
CHAPTER 1
What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace
Richard B. Freeman* & Joel Rogers†

§1-1. INTRODUCTION
Do American workers feel represented at the workplace? If not, what forms of representation do they desire, and why do they think they do not have them now? This paper reports the central findings of the Workplace Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS) — an extended, two-year (1994-96) effort to find the answers to these and related questions on American worker attitudes toward workplace voice, representation, and power. Directed by the authors, the WRPS began in early 1994 with focus groups in different parts of the country, with different sorts of workers — from low-skilled custodial employees to “knowledge workers” in advanced, high-tech industry. Informed by what these workers told us, we followed in the fall of 1994 with a large telephone survey of some 2500 private sector

*Professor of Economics, Harvard University; director of Labor Studies Program, National Bureau of Economic Research; and executive program director of the Comparative Labour Market Institutions Programme, London School of Economics. Professor Freeman also served on the Secretaries of Labor and Commerce’s Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations.
†Professor of Law, Political Science and Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison & director, Center on Wisconsin Strategy.
employees, asking them detailed questions about their working lives. This initial survey was augmented in 1995 with a follow-up survey of some 800 of the workers covered in the earlier sample, probing their responses. Later that year, for purposes of cross-national comparison, we also conducted a telephone survey of some 1000 Canadian private sector workers. We concluded our field research at the very end of 1995, with a special sample of American public sector workers, with first results tabulated in early 1996.

Following an initial note on the purposes and broad design of the WRPS, the following summary concentrates on the key findings in the main U.S. telephone surveys—the “Wave I” survey of 2500 workers, and the follow-up, “Wave II,” 800 member sub-sample.

§1-2. WRPS PURPOSE AND DESIGN

The purpose of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey was to provide an in-depth survey of how American employees regard how employers treat them at their workplace, and to assess employee attitudes toward current work organization and human resource practices and toward different forms of workplace participation and representation.

Understanding what employees want is vital to fashioning effective labor policies in an era when new technologies and forms of work organization demand change from both workers and managers, while national labor institutions are themselves changing. The characteristics of jobs and the demography of the workforce differ from what they were decades ago when the U.S. established its labor relations system. Private sector unions are in decline. Many firms are experimenting with employee involvement programs. Government regulation of the workplace has dramatically in-

1

creased without parallel capacities to monitor and enforce the new laws. If these sorts of changes motivate a reconsideration of our national labor policies, they also underscore the need to hear directly from American workers about how they think the current system is performing.

Considerable effort was made to assure the authority of the WRPS, making it qualitatively different from the standard opinion poll. Extensive focus group testing preceded the design of the telephone survey. The sample size was roughly double that of a standard national opinion survey; for those questions also asked on the omnibus instrument, it was three times the usual size. The length of the Wave I and Wave 2 surveys (roughly 25 minutes for both) pressed the outer bounds of conventional telephone surveys. The wording of questions and the sequence in which they were asked were varied to minimize possible biases due to wording or question placement. The survey instrument was pre-tested several times on a large group of respondents, resulting in extensive changes in question wording and placement. The ongoing feedback and counsel of our business, labor, and outside survey research experts contributed to making the survey as balanced and accurate as possible.

§1-3. WAVE I: THREE BIG QUESTIONS AND THEIR ANSWERS

While the WRPS is designed to gather information on a wide range of issues in present employment relations, at its core it sought answer to three big questions:

(1) Do employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than is currently provided?

(2) What do employees see as essential to attaining their desired level of participation and representation?

(3) What solutions do employees favor to resolve any gap between their desired participation/representation and what they currently have?

In this section, we report the answers to these questions provided by Wave I. By way of general background to them, however, we note the following:
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

Despite popular discussion about the end of long-term jobs and careers, the vast majority of employees are sufficiently connected and loyal to their firm to have reasons to want to participate in workplace decisions. So, for example:

- We found employees reporting that they have stayed many years with the same firm — on average, about 8 years. This is consistent with a number of studies, based on Current Population Survey data for all workers, showing no decline in years of job tenure in the past 20 years.

- Some 60 percent of our respondents described their job as either “long term” (40 percent) or “an opportunity for advancement” in the same company (20 percent); an additional 15 percent described their job as “part of a career or profession” that would probably take them to different companies. Most of this latter group of career trackers were highly-educated workers, with college or post-college degrees (57 percent).

- Only 23 percent of employees described their job as one they would “probably leave that is not part of a career.” This group was dominated (46 percent) by workers 18-24 years of age; most of these work in wholesale/retail trade, making $200 or less a week.

- Among non-managerial employees, 53 percent of employees described themselves as having “a lot of loyalty” to their company, with only 14 percent saying they have “only a little loyalty” or “no loyalty at all.”

- Loyalty to immediate supervisors (59 percent) and fellow employees (61 percent) was modestly higher, with those expressing “only a little” or “no loyalty at all” falling to 12 and 6 percent, respectively.

At the same time, many employees are concerned about the quality of labor-management relations at their firm or organization, and with their job situation, and are both worried about their future and not confident they can trust management with it.

- One third of respondents (32 percent) rated “relations between employees and management” at their company “only fair” or “poor,” compared to 18 percent rating them “excellent.”

- While 66 percent of respondents reported that they usually “look forward” to going to work, 34 percent did not. One-fourth (25 percent) reported that they “wish [they] didn’t have to go”; another 9 percent “don’t care one way or the other” about their job.

- The share of those lacking job satisfaction (“don’t look forward to going” and “don’t care one way or the other”) is 39 percent among the workers making between $200 and $599 a week and is 42 percent among black workers and those in manufacturing.

- Some 61 percent of respondents were only “somewhat confident” (31 percent) or “not too confident” or “not at all confident” (30 percent) that if they lost their current job they “could quickly get another job at about the same pay, without having to move.”

- A majority of employees reported “a lot” of loyalty to their company, but a minority (38 percent) have a lot of “trust [that their] company [will] keep its promises to [them] and other employees.” Among non-managerial employees, 36 percent reported having “a lot” of trust in company promises; 42 percent trusted their company only “somewhat”; 21 percent trusted it “only a little” or “not at all.”

- The share of employees trusting their company “only a little” or “not at all” is higher among non-managerial employees performing supervisory functions (24 percent) than those not supervising others (19 percent). Among managers, two-thirds of whom (64 percent) have “a lot” of loyalty to their company, just under half (49 percent) trust their company “a lot” in keeping promises to them.

- Many employees prefer dealing with management as a group. Some 57 percent of one panel of respondents agreed with the statement “I’d feel more comfortable raising workplace problems through an employee association, rather than as an individual”; 43 percent of another panel reported that in dealing with workplace problems they “feel more comfortable having a group of ... fellow employees help ... deal with management” than “dealing directly with management” themselves.

In short, American employees are committed to their firms, which gives them a stake in how those firms operate. But they have problems with job satisfaction and do not entirely trust their employers; many feel a need to deal with management as a group.

With this as background, we proceed to the answers to our three questions.
§1-3(a). DO EMPLOYEES WANT GREATER PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION?

(1) Do employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than is currently provided?

Yes, employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than they have. For all age, sex, race, occupation, education, and earnings groups, there is a representation/participation gap between what employees believe they can contribute at the workplace and what current work organizations allow them to do.

The vast majority of employees want more involvement and greater say in company decisions affecting their workplace. They believe increased influence will not only give them greater job satisfaction, but also improve the competitive performance of companies and the performance of existing human resource programs.

- Some 63 percent of employees reported, generally, that they would “like to have more influence” in such workplace decisions; only 1 percent wanted less influence; 35 percent would keep things as they now are. Among manufacturing workers, the percent wanting more influence rises to 72 percent.

- When asked about their general satisfaction with their influence on company decisions that “affect [their] job or work life,” before being asked to consider specific sorts of decisions, 28 percent of respondents reported being “very satisfied”; 51-53 percent reported being only “somewhat satisfied”; 18-20 percent were dissatisfied (“not too satisfied” or “not satisfied at all”).

- Asked the same question after considering specific areas of decision, including work organization, scheduling, compensation, training, technology use, safety, and the setting of work goals, the percent “very satisfied” dropped to 19-22 percent; “somewhat satisfied” ranged from 48-59 percent; the dissatisfied share rose to 22-29 percent.

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

- Averaging across responses in particular decision areas, the share of employees reporting that it was “very important to have a lot of influence on these decisions” (55 percent) was twice the share reporting at present “a lot of direct involvement” in firm decisions (28 percent).

- Some 76 percent of employees believed that if “more decisions about production and operations were made by employees, instead of by managers,” their company would be “stronger against its competitors”; 79 percent believed that the “quality of products or services” would improve; 87 percent reported that “employees would enjoy their jobs more.”

Most employees welcome the adoption of “employee involvement” (EI) programs and other policies emphasizing employee “empowerment” and employee voice. But they do not believe these programs have gone far enough to encourage worker participation, and think their effectiveness would improve with more of it.

- Some 31 percent of respondents reported personal involvement in EI programs — systems that are somewhat more prevalent among union workers (33 percent) than non-union workers (28 percent); of those non-union workers participating in an EI program, 27 percent reported that it addresses wage and benefit issues as well as production issues.

- Some 79 percent of non-managerial, non-union participants in EI programs reported having “personally benefited from [their] involvement in the program by getting more influence over how [their] job is done.”

- Among those without EI programs, 64 percent “would like to have a program like this” at their company.

- But only 31 percent of non-union non-managerial EI participants rate the programs as “very effective” in “improving productivity or quality”; most (55 percent) viewed them as only “somewhat effective,” with 11 percent finding them ineffective.

- Overwhelmingly (82 percent among non-union employees, 91 percent among union members), non-managerial EI participants believed

---

4Responses are reported in a range due to procedures used, viz. a four-way split. Two panels of employees were asked questions about two sets of decision areas — one area per panel. Half of each panel was asked the general question before consideration of these issues, half was asked after that consideration, yielding two “before” responses and two “after” ones. In the text, the “before” part of both panels yielded identical shares of “very satisfied” respondents, and marginally different shares of dissatisfied ones.

5In the text, we use the term as short-hand. In the survey, we asked about “things like self-directed work teams, total quality management, quality circle, or other employee involvement programs.”
such programs would be “more effective” “if employees, as a group, had more say in how these programs are run.”

Similarly, employees welcome widespread adoption of modern human resource policies and techniques to deal with individual employee problems at work, but most view them as only somewhat effective and think the antidote is more employee influence in their operation.

- Some 68 percent of respondents reported their firm having a “personnel or human resources department”; 85 percent said it had an “open door policy so employees can tell upper management about problems with their immediate supervisors”; and 32 percent reported their firm having a grievance procedure using “an outside referee or arbitrator to settle disputes between an employee and management.”

- Asked to rate the overall effectiveness of their company’s “system for resolving the problems individual employees have at work,” however, only about a quarter (28 percent) rated their present system “very effective”; 49 percent rated it “somewhat effective”; and 21 percent rated it “not too effective” or “not effective at all”.

- Some 76 percent of employees thought that “if employees, as a group, had more say in how the workplace problems of individuals are solved at [their] company,” the present system would be more effective; 16 percent thought it would become less effective; 4 percent thought increased employee involvement, as a group, would make no difference.

As with systems for resolving individual problems, so, too, with those designed to resolve group problems and concerns. There is evidence of wide diffusion of relatively modern human resource policies. But employees find them only somewhat effective and want more say in their administration and design.

- Some 48 percent of non-managerial employees in non-union companies reported their firm having regular “town meetings,” called by management, to discuss workplace concerns; 63 percent reported an “open door” policy for groups of employees to raise concerns to upper management; 32 percent reported having a “committee of employees that discusses problems with management on a regular basis.”

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

- No more than a third of such employees, however, thought any of these practices was “very effective”. Town meetings were rated “very effective” by 24 percent, employee committees by 29 percent, and open door policies by 33 percent.

- Non-union workers without committees want them as an additional mechanism for employee voice. Depending on the wording of the question, 69-76 percent of such workers thought establishment of a committee to meet with management to “discuss the problems employees have as a group” would be a more effective way to resolve concern than their present system; only 19-25 percent thought such a committee would reduce the effectiveness of their present system.

- Non-union workers with committees do not want management to select employee representatives to the committees. At present, in 26 percent of the cases, committee members are chosen by management; members volunteer in another 43 percent of the cases; employees elect representatives in only 17 percent. Asked how they would like committee members selected, non-union workers overwhelming (86-9 percent) chose against management selection, with a plurality (50 percent) favoring employee election of committee members over self-selection by volunteers (36 percent).

In short, most employees want more say in how their companies are run and how key decisions affecting them are made. They want more individual say and more say as a group, and believe greater worker involvement in firm decision-making is good for the company as well as for them.

§1-3(b) WHAT DO WORKERS SEE AS ESSENTIAL TO ATTAINING THEIR DESIRED LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION?

(2) What do employees see as essential to attaining their desired level of participation and representation?

Employees see management acceptance and cooperation as the key to the success of the employee organizations and workplace practices needed to close the representation/participation gap.
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

Employee sensitivity to the importance of management acceptance and cooperation is expressed in different ways:

- Asked "Do you think employee organizations can be effective even if management does not cooperate with them, or do you think they can only be effective if management cooperates?", 73 percent of respondents declared employee organizations could "only be effective with management cooperation"; only 17 percent thought management cooperation was not required.

- Asked to choose between two hypothetical employee organizations, "one that management cooperated with in discussing issues, but had no power to make decisions" and "one that had more power, but management opposed," non-managerial employees chose the weak organization over the stronger one by a 3-1 margin (63-22 percent).

- Unionized employees, who some might expect to be less concerned about managerial attitudes, show the same concern as other employees. The percentage of current union members believing employee organizations can be effective without management cooperation is the same as for non-union members (17 percent); the share that prefers a weak organization with cooperation to a stronger one without is slightly higher (65 percent).

- A minority of employees, though enough to swing most NLRB elections, report that their support for unions depends on management attitudes. Some 12 percent of non-union employees who think management opposes unions and who say they would vote against one also report that they would switch their vote if they learned that management did not oppose it. Reciprocally, eight percent of those who would vote pro-union, believing that management would not oppose a union, would switch on learning that management did.

At the same time, employees and managers alike note management reluctance to embrace the changes many employees think are needed. This has a general aspect, as well as special applicability to employees wishing to form unions.

- Given "the ways things are set up now" in their company, 56 percent of those wanting more involvement in workplace decisions believe that it unlikely ("not too likely" or "not likely at all") that they can get the influence they want even "if [they] tried"; only 10 percent thought it "very likely."

- One quarter (24 percent) of respondents reported having worked at a company or organization "at a time when employees were trying to form a union." Of these, 5 percent reported that management "welcomed" the effort; 66 percent reported management opposition ranging from information campaigns (43 percent) to "threatening or harassing... union supporters" (23 percent).

- In non-union companies, 66 percent of non-managerial workers believe management would oppose a union drive either through information campaigns (51 percent) or harassment and threats (15 percent); 3 percent thought management would welcome the effort.

- Among senior (those with 10 or more years with the firm) non-union managers, 69 percent report that they would "oppose" any unionization effort at their firm; 34 percent report that it would "hurt [their] advancement in the company" if the employees they managed formed a union; 22 percent report that it would hurt their career "a lot."

§1-3(c). WHAT SOLUTIONS DO EMPLOYEES FAVOR TO REDRESS THE REPRESENTATION GAP?

Our third question is the most difficult to answer.

(3) What solutions do employees favor to resolve any gap between their desired participation/representation and what they currently have?

It is difficult because we must ask respondents to assess potential new workplace arrangements which they have not directly experienced. Difficulty also lies in the involvement of management in how arrangements work;

This figure is consistent with estimates, based on NLRB election reports, that in about one quarter of elections workers are illegally discriminated against for union activity.
employees' assessment will presumably depend in part on how they see possible management cooperation, or lack thereof, to new arrangements. In addition, the wide diversity in employees and workplaces implies that the same nominal program or policy will have different connotations to different employees.

We tried several ways to get some notion of the attributes of the organizations or programs that employees would like. With regard to unionization, we asked how employees would vote in a union election today — a question that has been asked in several other surveys — and then added a second question about whether they thought 50 percent or more of the workers at their workplace favored a union. With regard to workplace organizations in general, we asked employees to specify the attributes of an employee organization to deal with workplace problems "if it was your decision alone to make, and everybody went along with it":

We also asked employees which one of three ways they preferred to increase employees' say and make sure employees are treated fairly at workplaces: laws, joint employee-management committees to discuss problems, and employee organizations or unions to negotiate or bargain over issues. Finally, we asked managers similar questions, to find the areas of agreement and disagreement with employees about ways to close the representation/participation gap.

From all of these different approaches, an answer did emerge:

*To deal with workplace issues and give employees greater say in enterprise decision-making, most employees want joint committees with some independent standing inside their companies, and many want unions or union-like organizations.*

As we have seen, most employees believe that giving employees, as a group, more say in workplace functions and programs — from making decisions about safety rules and the introduction of new technology to the resolution of individual disputes and group problems — would increase their job satisfaction and improve the effectiveness, fairness, and overall performance of their firm.

---

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

With respect to unions, a substantial minority of employees — several times the current level of union membership — want to join them.

- Among current union members, 90 percent would vote to keep their union if a new election were held today; 85 percent of all union members, and 94 percent of those who would themselves vote to renew the union, believe that a majority of their colleagues would do the same.

- Nearly a third (32 percent) of non-union non-managerial employees would vote for a union "if an election were held today to decide whether employees like [them] should be represented by a union"; 33 percent of all non-union non-managers, and 82 percent of those who would themselves vote for a union, believe that more than half their fellow employees would do the same.

- Overall, then, 40 percent of respondents reported that they would vote union in an election, and 40 percent reported that most workers at their workplace would vote union — about three times the rate (14 percent) of union membership reported in our sample.

Given a choice among "laws that protect the rights of individual employees," "joint employee and management committees that discuss problems," and "unions" or "employee organizations that negotiate or bargain with management over issues," and asked to choose which one they thought would most effectively "increase employees' say in the workplace and make sure they are treated fairly," the majority of employees prefer joint committees; unions or union-like organizations came in second; and more legal protections third.

- In a question format offering laws, joint committees, or "unions that negotiate or bargain with management over issues," 63 percent chose joint committees, 20 percent chose unions, and 15 percent chose laws.

- In a question format offering laws, joint committees, or "employee organizations that negotiate or bargain with management over issues," 56 percent favored joint committees, 29 percent employee organizations, and 13 percent chose strengthened laws.

Asked to consider "any kind of employee organization, not just unions," on the assumption that "it was [their] decision alone to make, and everybody went along with it," non-managerial employees chose an organization:
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

- “run jointly” by employees and management (85 percent) to one run by “employees” alone (10 percent); (union members split almost identically on the question, 82-14 percent);
- in which, in cases of conflict, final decisions are made by an outside arbitrator (59 percent) to an organization in which management makes final decisions (34 percent);
- with access to confidential company information (47 percent) to one relying on public records (39 percent);
- in which employee representatives are elected (59 percent) to one in which they are volunteers (25 percent) or management selected (10 percent);
- composed of similarly situated workers (55 percent) rather than including everyone except upper management (31 percent);
- drawing on company budget and staff (52 percent) to one relying only on its own budget and staff (34 percent).

If “the organization was set up in the way [they] just described,” 33 percent of non-managerial employees say they are “definitely willing” to volunteer two or three hours a month to make it work; another 44 percent say they are “probably willing.”

On the management side, the WRPS finds some areas in which managers and employees seem to be on the same wavelength, but others in which there are substantial differences. Managers in union workplaces have a generally positive view of their firm’s relationship with the union and describe their firm as generally accepting of it.

- Most managers at union firms reported that their union does not hurt company performance. Some 38 percent reported that it hurts, with twice as many of these thinking it hurts “a little” (25 percent) than “a lot” (13 percent); 29 percent reported “no effect” on performance; 27 percent believed it “helps,” with twice as many of these thinking it helps “a lot” (19 percent) than “a little” (8 percent). The view among senior managers is even more favorable, with those thinking unions help performance almost as high as those thinking that they hurt (33-37 percent), with twice as many thinking they help “a lot” (24 percent) than hurt “a lot” (12 percent).

- Most managers (64 percent) also reported the union at their company “makes the work lives of its members better”; only 16 percent thought

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace it makes the lives of workers “worse,” with only 2 percent thinking it makes their lives “a lot” worse.

- By 2-1, those managers observing a change in union behavior in recent years find a change toward “more cooperative” behavior (31 percent) rather than “more confrontational” behavior (16 percent).

- On balance, 69 percent of managers in union firms reported that their company’s top management “accepts the union as a partner in workplace decisions”; only 24 percent reported a top management wishing “it could get rid of the union.”

But many unionized employees are uneasy about management acceptance of their union. Some 62 percent of non-managerial employees at unionized companies believed that “if [their] company didn’t already have a union and employees tried to form one,” management would oppose the effort either through an information campaign (34 percent) or threats and harassment (28 percent). Among senior workers, skepticism is higher still; 73 percent thought management would oppose a unionization drive, either through information campaigns alone (38 percent) or threats and harassment (35 percent).

Many managers are willing to work with an employee organization to solve workplace problems, but they favor a form of workplace organization that differs in important respects from what employees seem to want.

- Some 36 percent of managers said they are “definitely willing” to work with an employee organization to solve workplace problems, and 47 percent said they are “probably willing.”

- Nearly half of all managers (47 percent) believed that employee representatives should be elected; over half (57 percent) believed that companies should contribute funds and staff to it.

- Managers also believed the membership should be limited to those doing the same kind of work (48 percent) rather than extended to all but top management (32 percent); and overwhelmingly (90-3 percent) stated that the organization should be run “jointly” rather than by employees alone.

- But managers preferred (55-37 percent) an organization in which management, rather than an outside arbitrator, has the final say in disputes,
and they preferred (48-38 percent) an organization that relies only on public information.

- Managers are also relatively confident (53-35 percent) that legal protections for employee members of the organization are not needed, whereas non-managerial employees are evenly split on the need for such protection (44-45 percent).

Our broad conclusion from Wave I, then, was that most American employees want more involvement and greater say in their jobs. Many — sometimes a clear majority, sometimes a large minority — also want some form of workplace organization or policy that provides them with group as well as individual voice. Employees want such an organization or policy to give them independent input into workplace decisions. A sizeable minority wants union or union-like organizations; the majority, favoring joint consultative committees, wants to be able to select their representatives to such committees.

At the same time, virtually all employees — including union members and those interested in joining unions — strongly prefer cooperative relations with management to conflictual ones and are acutely sensitive to the need for management acceptance of representation and participation organizations or policies if those programs are to work. And such cooperative acceptance is clearly hard to come by, as managers generally oppose the sorts of independent organizations that employees want.

§1-4. PROBING THE ANSWERS: WAVE II

The Wave II follow-up sought to enrich our understanding of this information and employee responses in several ways: by probing the structure of existing employer-led employee involvement programs and other advanced human resource practices; by probing employee attitudes toward employer willingness to share power and innovate further; and identifying the sort of practices and outcomes that employees identify with labor-management "cooperation"; and by probing attitudes toward unions, and the reasons non-union employees who desire unions do not have them.

Wave II also explored further a question first raised in Wave I, though not treated in depth in our first report on the WRPS: attitudes toward the role of government in protecting worker rights and enforcing standards. Wave I probed employee knowledge of statutory rights at the workplace, familiarity with court and agency means of enforcing those rights, and attitudes toward current levels of workplace regulation. It asked employees to compare additional rights and regulations to other means for ensuring fair treatment at the workplace. Wave II asked employees to give reactions to two specific institutional changes commonly suggested in national labor policy debates: the use of arbitration to resolve disputes over legal workplace rights, and the use of employee committees to administer nationally determined workplace standards (as in occupational safety and health). From these different probes, we aimed to answer a fourth large question:

(4) How do employees view the current system of court- and agency-based workplace rights and regulations, and what is their attitude toward "alternative" means of enforcing rights and regulations?

The Wave II results broadly confirm our interpretation of employee attitudes in the earlier survey, while offering important clarifications.

§1-4(a). EI, ADVANCED HRM, AND THE PRODUCTIVITY OF PARTICIPATION

Wave I found that most employees welcome the adoption of EI programs and other policies emphasizing employee "empowerment" and management accessibility to employee voice. But as just reported, they do not believe these programs have advanced enough and think their effectiveness would improve with more of it. In Wave II we asked more about the character of these programs. Our probes centered on the structure of programs, the incidence of employee use of them, and employee opinion of the depth of management commitment to them. We found:

- Contrary to the perception that EI committees exist only for short-term problem-solving, 78 percent of respondents reported that they included discussion of "different problems over a long period of time." We take this as evidence of the institutionalization of these practices.
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

- EI committees cover a wide range of issues, but with a concentration on production concerns. Among those participating in “short-term” committees, some 42 percent reported discussion of “production” issues, while only 8 percent reported discussion of issues relating to “job advancement/performance.” Among those participating in “long-term” committees, the respective figures were essentially the same: 39 percent reported discussion of “production” issues and 14 percent discussion of “job advancement/performance.” We take this as evidence of the essentially limited, functionally-specific character of these programs.

- Some 28 percent of participants in EI programs reported discussion of “wage and benefit” issues — as against discussion limited to “ways to improve productivity and quality” — and 72 percent of those who did rated the continuation of such discussion as “very important” to the success of the program.

- Participants in EI programs are attached to them, with 71 percent reporting that they would find it “bad” (48 percent) or “very bad” (23 percent) if the programs were abandoned. But less than half (44 percent) of participants rate their current management as “completely dedicated” to the program; 47 percent viewed upper management as “mostly dedicated” and 9 percent viewed upper management as “not too or not at all dedicated.”

With respect to other forms of human resource management — open door policies, town meetings, and the like — Wave II asked for detail on the practices that Wave I had found were quite widespread. Among the results:

- About a fifth of employees (21 percent) reported making heavy use of these practices (three or more times in the previous twelve months); 24 percent reported using them once or twice over that period; the rest reported not having used them at all.

- “Open doors” are channels for a range of concerns, with problems with immediate supervisors being only a minor (8 percent) one. More common is their use for discussion of problems with “production/procedures/operations” (38 percent) or general “working conditions” (22 percent).

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

- Some 40 percent of employees found the policy “very effective” in dealing with the problem(s) explored within it; 34 percent as somewhat effective; and 19 percent as not effective at all (7 percent did not respond).

We also probed Wave I’s finding that a vast majority of employees believed their firm would be stronger if more decisions were made by employees rather than managers — asking why employees believed this to be the case. One possibility is that they believe managers are incompetent. A related possibility is that they believe employees have substantially better ideas than does management about how to make improvements. A third is that they believe employees will work harder if they are more involved in decision-making. Wave II responses reject the first explanation, give only qualified support for the second, and confirm the third.

- Asked to grade the management of their firm on an A-F school-styled grading scale, the vast majority of employees rated management as knowledgeable; 46 percent gave their employer an “A” and 32 percent a “B” for its “understanding and knowledge of the business.”

- Asked to identify the sources of improvement in firm performance thought to ensue from increased power-sharing with employees, 55 percent attributed such improvement to employee “[willingness to] work harder if they have more say over their jobs,” as compared to 32 percent believing “employees have better ideas about how to make improvements.”

In general, Wave II showed that employees see current company efforts to involve them in company decision-making and open door policies as real and desirable. But they want more and greater involvement in decisions, for their own sake and that of their firm. The representation/participation “gap” identified earlier seems real, and very much on employees’ minds. Indeed, asked to choose among three options as to what “American workers most need” at the workplace, close to two-thirds rated increased participation or power in decision-making as most important. “[M]ore power to make decisions” about how their companies operated was chosen as the top priority by 26 percent of respondents, and “more opportunities to give advice to management” about operations by 39 percent, as compared to 31 percent ranking “better pay and benefits” as their top concern.
§1-4(b). EMPLOYER WILLINGNESS TO SHARE POWER

Our Wave I survey showed that employees were highly sensitive to management acceptance of employee organizations and to management cooperation in employee participation or representation programs. Employees made it clear that in the current situation, management was unlikely to give them the increased role in decision-making that they believed would benefit them and their firms. Wave II probed this attitude by asking employees directly why they believed they were not being empowered as much as they felt was beneficial for their firm’s performance. The majority cited management reluctance to share power as the most important impediment to increased participation:

- Among those (some 80 percent of respondents) who had earlier reported that greater employee participation would be good for their company’s performance, 55 percent identified the fact that “management doesn’t want to give up power” as the most important reason this greater participation was blocked.

Wave II also asked employees to rate managerial “willingness to share power and authority” on the same A-F school-grade scale used in ranking management business knowledge.

- In contrast to the high grades awarded management on that dimension, only 13 percent of employees gave their employer an “A” for willingness to share power and only 31 percent gave a “B” grade. The majority (55 percent) rated their employer anywhere from “C” (31 percent) to “D” or “F” (24 percent).

§1-4(c). WHY ARE EMPLOYEES WHO WANT UNIONS NOT REPRESENTED BY UNIONS?

Wave I found that some 40 percent of employees wanted union representation, about three times the actual rate of unionization reported in our sample. One reason for the gap between the desire for unionization and actual organization appeared to be management attitudes toward unions. In Wave II we probed this potentially controversial finding, asking employees who had earlier reported that a majority of their colleagues would support a union, “Why do you think there is no union coverage for employees like you at your company/organization?” — giving them the explanatory options of “management opposes unions,” “no union is interested in organizing employees like you,” and “some other reason.” Some 55 percent cited management opposition to unions as the reason they did not now have one, compared to 22 percent who said that no union was interested in organizing employees like them and 8 percent citing some other reason.

In addition, we asked employees who reported that most fellow employees would oppose a union the reasons for opposition. Better than a third of employees pointed to factors heavily influenced by management behavior — the belief that “having a union would create too much tension” in their company or organization (25 percent) or that “unions are too weak to help their members” (10 percent); 27 percent of respondents said it was because employees “prefer to take care of workplace problems . . . on their own,” while 22 percent attributed it to dislike for the “the way unions operate.”

§1-4(d). EMPLOYEE ATTITUDES TOWARD “COOPERATION” AND “POWER”

The first Wave of the WRPS found that employees expressed considerable loyalty to their employers and overwhelmingly favored “cooperative” relations with management. At the same time, employees wanted more participation and independent say at the workplace. Given the terms in which U.S. industrial relations are commonly understood — where “adversarial” relations are often equated with unions that have “power” and “cooperative” relations are often equated with “business-dominated” employee groups that have none — some commentators have found these results puzzling or inconsistent. We were a bit confused by the confusion. Given that employees repeatedly stated that they wanted more say at the workplace and more cooperative dealing with employers, it is logical to assume

8Observers interested in promoting EI without significant employee power focused on the desire for cooperation, ignoring the concern with independence; those interested in independence took the expressed concern for cooperation to be evidence of respondent confusion, or bias in our survey design.
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

that their least-preferred workplace regime would be one in which they had a weak organization and faced a hostile employer, and their most-preferred regime would be one in which they had a powerful organization and a cooperative employer. We took our finding — that workers preferred weak organizations that management cooperated with over strong ones that management didn’t cooperate with — merely as further evidence of the dominance of management behavior over organizational attributes in determining employee choice. Employees think that independent power is important — but that some measure of management cooperation is an essential condition of any organizational success. Or so, again, was our suggestion in interpreting the Wave I results.

In Wave II, we probed this suggestion. What do employees really mean by “cooperative” relations with employers? Is cooperation really thought of as something that is generally desirable? Is the taste for independence just as robust? And is cooperation itself understood in something like “power” terms?

Wave II confirmed that American workers want both cooperation and independence in workplace relations, and that they see no necessary conflict between the two. To the contrary, employees see some measure of cooperation as indispensable to the success of their firm and satisfaction of worker interests; those interests themselves are seen to require some measure of independent institutional supports.

- In answer to the question “what do you think employees get when management is cooperative?”, 31 percent said “some power to influence company decisions,” but two-thirds (66 percent) thought what employees get is “a chance to give their opinions and ideas.”

- But when asked further “if a company always listens to what employees have to say, but doesn’t follow their advice, is management being cooperative or uncooperative,” an overwhelming 71 percent declared such management to be “uncooperative.”

Putting these two questions together, we find that 84 percent say that a cooperative management gives employees some power to influence decisions or listens to what employees say and follows their advice at least some time.9

9This percentage is the sum of those who said that cooperation gave workers some power and those who said it meant more opportunities to give advice, but who then said that if management always listened to employees but did not follow their advice, it was

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

In a similar vein, asked about how they would like “any kind of employee organization” to work:

- Virtually all employees (91 percent) said they preferred organizations in which “either management or employees can raise problems for discussion” to one where “management decides the problems that should be discussed”;

- Half (50 percent) favored structures in which employees sometimes met on their own, apart from management, while just short of half (47 percent) preferred structures in which all meetings were joint;

- 81 percent favored organizations in which “employees and management have to agree on decisions” to ones where “management makes the final decision about issues.”

What is sought then is a structured relation, with shared power and institutionalized supports for that sharing. Thus in the “cooperative joint committees” many respondents favor, independent standing for employees on these committees is seen as a natural and necessary ingredient.

§1-5. PROTECTING WORKPLACE RIGHTS AND ENFORCING STANDARDS

In addition to the “three big questions,” Wave I of the WRPS asked employees various questions about their existing workplace rights. We found that employees consistently overestimated these, even as they also wished their (overestimated) rights to be strengthened. On confusion:

- Some 83 percent of respondents believed it illegal to discharge an employee at will and 83 percent believed it is illegal to discharge an employee for refusing to do hazardous work (both forms of discharge that are perfectly legal under U.S. labor law); 56 percent believed it illegal to permanently replace striking workers, even though Congress recently debated changing the striker replacement law and decided against doing so.

not cooperative. Thirty-one percent said cooperation meant power. Seventy-seven percent of the 69 percent who said it meant more opportunities to give advice, effectively qualified this by saying management was not cooperative if it always listened but did not follow workers’ advice.
Employee Representation in the Emerging Workplace

- Employees do correctly recognize that it is illegal to discriminate against someone for trying to form a union (86 percent), and that “good business reasons” do not excuse racial discrimination in hiring (76 percent).

With respect to additional legal regulations of the workplace, we asked two sets of questions — one that referred to employee protections, the other that referred to management restrictions. By posing the issue in terms of protections, we anticipated that employees would be more likely to favor additional employment law; by posing the question in terms of restrictions on management, we anticipated that employees would be less favorable to legal protections. The results supported this expectation, but still showed a majority favoring additional legal protections.

- Averaging responses across six specific areas of employee protections, 59 percent of employees said current employment laws give employees too little protection, compared to 21 percent who said current laws give them more protection than is necessary. The proportion who said current laws put too few restrictions on management averaged 45 percent across the six areas (a drop of 14 percentage points), whereas the proportion who said current laws put more restrictions than is necessary was 35 percent.

- Among areas of legal protection, employees believed that additional legal protections or restrictions on management are most needed in areas where in fact there is little if any protection: “firing without cause” (67 percent); “layoffs and plant closings” (63 percent); and the “use of temporary or part-time employees to replace full-time employees” (64 percent).

- Employees are less likely to favor additional legal protections or restrictions for “conflicts between work responsibilities and family responsibilities” (60 percent); “rights to form unions and employee associations” (53 percent); and “job discrimination based on race, sex, or age” (45 percent).

Growth in court filings on employment issues and in the number of complaints to government regulatory agencies raises questions about the use of these means to resolve workplace problems. As background, Wave I asked a series of questions about employee experience with courts and agencies.

- Some 5 percent of respondents said that they had gone to court or to an agency because of a possible violation of workplace rights, and 17 percent said someone they knew had done so; thus, more than a fifth of U.S. employees claim some personal knowledge of worker experiences before courts or regulatory agencies.

- Of those who had themselves gone to court over workplace rights, 33 percent were “very satisfied” with the outcome, 23 percent were “somewhat satisfied,” and 34 percent were “not too satisfied” or “not satisfied at all.”

- Some 9 percent of employees reported having “thought about going to court or to a government agency about a possible violation of workplace rights, but decided not to go,” and another 19 percent said that was true of someone they knew.

In short, Wave I found that a rather large fraction of American employees viewed courts or agencies as vehicles for resolving disputes about employment issues.

Finally, asked whether they would prefer an alternative system to deal with disputes in which an elected committee of employees and management would jointly choose an outside arbitrator to resolve the dispute, approximately 55 percent of employees said they would prefer the alternative system; 37 percent wanted to go to court or to an agency.

Since the use of arbitration and other forms of alternative dispute resolution is an area of current policy concern, Wave II probed attitudes toward alternatives to courts and agency enforcement of legal protections in greater detail.

For this evaluation, respondents were mailed short descriptions of two proposed alternatives to court-based or agency-based systems for enforcing workplace rights and regulations: arbitration and workplace regulatory committees. We presented the respondents with a brief summary of arguments for and against these alternatives and asked for their assessment of these arguments as well as of the proposed changes themselves.

§1-5(b). ARBITRATION OF STATUTORY DISPUTES

Arbitration, along with other means of “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR), is now widely promoted as a means of achieving reduced costs and

greater coverage in the resolution of disputes over workplace rights. Some proponents of arbitration would allow employers to require employees, as a condition of employment, to use an outside arbitrator to resolve disputes over statutory workplace protections. Others favor a policy by which employees would retain their right to traditional remedies, but in which the opportunity to use the alternative of arbitration would be more fully developed.

What is the view of the employees we surveyed?
Briefly, the majority are favorably disposed to using arbitration to resolve disputes, in place of court or agency resolution. But most employees want any such ADR system to be jointly administered by employees and management; most oppose requiring employees to use ADR as a condition of employment.

- Asked about arbitration in general, 17 percent find it a “very good” idea and 66 percent find it a “good” one, compared to just 8 percent who viewed it as a “bad” or “very bad” idea.

- Asked about the effects of a system in which “arbitrators replaced the courts in solving most employee disputes about legal rights,” 59 percent thought more employees would bring complaints; 62 percent that disputes would be settled “more fairly”; 71 percent that it would be “easier for ordinary workers” to get a fair hearing; 73 percent that workers would be better off; and 71 percent that management would be better off.

- Few found “very convincing” the concerns that, in such a system, decisions would be made “less carefully” (12 percent), that employees would not have lawyers to assist them (21 percent), that decisions would tend to favor management (17 percent), and that employees would not get their “day in court” (18 percent).

- What were found “very convincing” were the arguments that arbitration would be “faster” (47 percent), save companies money (56 percent), cost less for employees (60 percent), and be easier than the courts for employees to use (61 percent).

- Some 60 percent of employees believe that a system that relies on independent arbitrators to make final judgments would work well in their firm, compared to 27 percent who thought it would not work well in their firm.

---

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

Asked about the type of arbitration system they desire, employees report that they would like a joint system that both management and employees run and is largely independent of government:

- Nearly all employees (95 percent) believed an arbitration system should be jointly administered by employees and management, compared to 4 percent who wanted it run by employees alone and just 1 percent who thought the arbitration procedures should be established by management alone.

- Some 43 percent of employees wanted management and individual employees to pay the expenses of the system, compared to 15 percent who wanted management to pay for it alone, and 39 percent who wanted some government contribution.

- Employees overwhelmingly (82 to 17 percent) preferred a system in which “expert help” is available to grieving employees to one where it was not.

- The majority of employees (56 percent) wanted a system that operates without government review, as compared to 42 percent who wanted such a review.

Employees thus appear to see an arbitration system for resolving disputes about workplace statutory rights as a potential “win-win” situation, with both employers and employees gaining by avoiding courts or regulatory agencies. At the same time, however, employees overwhelmingly reject ADR systems that foreclose the option of going to court, and oppose making use of arbitration as opposed to courts a condition of employment.

- By better than a four to one margin (78-18 percent), employees preferred a system that allows them to take a dispute over legal rights to an arbitrator or a court to one that requires them to use arbitration.

- By almost four to one (76-20 percent), employees believed it should be illegal for companies to make reliance on arbitration a condition of employment.

Once more, these responses seem to confirm, in a specific instance, one of the main messages of the WRPS — that employees want to resolve problems cooperatively with management, but insist on some independent standing as they do so.
§1-5(c). WORKER REGULATORY COMMITTEES

The story is similar for the alternative of “worker regulatory committees” — i.e., firm-based committees of workers (and managers) charged and empowered with responsibility for enforcing workplace standards. The example we probed in particular was a committee to address safety and health issues.

• Employees were generally favorably inclined toward the use of such committees. As a general policy matter, some 21 percent thought them a “very good” idea, and 64 percent thought them a “good” one; if introduced at their own workplace, 64 percent thought such committees would work “well” as against 29 percent who thought they would not.

• Some 64 percent thought that, with such committees, standards would be “enforced more often” than at present; 58 percent thought they would “make it easier . . . for companies to meet standards”; 57 percent thought enforcement would be “more strict” than at present; 80 percent thought workers would be better off; and 73 percent thought management would be too.

• Few found “very convincing” concerns that committees would be costly (21 percent), or that committee members would be less skilled (13 percent) or diligent (13 percent) than government inspectors.

• More found “very convincing” the arguments that committees would increase the compliance rate among companies (30 percent); give companies greater flexibility in meeting standards (42 percent); and give workers greater say in regulatory enforcement (52 percent).

But the committees that workers have in mind are ones in which management and employee representatives work together, with some equality of footing, and in which employees are assured some independent authority or standing.

• Employees overwhelmingly (85-11 percent) preferred electing their own representatives to such committees to having them chosen by management.

• Employees preferred committees having outside expert help to operating on their own (83-14 percent).

Chapter 1. What Do Workers Want? Voice, Representation and Power in the American Workplace

• Employees were evenly divided about the powers that such a committee should have. About half (49 percent) of respondents wanted the committees to have the “power to enforce regulations directly”; and about half (47 percent) wanted the committee to advise management on compliance.

• Most (65 percent) thought that workplace regulatory committees should cover “all types of workplace standards,” as against having a limited jurisdiction.

§1-6. CONCLUSION

Summarizing across Waves I and II of the WRPS, then, we find a robust set of employee preferences and attitudes toward workplace voice, representation, and power. Sometimes expressed as support for unionization, sometimes as support for some joint committee, across a very wide range of workplace concerns American workers show a strong desire for voice, sensitivity to management concerns, interest in working jointly, and overwhelming support for some measure of independence within cooperative relations.

In the area of workplace rights and regulation, as just summarized, Wave II also showed significant support for innovation in the enforcement of workplace standards and rights. Workers prefer strengthening local workplace-based systems of participation and representation to further regulation of the workplace. In the enforcement of the rights they now enjoy (and do not wish to give up, but expand), they think such systems could play a very constructive role. But again, they want real input into the design and administration of those systems.

Finally, it is clear throughout the WRPS that while most American workers are prepared, even anxious, to take more responsibility at the workplace and in its regulation, they are deeply pessimistic about management’s willingness to share the power in decision-making that such joint responsibility implies. Employees welcome involvement committees and other managerial efforts to increase participation. But the majority believe that management is unwilling to empower them to the extent necessary to improve overall enterprise performance, and find management extremely hostile to efforts to establish independent employee organizations.