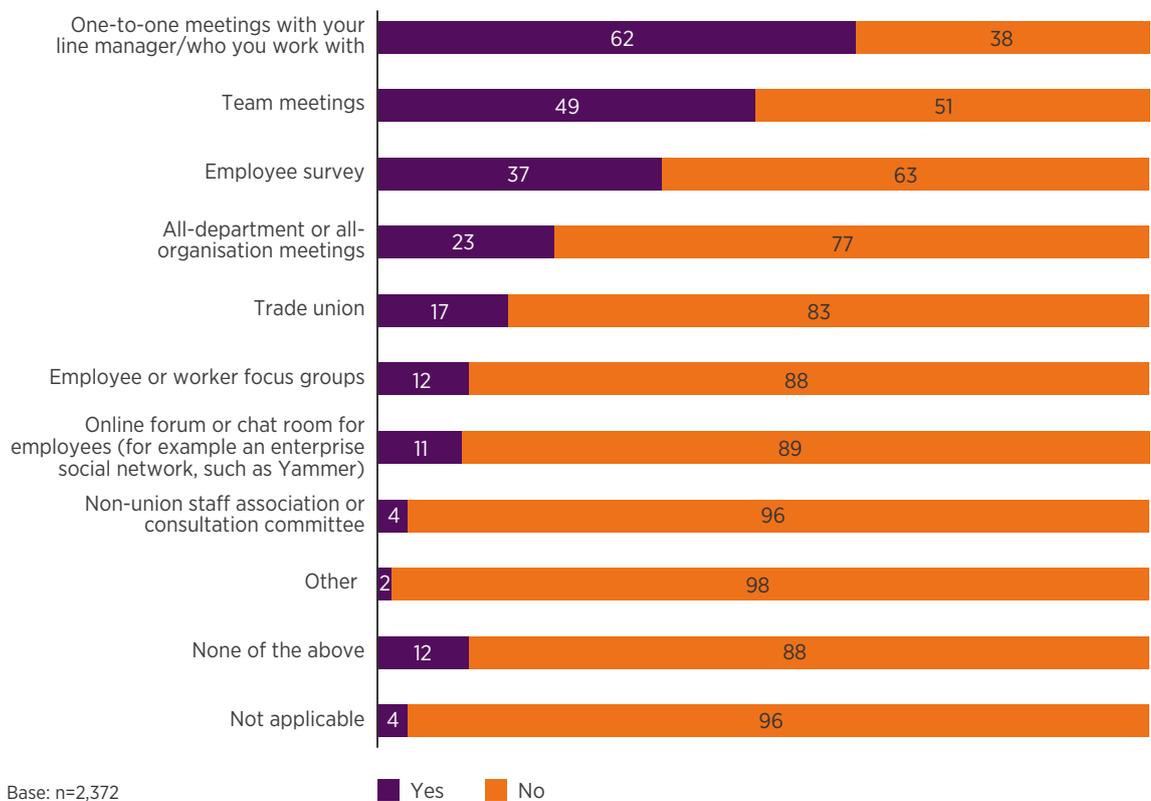**Figure 1: Overall satisfaction with voice (%)**
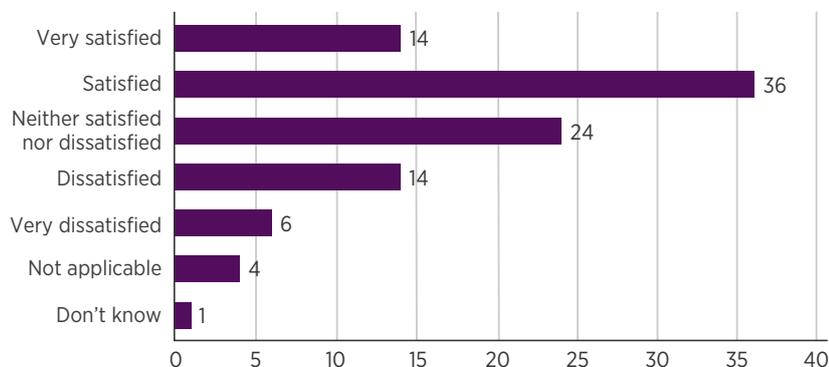
Base: n=2,372

Overall, our findings revealed that half (50%) of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of involvement they have in decision-making at work. Employees working in small and private sector organisations are more satisfied with their level of voice, compared with those working in large and public sector organisations.

Our research confirms the positive link between voice and job satisfaction. This highlights the need for employers to create mechanisms for all staff to have a voice, which can in turn boost their attitude and motivation at work.

Voice channels

The most common channel for voice across the respondents is one-to-one meetings with a line manager, with 62% expressing their views through this channel. Almost half (49%) of employees express voice through team meetings, while only 17% mention trade unions as a voice channel. These findings suggest that informal mechanisms for voice are the most commonly used, and line managers play a critical role in enabling individuals to voice their ideas and concerns.

Figure 2: Forms of voice experienced in the workplace (%)

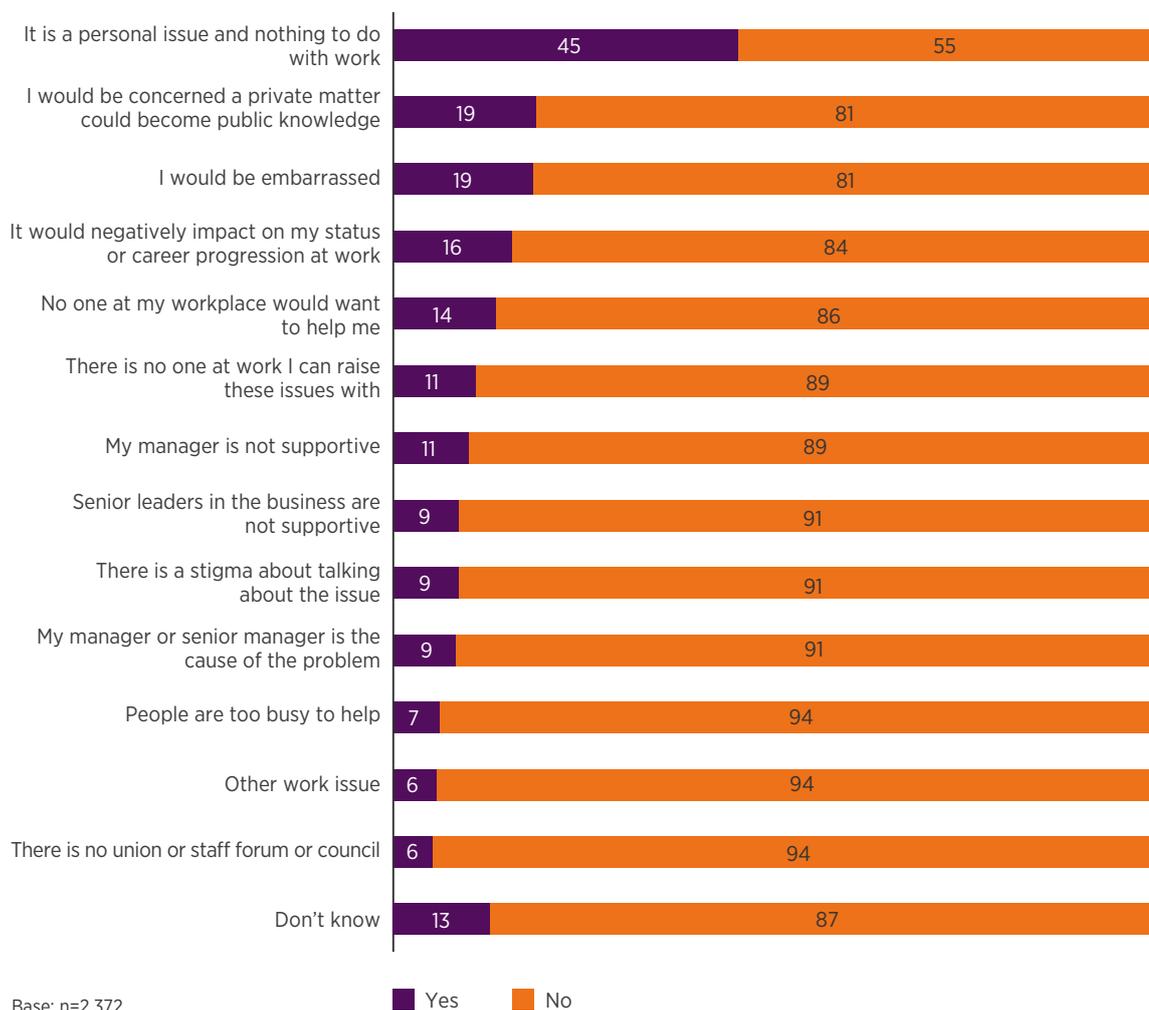| Form of voice	Yes	No
One-to-one meetings with your line manager/who you work with	62	38
Team meetings	49	51
Employee survey	37	63
All-department or all-organisation meetings	23	77
Trade union	17	83
Employee or worker focus groups	12	88
Online forum or chat room for employees (for example an enterprise social network, such as Yammer)	11	89
Non-union staff association or consultation committee	4	96
Other	2	98
None of the above	12	88
Not applicable	4	96

Base: n=2,372

Looking at the extent to which people can influence their terms and conditions of employment, we found that nearly four in ten (38%) do not have any bargaining power at all.

Issues raised by employees

We asked the respondents which issues they experience in the workplace, and whether they feel able to raise these issues. The data showed that work pressure is the most common issue experienced by employees (43%), while just under a third have been affected by considerable organisational change (29%). Over a fifth (22%) of those who have raised an issue at work felt that they received no advice or support.

Figure 3: Reasons for not reporting issues (%)

Reason	Yes	No
It is a personal issue and nothing to do with work	45	55
I would be concerned a private matter could become public knowledge	19	81
I would be embarrassed	19	81
It would negatively impact on my status or career progression at work	16	84
No one at my workplace would want to help me	14	86
There is no one at work I can raise these issues with	11	89
My manager is not supportive	11	89
Senior leaders in the business are not supportive	9	91
There is a stigma about talking about the issue	9	91
My manager or senior manager is the cause of the problem	9	91
People are too busy to help	7	94
Other work issue	6	94
There is no union or staff forum or council	6	94
Don't know	13	87

Base: n=2,372   ■ Yes   ■ No

Employees' experiences of different types of voice

Our findings illustrate that there are two distinct types of voice: one which benefits the organisation ('organisational voice'), and the second, which serves individuals' need to express their true feelings regarding their job ('individual voice'). We found that a quarter (25%) of employees rarely or never have the opportunity to raise ideas or concerns in order to improve the functioning of the organisation. Only a quarter indicate that they feel able to freely express themselves at work, while a quarter report that they often choose not to speak up, even though they have something they'd like to say. This suggests that for many employees, organisations offer limited scope for sharing matters that they regard to be important. This could harm employee well-being and organisational performance, since it suggests that issues are not addressed.

In addition, our findings show that both types of voice increase with seniority level, which suggests that employees in higher management positions both express themselves more and suggest more ideas to improve organisational functioning, compared with junior staff members. The extent to which individuals believe that speaking up will be effective ('voice efficacy') also reduces soon after they join the organisation, only rising after around 15 years of tenure. It appears that new employees start with high expectations of voice, but as they become familiar with the work environment, they may accept things as the norm and become less motivated to raise issues that initially seemed important.

Figure 4: Voice efficacy and length of service

Base: n=2,184
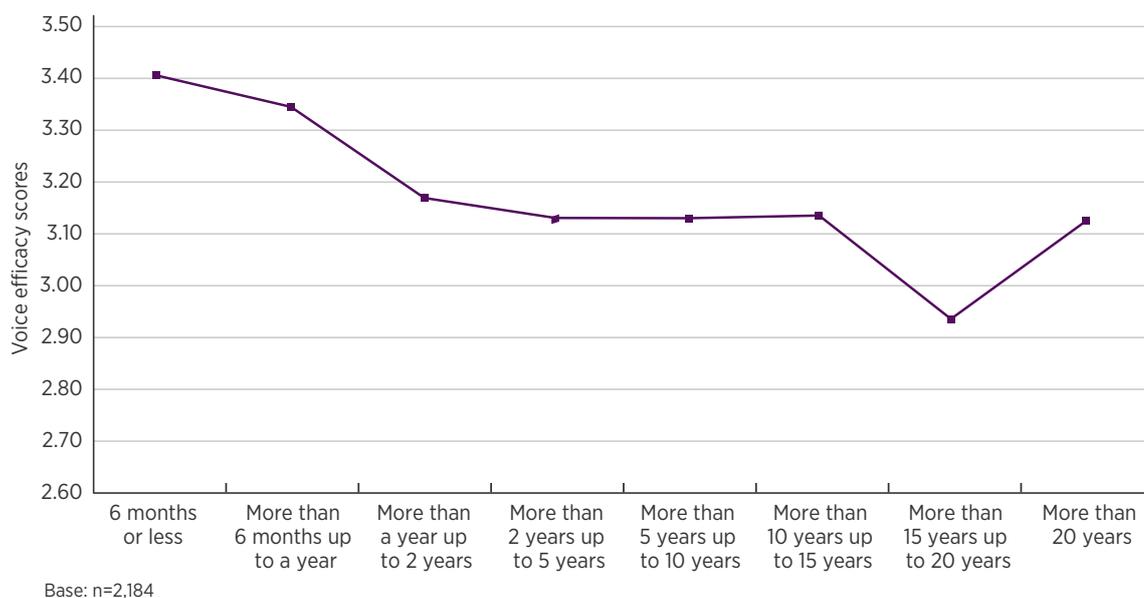
Barriers and enablers of voice

The data revealed that leadership style (including ethical leadership, trustful relationships and line manager encouragement of voice) can help employees to express their voice. HR practitioners should therefore ensure that all managers are trained to understand how their attitudes and behaviours can influence their staff's confidence to raise both personal and work-related issues.

We also found that three in ten (30%) employees don't feel comfortable about taking risks and sharing thoughts with others in the organisation, which can make it more likely that they remain silent. Our analysis highlighted the need for employers to develop an open and supportive organisational environment, where individuals feel empowered and motivated to take risks.

(3) Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, this report suggests that there are considerable gaps in employees' ability to have a voice at work, both on matters that are important to them as individuals, and those which are aimed at enhancing the way things are done in the organisation. Our results indicate that a significant proportion of employees feel unable to share matters that they feel are important. This may be detrimental not only to their well-being, but also damaging where organisational learning, resilience and innovation are concerned.

Strong leadership and line managers have an important role in enabling employee voice. The organisational environment can also significantly impact how safe and confident individuals feel to speak up and share their ideas. People professionals need to consider how job design, organisational policies and processes, as well as values and behaviours can be developed to provide better opportunities for all employees to have a meaningful voice on matters that affect them at work.

These findings are an important consideration in the context of ensuring job quality and good work, by providing insight on how organisational environments can be developed to enable people to have influence over their working lives. We will explore practical solutions for organisations in more depth in the next phase of our study.