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Literature review on direct worker participation

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Publication date
2024
Document Version
Final published version

Citation for published version (APA):
Franca , V., Kirov, V., & Tros, F. H. (2024). *Literature review on direct worker participation*.
BroadVoice Project Consortium.

BroadVoice

Broadening the spectrum
of employee voice
in workplace
innovation

Literature review on direct worker participation

Deliverable 2.1.

Project Consortium

Coordinator	ADAPT (IT)
Beneficiaries	CISL (IT), IPS-BAS (BG), LTU (SE), UL (SI), UvA (NL), WIE (IE)
Affiliated Entities	Fondazione ADAPT (IT), Fondazione Tarantelli (IT)
Associate Partners	ETUI (EU), ETUC (EU), Federmeccanica (IT), FIM-CISL (IT), ZDS (SI), KSS PERGAM (SI), FNV (NL), KT PODKREPA (BG), UPEE (BG), FCIW PRODKREPA (BG), SRVIKBG (BG), IDEAS INSTITUTE (IE), AWVN (NL), LO (SE)

D2.1 Literature review on direct worker participation

Deliverable number and title	[D2.1.] [Literature review: Direct worker participation]
Dissemination level	Public
Organisation Name	University of Ljubljana; Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; AIAS-HSI of the University of Amsterdam
Authors	Valentina Franca; Vassil Kirov; Frank Tros
Submission date	26/08/2024

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Abbreviation

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DSR	Design science research
ECS	European Company Survey
EDI	Employee-driven innovation
E.g.	Exempli gratia, for example
EP	Employee participation
ESOP	European Stock Ownership Plan
EU	European Union
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
HPWP	High Performance Work Practice
HPWS	High Performance Work System
I.e.	In essence
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IT	Information Technology
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SME	Small and medium enterprise
TQM	Total Quality Management
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America

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Executive Summary

Direct employee involvement has been a recurring theme in the industrial relations literature for more than four decades. This literature review does not claim to be comprehensive and focuses primarily on publications in English, supplemented by a small number of publications in other European languages. Definitions of direct employee participation are somewhat elastic and can be broad, e.g., any form of delegation to or consultation with employees, or narrow, e.g., a formal, ongoing structure of direct communication. The whole stream of literature on employee participation has been structured around two arguments, the first related to the development of industrial democracy, the second built around the economic efficiency model, which suggests that allowing employees to have a say in work and business decisions can lead to better decisions.

The literature on direct employee participation has identified differences between the practices in the different European countries. The 2019 ECS shows remarkably high national varieties in managerial attitudes towards direct participation practices, in intensity of regular meetings between management and workers, and in direct participation's influence. Qualitative studies show that the effectiveness of direct employee participation for management and/or for workers depends on organisational characteristics and structural positions of workers, such as job autonomy, bottom-up management structures, managerial attitudes regarding workers voice, and higher skilled employees. In practice, the functioning and contributions of direct employee participation seems to be dependent on 'the right combination' of formal and informal channels and written and verbal forms, although verbal ways are more effective in SMEs. Greater internationalisation of business - in combination with digitalisation and the crisis of trade unions - is acknowledged as an influencing factor in growing inequalities in the direct employee participation practices.

Literature shows that direct employee participation can have several positive social and economic effects, such as employee autonomy, employee wellbeing, engagement and productivity. In most of the literature on 'workplace innovation', the contribution of direct employee participation is seen as a 'win-win' for both workers as well as employers. Ongoing digital developments - and its impacts on communication, jobs, skills and working conditions - ask for more research focusing on the role of new technologies in promoting or inhibiting employee participation practices and with what effects. Organisations' environmental challenges make social dialogue even more complex and broader in scope, although rare publications have addressed employee participation in this context.

Direct employee participation within representative contexts is influenced by institutional power structures, including national traditions and the roles of trade unions, NGOs, and regulatory bodies. Understanding the impact and interplay between direct and indirect employee participation is crucial for fostering engagement, empowerment, and effective decision-making within EU establishments. Academic perspectives differ on whether direct participation complements or competes with indirect forms, highlighting the need for balanced approaches. Integrating both forms of participation is essential for improving organisational performance and employee satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Direct employee[1] participation has been a **recurring topic** in industrial relations literature. For example, according to Marchington and Wilkinson (2005), in the UK, the concept of employee participation was initially explored within the framework of **industrial democracy** (Müller-Jentsch, 2008). Subsequently, in the early 2000s, direct participation resurfaced in the context of research on the implementation of the 2002 EU Directive on information and consultation. In other contexts, it was developed in the framework of the management traditions, and further was explored based on the large European Company Surveys (ECS). More recently, employee participation could be also an object of particular public support policies, at least in some European countries/ regions.

Methodological clarification

This literature review does not claim to be comprehensive and is primarily focused on publications in the English language, supplemented by a small number of publications in other European languages. Relevant publications were identified through searches on Google Scholar and Scopus (using keywords such as direct employment participation, employee participation, employee voice, employee involvement).

For this literature review is used Google Scholar with several combination of keywords 'direct employee participation', 'direct worker(s) participation', 'technological change', technological innovation', 'environmental', 'digital change in workplaces', 'productivity', 'job quality', 'engagement', 'organizational change', 'workplace innovation' etc. The result of this is that many publications come from Western and Northern Europe and Australia. The implication of this geographical bias is that we must be extra careful in generalizing the assumptions and conclusions in the literature.

The objective of the second section of this report is to summarise the development of scientific understanding regarding **direct employee participation in Europe**. To achieve this, we explored literature sources that have delineated the evolution of employment relations over the last few decades, with a particular focus on the period following the global economic and financial crisis of 2008–2009. While the research primarily focuses on Europe, we cannot overlook important analyses conducted elsewhere, notably in North America.

In the third part the forms of employee participation are presented, including their distribution, application and the related practices across European countries. This is further developed with the discussion of the varieties in the contribution of direct employee participation in the fourth part of the report. The fifth part deals with a two-fold question of (i) analysing the role of direct employee participation practices in tackling organisation, technological and environmental challenges and (ii) understanding if, and how, direct employee participation (might) lead to better economic and social outcomes and to the application of the principle of justice. The sixth and seventh points are dedicated to the role of industrial relations in the development of direct employee participation, particularly focusing on unravelling the multifaceted role played by industrial relations in contemporary work environments and investigating the determinants that impact on their

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[1] In this literature review we use employees and workers interchangeably.

effectiveness, including the role of indicators and the relationship with bodies of indirect representation, such as works councils.

2. Definitions, values, historical developments of direct employee participation

This section of the report examines the definition, the forms of employee direct participation and then provides illustrations of the development of this phenomenon in Europe.

Traditionally, direct employee participation (EP), sometimes referred also as employee involvement[2], used to be considered as a process that defines, describes, and explains «how businesses can improve their performance by cultivating employee interest and dedication» (Cotton, 1993).

In their analysis, Wilkinson and Dundon (2010) defined direct participation and explored the context in which participation has changed over time from the perspective of industrial relations. According to Dundon and Wilkinson (2009), employee participation, involvement and voice are: «somewhat elastic terms with considerable width in the range of definitions» (see e.g., Poole, 1986; Heller et al., 1998; Wilkinson, 2002; Strauss, 2006; Dundon and Rollinson, 2004). The definitions may be as broad and **all-inclusive** as 'any form of delegation to or consultation with employees', or as **narrow** as a 'formal, ongoing structure of direct communications' such as through team briefing. Some authors refer to involvement as participation while others use empowerment, voice, or communications, often without extracting the conceptual meanings or differences that are used in practice (Parks, 1995).

The whole stream of literature on employee participation has been structured around two arguments, the first one related to the **development of the industrial democracy**, the second is built around the **economic efficiency model**, which suggests allowing employees an input into work and business decisions can help create better decisions and more understanding (Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010).

And as employee participation has always been considered elastic, according to different authors, it could encompass a **variety** of different practices and processes. That is why some of the leading authors in the field made efforts to clarify these forms of employee participation and the extent to which various practices allow workers to have a say in organizational decisions.

Direct employee participation is often seen as beneficial for both workers and employers and organizations, as it is further explored in parts 2 and 3 of the report. It can lead to increased job satisfaction, higher levels of commitment and motivation, improved communication and collaboration, as well as better decision-making and problem-solving outcomes. Additionally, it can help organisations adapt to change more effectively and foster a culture of trust and transparency.

According to Gill and Kreiger (1999), despite the wealth of literature on human resource management (HRM) and employee involvement, up to now there has been an important lack of

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[2] In this literature review we use (employee/worker) *involvement* and (employee/worker) *participation* interchangeably.

(large-scale) survey evidence on the diffusion of employee involvement in work organisations in Europe. However, during the last two decades this gap was partially filled by the secondary analysis of large-scale European surveys, e.g., the European Company Survey, as well as by national surveys about participation practices in different European countries.

2.1 The employee voice – revisited

In parallel to other focuses, the research on employee voice has continued during the last years and an example of it is the seminal "Handbook of Research on Employee Voice" where editors, Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey and Freeman (2020), explain the term 'voice', which is widely used in industrial relations, human resource management and organisational behaviour (OB). The authors retrace the evolving definitions and interpretations of employee voice, a term that has become very '**elastic**', and used by different disciplines and perspectives in different ways. For them, the employee voice, closely related or even synonymous to employee participation, is: «the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say, formally and/or informally, collectively and/or individually, potentially to influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work, their interests, and the interests of managers and owners» (p. 5). The Handbook addresses employee voice from these different perspectives, providing well-designed systematisation. This is particularly needed at a moment where the conclusions of a large empirical research, carried out by Eurofound & Cedefop (2020), the European Company Survey, suggests that companies and organisations with strong workplace social dialogue score better both on performance and wellbeing). In other words, employee voice reinforcement and expression might contribute both to individuals and organizations.

A chapter in the same handbook, called "The Future of Employee Voice?" reviews pertinent themes in existing voice scholarship with a view toward proposing areas for future research. They examine definitional disagreements present in the literature and challenge the assumption that voice needs to lead to something for it to be legitimate, as well as that voice is only directed upwards. They continue by exploring exit and silence as alternatives to voice, and review research which questions how much voice workers desire. The authors also argue that voice is linked to how one conceptualises the nature of the work and provide several alternatives to that end. They then consider more recent workforce trends such as the rise of gig and platform work, social media and financialisation to problematise how they might affect the future of voice.

Employee participation has many values for workers, companies, and societies. Firstly, it can be seen as a **human right** for an employee to raise the voice regarding an opinion, a complaint, a dissatisfaction, or an idea for an improvement in one's job, workplace, or company. This value and the workers' need are even stronger in times of organisational and technological changes that might have an impact on the working life. Workers in Europe have a right to be (minimally) informed and be consulted in case of changes in undertakings activities and of decisions that might lead to major changes in the organization of labor. The democratic argument in favor of direct participation typically relates to giving voice, not only to **marginalised employees, but to all workers** (Dundon, et al., 2004). Another argument focuses on the promotion of workers' empowerment, which in turn fosters job satisfaction, self-determination, and meaningfulness (Abildgaard, et al., 2020). Further, consultation and co-determination in managerial decision-making leads to more consideration of

workers' interests and might even lead to rebalancing power relations between employer/management and workers. Finally, there is **an employers' interest** in employee participation: not only by using the insights of workers in organizational and business processes, but also by creating a support base among the personnel for management decisions and company policies. A bit at the side, but employee participation can also be promoted in the job design to give workers autonomy in the way they have choices in doing their tasks. Having control of your own job is an important ingredient in job quality.

Employee voice can be described as «the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owners» (Wilkinson, et al., 2014). Employee participation is a process in which employees have a certain level of influence on work, organization and/or working conditions (Strauss, 2006).

The employee expression of **voice** can be examined at different levels: macro-, meso- and micro-level (Wilkinson et al., 2021). At the macro-level, attention is directed towards regulatory frameworks, societal influences, and corporate culture. On the meso-level, the examination involves organisational voice systems and the influence of policy actors as well as representative workers participation such as collective bargaining with unions. The micro-level discussions predominantly revolve around direct employee participation, with a primary focus on individual and team-level factors. Generally, many times authors question why participation is introduced in companies. In response, Strauss (1992) summarises that employee participation redistributes influence or power in society, protects workers' interests, strengthens unions, and extends the benefits of political democracy to the workplace. It fosters employee satisfaction and enhances organizational efficiency. Based on this perspective, participation always begins in **the workplace**, addressing issues such as work organization, expertise, compensation, and similar matters. It then extends to personnel and social issues, which need collective voice through worker representation. Subsequently, there are issues that transcend the interests of individual companies and must be regulated at the industry or regional level (Kohl, 1995).

EP is directly observable at the workplace level, where a myriad of informal practices between unions, employers, and employees coexists with formal mechanisms, such as collective agreements. These formal structures not only reflect historical processes but also encapsulate the prevailing institutional environments within specific national industrial relations systems (Berton et al., 2021). Formal structures and informal practices affect the presence and development of direct employee participation at the workplace level. It must be noted that discussions in the field of industrial relations mainly focus on representative employee participation (e.g., Doellgast & Benassi, 2020; O'Brady & Doellgast, 2021). Discussions regarding direct employee participation within industrial relations are relatively infrequent, even though there is a consensus in the theoretical realm that direct participation unquestionably constitutes one form of employee involvement (Gold, 2005; Wood & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005; Gallie, 2013; Gonzales, 2010; Armaroli, 2022 and many others), making it an integral component of industrial relations. Also, according to Eurofound (2023), one subdimension of industrial democracy is also participation, referring to employee involvement in management decisions-making at company level, either **directly** or indirectly.

3. Forms of employee participation

Direct employee participation refers to the **involvement of employees in decision-making processes and organisational activities within a company**. Unlike the indirect forms of participation (single or dual channel – either through trade union sections, and/or through works councils; more in sections 6 and 7), this form of participation typically involves employees having a 'direct say' or influence in matters that affect their work environment, job roles, and overall organizational outcomes.

As underlined previously by Wilkinson and Dundon (2009), the forms of direct employee participation are diverse. For example, already during the 1980s and throughout the 1990s terms such as 'quality circles', 'total quality management', 'lean production', 'flexible organizations', 'empowerment', 'autonomy', 'communications', 'teamworking' and many other related terms have been introduced in the HRM literature as also forms of direct participation (Geary & Sisson, 1994).

Direct employee participation can take various forms, and in line with the width of the definitions can include:

- Team-based decision making: in this approach, employees are involved in making decisions that directly affect their work teams or departments. This can include setting goals, allocating resources, and solving problems collectively.
- Job autonomy: mentioned below and an important part of the 2019 ECS.
- Flatter organisations: associated with delegated decision-making.
- Values-based performance measurement: e.g. incentivising collaborative and innovation behaviours.
- Suggestion Systems: organisations may implement systems that encourage employees to submit suggestions for improvement or innovation. These suggestions are then reviewed and implemented if deemed beneficial. Whilst there are still many companies that operate suggestion schemes in which ideas are dropped into a box and awaiting management approval (or otherwise), this seems outdated in particular contexts.
- Quality Circles: they are small groups of employees who come together regularly to identify, analyse, and solve work-related problems, with the goal of (continuous) improving quality and productivity.
- A coaching and leadership style that encourage employees to approach management with ideas, concerns, or feedback at any time.
- Employee Ownership: in some cases, employees may have ownership stakes in the company, either through stock ownership plans or employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), giving them a direct financial interest in the company's performance and decisions. For the purposes of our project, we do not delve into this form of employee participation.
- Communications and information-sharing (one-way; two-way; top-down, and/or bottom-up)
- In a more negative/dysfunctional way one can also think on forms like ignoring/avoiding/obstructing rules and protocols, sabotage, and fooling the management or the algorithm.

Direct employee voice/participation can be individual as well as collective (De Spiegelare & Van Guyes, 2015; Dundon et al., 2004; Marchington & Dundon, 2017, Wilkinson et al., 2021). It refers to the individual workers' voice and influence on the organization of one's own tasks, job autonomy and direct dialogue with the manager or the colleagues at the workplace level. It can also refer to suggestion schemes, engagement surveys, etc. on broader company policies. Or through a grievance procedure or speak-up program, as an articulation of individual dissatisfaction to rectify a problem with management or prevent deterioration in relations (Dundon et al., 2004). Maybe in contrast to a common view that 'direct' is the same as individual, we are claiming here that 'direct' can be also 'collective'. Collective forms of direct employee participation are related to autonomous teams, self-organised teams, regular work meetings/consultations, team briefing, problem-solving groups, etc. In this context, collective ways of direct participation have not to be confused with representative participation.

In the literature on employee participation there are different attempts to conceptualise the forms of participation. One of the most relevant examples for the purposes of BroadVoice research is the so-called escalator of participation (introduced by Wilkinson, et al. (2012), starting from the information, through the processes of communication, consultation, co-determination, and control (see fig. 1).
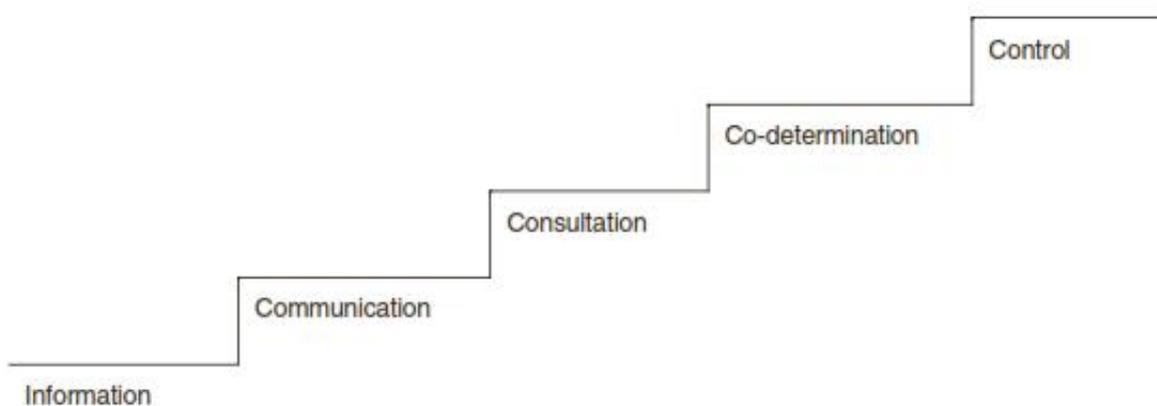
Figure 1. The participation escalator

Figure 13.1   The escalator of participation

Source: Wilkinson et al. (2012)

The analysis of the forms of direct participation has been often carried out in parallel to the examination of the forms of indirect participation that can co-exist, complement, or conflict with each other.

It is important to differentiate between, on the one hand, the process stages in participation and on the other hand, the scope and impact of direct employee participation. As regards process stages, participation begins with the willingness, opportunity, capabilities and sometimes even courage of the worker(s) to open the mouth (voice). Crucial is the question of whether there is a response or not, and if so, the way management or colleagues respond to the employee's voice. A third stage is more real participation in the forms of interactions and quality of communications between management (colleagues) and the employee(s). A final stage is the **influence** the employee(s) has in decision-making. According to Abildgaard et al. (2020), a minimum level of what should be considered a participatory intervention are initiatives where employees have at least a moderate degree of influence over either the content or process, preferably both.

4. Understanding varieties in the contribution of direct employee participation

What is the literature saying about the functioning and contributions of direct employee participation for workers, management, and the organisation? Most of the literature conclude that the effectiveness of channels of direct employee participation for management and/or workers depends on organizational characteristics and structural positions of workers, and it is more about the right mix of channels than about 'one best way'.

Let's first start with the **'right mix' of channels**. The first distinction can be made between verbal (face to face) and written channels of having a say. Verbal ways seem relatively more effective in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) than in larger firms in the field of innovation (Della Torre et al., 2021, based on data from the 2013 European Company Survey). A second distinction is between informal and formal channels. Under informal channels, Mowbray and colleagues (2015) mention informal discussions, one-to-one meetings, word-of-mouth, email, open door policy and empowerment by supervisors. Under formal channels, they mention grievance processes, speak-up program, self-managed teams, upwards problem-solving groups, attitude surveys, staff meetings, team briefings, quality circles, suggestion schemes, continuous improvement teams, ombudsman, mediation, arbitration, internal tribunals, intranet. Interestingly, Marchington and Sutter (2013) show that **informal employee involvement/participation needs to be combined with the formal system** to operate effectively. The HRM literature largely agrees that a **combination of channels** sends a supportive message to the employees and gives them more opportunities to be involved in different ways and that information received via one way can be used in others to influence decision making (Mowbray et al., 2021), and contribute to innovation (Della Torre et al., 2021). If this mechanism is also the case between direct forms of participation at the workplace level and representative forms of participation is an interesting question in the BroadVoice project.

Regarding **organizational characteristics,** we refer to the typology of a top-down management structure, vertical division of labour combined with low job autonomy on the one hand versus bottom-up management structure, flatter division of labour combined with high job autonomy on the other hand. In the last-mentioned category, we expect more EP-practices and better social and economic outcomes of direct EP. Management control can (even) go into the direction of exploitation and extreme discipline, together with union boosting and no EP at all. Corporate

ownership and firm-level culture play also a crucial role in shaping workforce organisation, including the adoption of high-performance work practices. Workplace attributes influence organisational culture, worker identity, and relationships within the company (Jirjahn, 2024). Managerial attitudes further shape the likelihood of employees expressing their voice, with Wilkinson et al. (1992) highlighting the dual role of voice in gaining cooperation from workers and challenging managerial control.

Moreover, **the structural position of workers** within the labour market significantly influences their level of power in direct participation. Generally, low-skilled workers who are easily replaceable have less structural power compared to high-skilled workers who are less dispensable in terms of both workforce replacement and technological substitution. Gallie (2013) suggests that also the implications of direct participation vary among employees, particularly depending on their occupational class and their emphasis on utilising initiative at work. However, except for those with weak initiative orientation, the overall effects of direct participation tend to be positive across different employee categories. According to the 2021-round of the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) data of Eurofound (2023a), having a voice, that is, being consulted about objectives and work organisation, is a reality for almost half of EU employees, ranging from 43 % in Slovakia to 64 % in Estonia.

Varieties in company profiles: quantitative data

More specifically, as regards **organisational characteristics,** literature points to the importance and varieties of the i) intention and attitude of several stakeholders in direct participation practices, ii) quantity and quality of (top-down or bottom-up) information sharing, iii) intensity and quality of interaction between the stakeholders and iv) its impact on organisations. Regarding the first point, in the 2019 ECS, more than two-thirds (70%) of managers in Europe reported that, in their opinion, involving employees in work organisation changes gives the establishment a competitive advantage to a moderate or great extent (Eurofound & Cedefop, 2020: 103-110). Managers in Denmark (90%) and Portugal (88%) are the most positive in this regard, and managers in the Netherlands (43%) and Czechia (52%) are the least positive (ibidem). In a qualitative study in the industry in France and Sweden, Ahlstrand & Gautié (2023) found significant variations in employee involvement where managerial orientations played an important explaining role (i.e., technocratic/top-down in France and bottom-up involvement enhancing orientation in Sweden). In addition to that, they found also different attitudes among unions: more defensive in France and more influencing employee participation in Sweden (Ahlstrand & Gautié, 2023). Padzik-Wolos (2022) studied more deeply the role of trust in promoting and controlling employee driven innovation in organisations (see also Høyrup (2010) for the concept of employee-driven innovation). Her research proves an important role of general *managerial support* in EDI. Regarding the second and third point, the 2019 ECS found that regular meetings between employees and their immediate manager are most prevalent in Sweden (82%) and Austria (76%) and least prevalent in Poland (42%) and Croatia (43%). Regular general staff meetings are reported most frequently in Sweden (73%) and Denmark (60%) and least frequently in Poland (18%) and Spain (25%). Regular dissemination of information was reported most in Sweden (70%) and Finland (65%) and least commonly in Poland (18%) and Romania (22%). Regular online discussions were reported most in Finland (18%) and the United Kingdom (16%) and least commonly in Poland (3%) and Croatia (4%). Regarding the last point, in the same survey, two thirds of the managers reported that employees influence decisions about the organisation and efficiency of work processes to a moderate or a great extent. High level of direct employee influence

was reported most frequently in Romania (55%) and Spain (47%) and least frequently in the Netherlands (18%) and Belgium (23%).

The study of Eurofound and Cedefop (2020) concludes that there are four establishment profiles. Almost one-third (31%) of establishments were classified as having regular use of all means of engaging with staff and a relatively high level of employees' direct influence on management decisions. Another third was characterised by the irregular use of most means of engaging with staff in combination with a medium level of direct employees' influence on management decisions. The third profile contains 19% of the establishments, characterised by relatively regular occurrence of meetings but low influence of employees on management decisions. The last type comprises 13% of establishments, characterised by the absence, or, at most, the irregular use of the means to engage with staff combined with the little employees' influence on management decisions. Besides the variety in countries (see earlier), there is variety between sectors and company size. The 'regular, high influence' type is most prevalent in the sector of other services (39%) and least prevalent in the construction sector (23%). And more common in large establishments (42%) than in medium-sized (33%) and small (30%) establishments.

International dimension

Finally, greater internationalisation of business – in combination with digitalisation and the crisis of trade unions – is acknowledged as an influencing factor. Multinationals, workforce mobility, outsourcing, and offshoring contribute to workforce diversity but also pose challenges to traditional trade union models (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that we could not find that much literature about comparing empirically EP practices and EP outcomes in its relation to characteristics in national IR-models or state traditions. It is common knowledge in the field of organisational and labour studies that Nordic countries do have a rich tradition in social innovation, active employee participation at the workplace and embeddedness of autonomy and direct participation in job design. In Nordic countries there have been sustained policy initiatives to redesign work in a way that increases employees' control over their job tasks and to encourage the active involvement of employees in decisions about organisational change (Inanc et al., 2015: 468). Management in these Nordic countries seem to have less resistance from unions in organisational change compared with Western/Southern continental countries (see e.g., Ahlstrand & Gautié, 2023). Studies of the strategies of multinational companies give in another way proof of the importance of national characteristics. Organisations increasingly outsource work on a global scale, driven by technologies and supply chain structures. This concentration of work in low-cost geographies often limits worker voice and seeks to marginalise unions (Harvey, 2006). Cross-border employment schemes and power imbalances between corporations and governments introduce ambiguities and barriers to effective voice (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Donaghey et al., 2013; Reinecke & Dongahey, 2020). With internationalisation and the development of multinational corporations, there is an increasing number of companies in which various systems and forms of employee participation are present. For instance, Dundon et al. (2015) researched employee voice within the specific institutional arrangement of double-breasting. Double-breasting is when multi-plant organisations recognise trade unions in some company sites, with non-union arrangements at other company plants, or where a unionised firm acquires a new site that then operates on a non-union basis. The study examines four multi-site organisations in both Irish jurisdictions, focusing on voice arrangements in double-breasting scenarios. These arrangements, influenced by various factors, involve both direct and indirect practices in unionised and non-union work locations.

Notably, spill-over effects from unionised sites impact behaviours at non-union plants. Furthermore, differences in voice practices between union and non-union sites were evident in all cases. Collective voice schemes were more prevalent in unionised sites, while less common in their non-union counterparts. From another angle, Jirjahn (2024) reviews the impact of corporate globalisation on worker representation, highlighting transmission channels through which foreign multinational companies influence host-country institutions. Foreign affiliates' adaptation to or avoidance of host-country institutions affects worker bargaining power and industrial relations.

5. Direct employee participation and organisational and technological challenges

As underlined in this literature review, publications about employee participation used to be developed in academic disciplines of industrial relations and management. Most of the empirical studies are in Scandinavia and countries like the UK and Australia (and maybe Germany). First, there was a traditionally strong focus, relating employee participation and **job quality** (section 5.1). Second, there was a related stream, defining employee participation as an essential part of '**workplace innovation' (**section 5.2). Since the beginning of the so-called **digital transformation** (Meil & Kirov, 2017), several authors focused their interest on the EP in this context (section 5.3). So, the academic interest in employee voice and employee participation has been continued but with some changes in the focus. Nevertheless, the relation of EP with environmental challenges, sustainability and the **green transition** is still under research (section 5.4.).

5.1 Employee participation and job quality

The first stream of literature, both in the field of industrial relations and in management (HRM, but not only) could be labelled under the relation between employee participation and job quality. Hereunder, we will provide examples of such research carried out in different European countries.

In Germany, already from the 1990s, a representative German establishment data set 'the IAB establishment panel' has been used to investigate employee participation. For example, using this dataset, the paper of Gill and Kreiger (1999), measured the productivity impact of management-led participative establishment practices and they found that the presence of teamwork, reduction of hierarchies and autonomous work groups significantly increased productivity.

Traditionally, the research on direct employee participation has been carried out intensively in the Nordic countries. In 2010, Busck et al. investigated the transformation of employee participation and its consequences for the work environment. Taking its point of departure in a 'deconstruction' of the concept of participation based on research on employee participation from the past few decades, the article questions why increased employee participation does not seem to result in a healthy work environment. It ultimately suggests that the demand-control model may have shortcomings in today's workplace dynamics due to evolving employer-employee relationships, potentially altering the significance of employee participation. Another Danish paper, written by

Nielsen and Randall (2012), explored the importance of employee participation and perceptions of changes in procedures in a teamworking intervention. They found that pre-intervention factors like autonomy and job satisfaction predicted the extent of employee involvement in planning and implementing the intervention. Well-being and social support before the intervention were directly linked to employees reporting changes in existing teamwork practices. Moreover, participation and procedural changes were significantly linked to post-intervention factors such as autonomy, social support, and well-being.

These findings in the Nordic countries highlight the critical role of employee involvement in intervention processes, as it appears to be closely tied to perceived procedural justice and, consequently, intervention success. Based on participatory literature and case studies in the Nordic countries, Abildgaard et al. (2020) presents a conceptual model that can be applied in the design and assessment of participatory work environment interventions. This model consists of the following four dimensions: i) participation in relation to the content of the intervention; ii) participation in relation to the process of implementing it; iii) degree of directness in involvement and iv) the goals of using a participatory approach. The author's recommendations for a minimum level of what should be considered a participatory intervention are initiatives where employees have at least a moderate degree of influence over either the content or process, preferably both.

A recent paper from the UK (Fitzroy & Nolan, 2022) assesses how employee participation in decision-making, ownership, and profit-sharing influences job quality, worker well-being, and productivity, aiming to derive policy recommendations based on these insights. Through a synthesis of findings on 'declining labour power', theoretical discussions and empirical evidence highlighting the advantages of EP for job quality, satisfaction, and productivity, the authors explore the significance of EP. The authors argue that worker well-being and job satisfaction often receive insufficient attention unless they directly contribute to profitability. In contexts where employers hold significant market power and unions lack strength, EP emerges as a necessary intervention to address this disparity. Consequently, fostering EP can lead to improvements in both productivity and worker well-being (see also Wood, 2008).

Other studies in the UK are e.g., from Gallie et al. (2017; 2017b). Based on data in workplaces, they argued that direct employee participation might diminish job insecurity; that might be because of perceived procedural fairness in enhancing trust and moderating sources of job strain, as well as to the effects of greater control in reducing the psychological impact of work stressors.

While research on employee participation is rarer in Central and Eastern Europe, there are some papers providing insights, for example from Poland (Widerszal-Bazyl & Warszewska-Makuch, 2008). In this research, managers from 192 companies were surveyed with a questionnaire assessing employees' direct participation in organisational decisions. Four primary forms of direct participation were identified: individual and group consultations, as well as individual and group delegation. Workplace safety was evaluated through metrics including the number of accidents, employees working in hazardous conditions, accident absenteeism, and sickness absence. Findings revealed that the latter two indicators were significantly associated with certain aspects of direct participation. Specifically, companies utilising **face-to-face individual consultations** experienced lower accident absenteeism compared to those that did not. Similar effects were observed for **group consultations** involving temporary groups, as well as individual and group delegation. Workplaces with high scores for the scope of group consultation demonstrated lower accident absenteeism, while those with high scores for the scope of group delegation exhibited lower sickness absence

rates. The study concluded that direct employee participation positively influenced workplace safety, even when involvement was not directly linked to safety concerns.

Regarding the factor of 'job autonomy', as being part of both job quality and direct EP, we would like to stress here that little job autonomy can have serious health effects (Niedhammer et al., 2021; Taouk et al., 2020). In the scope of this literature review it goes too far to go deeper into that.

5.2 Workplace innovation

In most of the literature on the role of direct employee participation in 'workplace innovation', the contribution of direct employee participation is seen as a 'win-win' for both workers as well as employers (Oeij et al., 2017/2021; Pot, 2017; etc.). In the BroadVoice project we follow this assumption although not being blind for negative effects and for barriers in reaching these win-win potential outcomes. Further, BroadVoice wants to go more into depth about conditions and mechanisms in which positive effects evolve. Hereunder we go further into specific direct and indirect social and economic effects of employee participation.

Social effects

Direct effects of employee participation relate to the intrinsic dimension of workers participation, whereby involvement in decision-making leads directly to changes in job satisfaction and employee wellbeing. This draws on theories on basic human needs, such as procedural fairness (Gallie et al., 2017b: 177) but also engagement as such that creates employees' satisfaction, especially in context of change. In general, it is assumed that direct participation also has positive effects on other employees' intrinsic motivational factors, such as commitment, competences, team co-operations and giving meaning to work (De Spiegelaere & Van Guyes, 2015). Also, the EWCS data confirm correlations between 'having a voice' and mental well-being and work engagement (Eurofound, 2023: 23). Literature makes a difference between engagement and involvement. Engagement refers to an organisational culture that is receptive to employees' interests, whereas involvement seems to point to employee voice in structural changes and decision making, in other words a different position on a dimensional scale of employee autonomy (Oeij et al., 2021). Engagement is passive agreement, while involvement implies active ownership (Boxall & Macky: 2009; 2014; Wood & Wall, 2007).

There have been substantial research publications about the relationship between employee participation and employee satisfaction in the 21st century. Just to mention a few, that relate to both main forms of participation: Holland and colleagues (2011) found in Australian workplaces that direct voice is positively associated with subjective job satisfaction and that its effect increases when it is adopted in combination with union voice. In the same direction and in Australia, Wilkinson et al. (2018) found that simultaneous presence of direct and indirect forms of employee participation has the strongest positive effect on the perceived quality of workplace relationships. Further, Zhu and colleagues (2015) show that participation of the new generation of Chinese employees in management and decision-making has a significantly positive impact on their job satisfaction. In this study, the employee's willingness to participate ('participate intention') appears to play a moderating role between actual participation and satisfaction. Pohler and Luchak (2014) show

evidence that employee voice has positive outcomes on employee well-being. Gallie and colleagues (2017b) found in the British context that job discretion as well as organization participation - in terms of having meetings for expressing views and having a say in the decision about the change of workplace – have positive effects for employees' well-being.

Having said that, we agree with those who say that we must be careful using the concept of 'job satisfaction'. Subjective measurements like job satisfaction, meaningful work, are important but not sufficient to ensure decent work that is compliant with the law. After all, we know that how people evaluate their work partly reflects their socioeconomic position, their work history and the opportunities they see, or do not see, in the future (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017). Indirect or mediating effects of practices in employee participation relate to the fact that it influences other features of the work context, which in turn affect these employee outcomes (Gallie et al., 2017). Firstly, other literature teaches us not to be naïve in praising (all forms of) direct participation and in expecting only positive outcomes. Higher involvement may be a key factor predicting higher job satisfaction and wellbeing, but it risks higher levels of work intensity that may increase fatigue and stress and undermine work–life balance (Boxall & Macky, 2014). More in general it is important not to ignore sceptic views and factual side effects of too much involvement/commitment, such as regarding work intensification, horizontal control mechanisms of colleagues, more performance-related responsibilities towards workers on the shop floor and limited workers' rights (Della Torre, 2012). Also, Gonzalez (2010) delved deeper into the relationship between workers' direct participation and job quality, identifying both positive and negative outcomes: it can '**empower**' workers, but can also lead to 'intensification' of work. Another source of negative effect (less satisfaction, less well-being) is the mechanism of 'the voice gap', which is the difference between how much voice workers believe they ought to have and how much voice they actually have (Diaz-Linhart et al., 2023; Kochan et al., 2019).

Economic effects

Besides the psychological and social benefits, direct participation is also seen as a managerial instrument to promote employees' communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organisational or unit functioning (Bryson et al., 2006; Della Torre et al., 2021; Harley, 2014; etc.). In this way, direct worker participation has a **promotive** function in productivity. Direct participation is often positively associated with greater training provisions and increased use of skills, competence development, etc., which may increase workers' employability and productivity, but at the same time may contribute to social effects of wellbeing and job security (Boxall et al., 2015). Analysis of data from the British "Skills and Employment Survey" confirms that direct participation is strongly associated with enhanced learning opportunities at work (Inanc et al., 2015). Interestingly, direct participation was found to be particularly important for those in jobs that have been traditionally disadvantaged with respect to learning at work: they receive the greatest benefits from direct participation (Inanc et al., 2015: 468). Increasing the prevalence of direct participation among those in lower skilled jobs may then be a potentially important lever for upgrading the skills of those in poor-quality jobs, thereby helping to reduce inequalities in job quality (ibidem).

Workplace innovation with (synergetic) social and economic outcomes

Empirically, based on the findings in the most recent round of the European Company Survey (ECS), researchers found associations between direct participation practices on the one hand and **establishment performance** and **workplace well-being** on the other hand (Eurofound & Cedefop, 2020). Regular meetings, high influence establishments perform better and have higher well-being than other types. Conversely, those establishments that use few tools for employee participation and have little direct influence on employees score worst in terms of performance and well-being. This suggestion of a win-win relationship between economic and social effects is in line with the findings of the earlier waves of ECS, where the more elaborate forms of direct (and indirect) participation go hand in hand with positive outcomes for both the organisation and the employees (Eurofound, 2015; Van Houten et al., 2016).

Important to state here is that in many (holistic) investigations it is not clear which key feature in employee participation is the success factor or barrier. It is safe to conclude that direct employee participation might have both social and economic positive effects, but this depends on the forms and other features of employee participation, as well as the kind of technological (and other organisational) innovations and in which phase of innovation workers are involved; and of course, it depends on the attitudes and intentions of managers, companies' strategies, and workers' characteristics. An important question is then: 'What are beneficial contexts and conditions for positive outcomes of direct participation?' At the workplace level, 'High Performance Work Systems/Practices' (HPWS/HPWP), educational level of workers, and trust relationships between management and workers, are often mentioned in the literature as being beneficial.

5.3 Employee participation and digital transformation

During the last decade, direct employee participation was often explored in the context of the digital transformation. For example, the paper of the Belgian researchers Vereycken, Ramioul and Hermans (2021) has undertaken a critical examination of employee participation within the context of Industry 4.0 through a systematic literature review. Fifty-eight studies were analysed, leading to the classification of literature into three main perspectives. The '**techno-optimist**' and '**socio-technical**' perspectives emerged as predominant in the reviewed literature. Both perspectives endorse a trend that portrays employee participation within a **unitarist** framework, emphasising the synergies between managerial efficiency and primarily individual participation, thereby fostering significant innovation potential. According to the authors, the third perspective, grounded in critical studies, anticipates increased standardisation and centralisation, along with the continued decline of collective and representative forms of participation. To gain a deeper understanding of employees' role in Industry 4.0, they propose a rigorous empirical investigation to reject both technological and social determinism and recognize the structural complexities and multifaceted nature of employee participation in technological transformations. A more academic and objective/neutral question is to consider how technologies afford and constrain motivators and inhibit employee voice and participation practices (Knoll et al., 2022) and with what effects. Together with the concept of 'organisational choice' and having options for decision-making, opposing the ideas of technological or economic determinism (Acemoglu et al., 2023; Bloom et al., 2019).

A recent paper from Austria, written by Blanka et al. (2022) explored the **interplay of digital transformation and employee competency**. While research often addresses technological and organisational aspects, the authors identified an existing gap regarding the role of human resources and employee capabilities. This paper attempted to fill this void by taking a human-centric approach to digitalisation, focusing on the overlap of digital and human transformation. Using design science research (DSR), the authors developed a framework to identify individual employee competencies crucial for an organisation's digital journey. Through iterative refinement following DSR principles and expert feedback, the framework highlights the dynamic interplay between individual and organizational levels. It emphasises employees' transformative competencies, such as entrepreneurial and digital skills, as drivers of digital transformation. The study reveals the dynamic nature of entrepreneurial competencies, which propel an organization's digital evolution. Thus, employee competency emerges as pivotal in facilitating organisational adaptation to digitalization.

Another recent paper is about a case study in the steel industry, where robots can play a role in improving health and safety conditions, but in the condition that workers are from the beginning involved in the design process, combining technological and social innovation (Colla et al., 2021). The article shows that these so called 'human-centred robotic workstations' are successful in reducing cumbersome operations and improving workers' health and safety conditions.

Another recent paper, published by German researchers (Ullrich et al., 2023), focused on the employee involvement and participation in the digital transformation through a combined analysis of literature and practitioners' expertise. This paper systematically reviews existing literature on employee participation objectives and intervention methods in organisational change, assessing their alignment with participation goals and exploring determinants of employee involvement in digital transformation. Through a systematic literature review, the authors structure and correlate participation objectives and methods, further refining these insights through a workshop involving digital transformation experts. Findings indicate that the effectiveness of employee participation hinges on **context-specific measures**, implementation quality, and adoption of suggestions by employees, necessitating sufficient information and time for participation in transformation processes. This paper's transformative approach integrates theoretical analysis with practical insights from practitioners, linking intervention methods to organizational change objectives while drawing on empirical and experiential perspectives to identify key determinants in digital transformation.

Another systematic literature review exploring the conditions for employee participation in digital transformation was prepared by Norwegian researchers, Mehmood & Farshchian (2023). According to them, while employees are recognised as key players in successful digital transformation endeavours, the existing digital transformation literature frequently overlooks their significance. To shed light on how employees can be meaningfully engaged in digital transformation initiatives, a systematic literature review was undertaken. This review unearthed five critical conditions conducive to fostering employee participation in digital transformation efforts. These conditions encompass transparent and trustworthy strategizing, effective communication, and collaboration, incentivization of participation, provision of necessary knowledge and skills, and the delicate balancing of organizational structure and employee autonomy. The findings offer both theoretical insights and practical guidance for facilitating digital transformation through robust employee engagement.

In the context of the digital transformation, the research focus was also on specific aspects as shown by the paper on the significance of employee behaviours and soft management practices to avoid

digital waste during a digital transformation (Alieva & Powell, 2022). This study aims to explore the relationship between soft management practices, employee behaviours, and the implementation of digital technologies in manufacturing plants, and its connection to the emergence of digital waste. Employing a case-based research approach, data was gathered from two large manufacturing companies in Norway and Sweden through semi-structured interviews with two management representatives and four shop-floor employees. Analysis of 29 variables associated with lean and total quality management (TQM) behaviours and soft management practices in the context of digital transformation revealed several positive influences, including top and middle management involvement, employee education, corporate social responsibility focus, innovation, knowledge sharing, work-life balance, psychological capital, job satisfaction, and career commitment. However, digital transformation also negatively impacted on aspects such as lack of employee training, creativity, discretionary effort, turnover intention, and lack of pro-activity. Furthermore, the study found that certain soft management practices and employee behaviours not only responded to manufacturing digitalization but also influenced the transformation process itself. Additionally, the potential for digital waste creation was observed in variables like reward and recognition and employee training. The practical implications of these findings lie in informing managers, practitioners, and academics about the significance of specific managerial practices and employee behavioural needs during digital transformation, aiding in prioritising TQM and soft lean management practices, and creating awareness regarding digital waste. This study contributes to existing literature by providing insights from a lean and TQM perspective and offering guidance on prioritizing practices and behaviours during digital transformation while underscoring the importance of addressing digital waste.

There is a reciprocal relationship between direct employee participation on the one hand and technological challenges on the other hand. Wilkinson et al. (2021) argue that social, economic, and technological developments disrupt existing work patterns. They propose a functional conceptualisation of voice, recognizing the transactional relationship between changes in work circumstances and the evolution of voice mechanisms. One can think of the direct effect on employees' communication with each other, with their supervisors/management, and with their representatives. Digital communication channels do change the way we communicate at work and in companies and might also extend the spectrum of voice opportunities (Kerr & Waddington, 2014; Knoll et al., 2022). The same can be said about mutual communications between workers and their representatives in trade unions and works councils with broader spectrum of people, including social media (Schoemann, 2018). Importantly, digital developments relate to new organisational and job designs that can enhance workers' autonomy in making decisions in their tasks. In addition, Zirar (2023) makes the point that the limitations of artificial intelligence (AI) can drive innovative workers' behaviour, e.g., by responses on robot's mistakes and 'fear' among workers. Nevertheless, technological changes can also go in the opposite direction of less autonomy, less innovative behaviour in case of more standardisation of tasks, direct control, and isolated workplaces. Another important effect is that technological challenges stimulate the need for workers voice and participation in decisions on technological investments and in its effects on restructuring, job loss, emergence of new jobs, new professions, and new skills. Zirar et al. (2023) point to AI's requirements on constant re- and upskilling technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills in workers' coexistence with AI at the workplace. Technological challenges relate to the 'promotional function' of employee participation to improve productivity, but also to its 'remedial function' in case of employees' risks and fears to lose jobs and digital surveillance of workers, etc. Workers' consultation could ease transitions for employees as well as employers through improving the

usability of the technology, mitigating risks and promote greater engagement and acceptance by allowing workers to provide input into the development and adoption process (OECD, 2023, 74).

In the most recent European Company Survey, the levels of digitalisation and innovation in establishments are positively associated with the presence of a broad set of direct participation tools – even if used irregularly – and with employees having greater influence on decision-making (Eurofound & Cedefop, 2020: 109). The same conclusion can be reached in recent OECD-research (2023). Consultation with workers or worker representatives about AI appeared to be associated with more positive outcomes of AI in terms of company performance and working conditions, according to both workers and employers (OECD, 2023). A Canadian study shows that managerial actions to enhance employee voice – in both promotional and prohibitive forms – can add value by supporting organizational innovation (Shin et al., 2022).

Although it can be argued that technical opportunities and stakeholders' needs regarding employee participation have increased though technological innovations at the workplace, a positive relationship between technological innovations and employee participation is not self-evident. On the side of workers' representatives: not all social partners do have sufficient technology (AI-) related expertise and resources to acquire knowledge (OECD, 2023b), and not all companies do consult trade unions or works councils regarding the use of new technologies. Interestingly, case studies in industrial companies show that works councils can rely on important resources in the bargaining of digitalisation processes in the German context (Rego, 2022). Nevertheless, also the longer established councils enter a 'zone of uncertainty' in shaping a topic like digitalisation and managements' (non-)willingness to integrate the works council in decision-making (Rego, 2022). Interestingly, this study shows the importance of the involvement of employees in the works councils' work to gather expert IT knowledge and to explore workers' interests related to digitalisation in the company. These 'internal networks' can be complemented with external networks like trade unions and politics for works councils to position themselves strategically within the digitalization process (Rego, 2022, 1930).

Recent OECD research (2023) in sectors of manufacturing and finance found more consultation practices about AI in the UK, Ireland, and Germany and (far) less in France, the US, Canada, and Austria. Large sized employers and firms with workers representation were more likely to hold direct worker consultation. In both sectors, the most discussed topic in consultation was '**skills and training**'. In manufacturing, 'impact on working condition' was also an important topic. In finance, 'the use of data' was the second most discussed topic (OECD, 2023, 81). 60 to 65 percent of the employers said that consultations resulted in a concrete outcome, such as the formulation of guidelines, a written AI-strategy or a collective agreement (OECD, 2023, 82).

Besides the many conceptual literatures on the (possible) implications of the digital transformation, including AI, in organisations and the importance of workers voice in AI introduction and application (Kochan, 2024; Pot, 2024), it is remarkable that in-depth empirical investigations in the functioning and outcomes of (specific forms of) direct employee participation practices in tackling these technological challenges are still scarce. Empirical studies on the role and strategies of trade unions in the context of Industry 4.0 are also limited, although with some exceptions in German studies (Bosch & Schmitz-Kiessler, 2020; Haipeter, 2020), and Italian studies (Armaroli, 2022; Cirillo et al., 2023). Cirillo et al. (2023) discuss Industry 4.0 as a significant opportunity for trade unions to reposition themselves in industrial relations. Decentralized collective bargaining and agreements regulating aspects of employment contracts are proposed strategies. However, challenges posed by Industry 4.0 necessitate conciliatory and collaborative practices, as seen in the "Work2020" project.

5.4 Employee participation and environmental challenges

Besides digital developments, the urgency of organisations' **environmental** challenges make social dialogue at all levels more multi-dimensional, more complex, and broader in scope. Despite the increased policy and academic interest to the challenges of the 'just transition' and the need to boost sustainable development, rare publications have addressed employee participation in this context (Temel et al., 2022). For authors, such as Temel et al. (2022), employee participation could be a strong lever to achieve organisational sustainability. Organisations have increasingly incorporated sustainability considerations into their operations. However, there remains limited research on the factors influencing employee participation in achieving organisational sustainability. This study aims to explore the significance of EP factors and their interconnectedness. A survey was conducted to assess the importance and relationships of EP factors for sustainability, gathering 305 comprehensive responses. Analysis techniques including Friedman tests, Kruskal-Wallis tests, correlation analysis, and centrality measures were employed. The findings underscore the importance of all factors for organisational sustainability, albeit with varying degrees of significance. Correlation and centrality analyses reveal interconnections among all factors. This article contributes insights by ranking EP factors within organisations, examining their interrelations and centrality, and comparing these metrics. By emphasising the human dimension through EP factors, this research enhances understanding of organisational sustainability. Recognising and integrating EP factors are imperative for effectively implementing sustainability initiatives within organisations, as no organisation can achieve sustainability without engaging its employees.

6. Role of industrial relations

The landscape of industrial relations has undergone **significant transformations** in recent times, influenced by dynamic factors ranging from globalisation to technological advancements. Industrial relations undoubtedly involve the **intricate interactions** among employers, workers, the state, and relevant institutions within a working environment. They play a crucial role in shaping workplace dynamics, addressing conflicts, and establishing frameworks for fair and productive employment relationships.

When examining direct employee participation, the question arises of how it evolves and materialises **alongside representative participation**, which operates within a defined institutional framework. This interconnectedness within existing institutional structures prompts inquiries into understanding the potential impacts of prevailing institutional power resources on the implementation of direct employee participation. This exploration necessitates considering various factors, including the diverse institutional frameworks among countries, closely intertwined with the traditions and history of industrial relations. Moreover, the multi-level interaction of influence involves diverse entities such as associations, community organizations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, management consultancies, and various state regulatory bodies, collectively shaping the arenas for equitable expression (Marchington & Dundon, 2017).

Additionally, several factors come to the forefront, rooted in societal cultures, legislation, traditional norms, and the socio-economic context in which employees and organisations function (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Within the scope of this project, we particularly focus on understanding the impacts associated with the presence, participation, actions, and influences of trade unions and other industrial relations characteristics, examining their correlation with direct employee participation.

Beyond this workplace level, there is also the influence of employers' associations, community organisations, NGOs, trade unions, management consultancies and various state regulatory bodies that affect the spaces for fair voice (Marchington & Dundon, 2017). Relevant contextual factors to be studied in this project are related especially to the presence, participation, actions and influences of trade unions and other industrial relations characteristics and how this is related to direct employee voice. Among academics, there is a long-standing discussion about the relationships between direct and indirect/representative participation. On the one hand, some authors assume a trade-off relationship. Management could use direct participation to sideline representative bodies, e.g., when employers want to break the power of the unions in collective bargaining or in other representative forms of participation (Bryson, 2004; Guest, 1987). Giving individual workers a direct voice is an alternative communication channel between management and workers other than via employees' representatives in more collective forms of dialogue. Management opposition to unions might also be perceived by workers as low trust from the employer to its personnel, that might be a barrier in direct voice practices (Holland et al., 2012). Trust in management is an important condition in the existence of direct voice arrangements (Holland et al., 2012).

On the other hand, other (survey) studies point to complementary and even synergetic relationships between the existence of both forms of employee participation (Eurofound & Cedefop, 2020: 122; Eurofound, 2015; OECD, 2023; Van Houten et al., 2016; Wood & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005). Direct employee voice may become a goal of trade unions, being the expression of employee self-determination and human dignity (Armaroli, 2022). Nevertheless, scenarios of interchangeable, independent, and synergetic relationships between trade unions and direct employee participation are all visible (De Spiegelaere & Guyes, 2015). Also, the European Company Surveys find some small group of establishments that combine high direct participation with low representative participation and even a less small group of combining low levels of direct participation and high levels of social dialogue. This is e.g., dependent on the power of trade unions and the degree of conflictual relationships with the employer. There is more chance of a win-win relationship between both forms of participation in cases of strong trade unions, combined with low conflict between unions and the employer (ibidem). Management opposition to unions might also be perceived by workers as low trust from the employer to its personnel, that might be a barrier in direct voice practices (Holland et al., 2012). Trust in management is an important condition in the existence of direct voice arrangements (Holland et al., 2012). Another study, in the same direction, shows that the presence of collective representation gives employees a higher sense of belonging to their organisational team and a higher perception of job security, which also leads to an increase in the level of participation in events and meetings (Matlay, 2002).

6.1 Institutional power resources for direct workers participation

The institutional framework plays a very powerful role in implementing and developing worker participation. One of the prevailing opinions in literature is that without a strong institutional framework, there would be no chance to have workers' voices heard. Or, in other words, the institutional framework enables **a greater influence** of workers in companies (Strauss, 1992) or the law itself designates workers as stakeholders (Gospel & Pendleton, 2005).

EU framework

For the EU, a prevailing characteristic is the codification of employee participation. On the EU level there are several legal acts which aim to give workers a voice. In the context of employee participation, the Directive 2002/14/EC establishes a comprehensive framework for informing and consulting workers in the European community, delineates a minimum standard for informing and consulting employees across all companies or subsidiaries in the EU, emphasising a framework for information and consultation at the EU level. The purpose of the Directive as set out in Article 1 is to «establish a general framework setting out minimum requirements for the right to information and consultation of employees in undertakings or establishments within the Community». In the two decades since the Directive's adoption, significant attention has been devoted to shaping the institutional framework, alongside other European directives like the European Works Councils Directive and the European Company Statute. This concerted effort aligns with the European Commission's rationale to safeguard workers' rights and promote their interests (Gold, 2010). Indeed, the discussions about the Directive primarily focused on **representative** employee participation, having developed different forms of information and consultation regulation practiced depending on national legal system or industrial relation traditions (Carley & Hall, 2008; Eurofound 2013; Hall & Purcell, 2011; Rainone, 2022). The impact of the Directive was notably contingent on whether countries already had established certain mechanisms of worker representation, such as unions at company level or works councils. Modest adjustments were made elsewhere, while substantial legislative reforms occurred in voluntarist contexts like the UK, Ireland, and new Member States.

On the other side, the establishment of a framework for direct employee participation based on the Directive **was largely excluded and limited** (Eurofound 2013), with this aspect predominantly left to individual companies to develop. Although the Directive itself allows for the use of direct participation to inform and consult employees, if they retain the unimpeded right to exercise these rights through their representatives (as stated in Article 16 of the Preamble). This approach was adopted by Ireland and the UK during the transposition process (Carley and Hall, 2008). While certain legislations, such as those in Lithuania, Estonia, and Slovenia, stipulate employers' obligations to directly inform and consult employees in the absence of dedicated information and consultation bodies, there is a lack of available evidence regarding the practical impact of these obligations (Eurofound, 2013). Though, in practice, comprehensive frameworks for direct participation **have not been widely developed based on the Directive**. A comparable outcome has been noted with the European Pillar of Social Rights, designed to strengthen workers' rights. However, despite the alignment of direct employee participation with the objective of promoting a high-quality working environment, it has not garnered significant discussion.

Employee participation is not only governed by various legal sources within the EU but is also subject to regulations by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Council of Europe. The overarching objective is to create conducive conditions for workers to exercise their fundamental rights, emphasising the facilitation of consultation and collaboration between employers and workers. Establishing practices and national legislation becomes imperative to enable contributions to determine and enhance working conditions, work organization, the work environment, health and safety protection, and similar aspects. But mostly, even here, both regulations and principles, as well as other guidelines, primarily emphasize representative employee participation, with direct participation receiving modest consideration overall, mostly through the concept of job and work quality (Caillaud et al., 2012).

Despite various changes in frameworks and institutional resources, the theoretical premise that direct participation is considered a **weak form** of participation, generally **voluntary,** and predominantly the result of management initiatives is still adhered to (Gold, 2005), including personnel management and leadership in a general sense. Direct participation in Europe is primarily linked to contemporary work structures, as highlighted by Valeyre et al. (2009), diverging significantly from representative workers' participation, which is more legislative in nature. Hence, the conclusion is that direct participation **has not systematically evolved in an institutional sense**; however, this does not imply that institutional power resources have no impact on it. On the contrary, as elucidated in the subsequent section of this report, we explore the impact of different models of industrial relations in the EU, considering their potential effects on direct employee participation, particularly regarding the roles and influences of trade unions and works councils.

National industrial relations systems

Although many directives regulating labor market relationships have been adopted at the EU level, national differences persist. The tradition and development of industrial relations in European countries are heavily influenced by individual cultures and histories, making it essential to consider these factors when studying direct participation in the context of employee participation regulation. The concept of participation is integrated into various institutional features, encompassing regulations that vary across countries and even sectors. (Alsos & Trygstad, 2023). As an illustration, certain nations possess distinct traditions related to employee participation, a legal assurance in more coordinated and regulated countries (Szabo et al., 2002).

As mentioned, some EU countries adhere to long-standing traditions, others have intensified their commitment to this framework, particularly following the adoption of European directives in the field. In a broader sense, legal systems can be classified into three main groups, as outlined by scholars such as Hall (1994) and Gold (1993):

- **Roman-Germanic System:** in this model, the state assumes a pivotal role in regulating industrial relations. Representative countries include Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovenia.
- **Anglo-Irish System:** this system features limited state involvement, with legislation being less extensive, leaving the negotiation of mutual relations to the involved parties. State intervention occurs primarily to safeguard national interests or protect vulnerable groups, earning it the label of a voluntaristic system. This approach is prevalent in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

- **Nordic System:** this model places a greater emphasis on collective agreements, where workers and employers freely engage at the national or sectoral level. These agreements serve as the foundation of the industrial relations system, with state intervention occurring when both parties deem it necessary. Countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Finland adopt this system.

With the enlargement of the EU, a fourth group emerged, represented by **Eastern European systems** that primarily rely on unions for employee participation. However, these systems are often fragmented and comparatively weaker than those in the West (see e.g., Meardi, 2007; Prouska et el., 2022); although there are significant differences within this group.

The national **diversity** and the level of development in worker participation continue to be evident. As highlighted in a recent report by Eurofound (2023a), the landscape of industrial democracy and industrial relations appears polarised, with specific Member States exhibiting either exceptionally high or extremely low performance. While differences in other dimensions are less apparent, the report underscores a fragmented and divided model of relations, highlighting winners and losers in the context. Yet, employee participation is dependent on institutional foundations, which underpin formal structures rather than based on volatile management concepts (Haipeter, 2020).

Although the purpose of this report is not to provide a detailed presentation of the institutional characteristics of each group or country, it is important to consider this in further analysis and discussion of direct employee participation. While the typology is primarily based on the regulation and tradition of representative employee participation, it would be inaccurate to assert that the unique features of the systems have no influence on the implementation of direct employee participation. Despite the lack of robust empirical studies supporting this claim and the inherent challenge of precisely conceptualizing the impact, it is reasonable to posit that the national and systemic characteristics of industrial relations indeed **play a role**. For example, the 2019 European Company Survey shows that the regular and high influence type of direct participation is most prevalent in Sweden and Denmark, least in Poland and Netherlands and similarly the irregular, moderate influence type in Poland and Croatia and least commonly in Sweden (Eurofound & Cedefop 2020). In line with this, it is also not surprising that in Central Eastern European countries, there is very limited research on direct employee participation from the industrial relations perspective. Primarily, the focus tends to be on representative forms (for example Franca & Pahor, 2014; Prouska et al., 2022; Soulsby et al. 2017).

The state, as a pivotal force primarily through regulation, plays a crucial role in shaping employee voice. From the regulatory space perspective, this role is seen as instrumental in understanding regulatory changes, serving as a mechanism for redistributing power among various actors. This perspective emphasizes a dynamic process that extends beyond the simple absence or removal of legal rules.

Inversi et al. (2017) contribute to this discussion by addressing the escalating complexity of the EU's regulatory role and the globalisation of labour. Their analysis reveals conflicting structural issues among different political and economic constituencies of Member States. In the UK and Ireland, a regulatory preference for soft law and 'light touch' regulation is identified, aiming to ease the regulatory burden on businesses while upholding a minimum standard of rights. The authors contend that the regulatory space is not a rigid and hierarchical structure but, rather, a dynamic and fluid entity shaped by relationships among actors, sources of influence, and institutional affiliations.

This complexity poses challenges in establishing a clear hierarchical structure to comprehend regulatory transformations in the realm of work and employment.

Furthermore, Dundon et al. (2014) contribute to the understanding of power dynamics in employment regulations through a multi-level analysis of information and consultation rights. Their findings underscore the significant influence of resource mobilisation capabilities of key actors, including large multinational corporations, employer associations, and state agencies. Despite these dynamics, the context of the current European landscape witnesses the contestation of national regulatory boundaries at the transnational level. Consequently, an actor-centered approach to regulation, delving into the roles, competencies, and accountability of regulatory players, is deemed valuable for comparative understanding. Comparative analyses of different space allocations within diverse institutional settings provide valuable insights into the field of regulatory studies.

7. Orientations/strategies of trade unions/works councils in contemporary work environments/Actors' Strategies and Practices

Among academics, there is a longer existing discussion about the relationships between direct and indirect/representative participation. Understanding the impact and interplay between direct and indirect/representative employee participation is essential for creating a collaborative work environment that fosters employee engagement, empowerment, and effective decision-making processes within EU establishments.

Trade unions

When examining the role of representative employee participation, it is essential to start by considering **trade unions** as the longest-standing tradition of workers' representation. Unions are present in all European countries, with variations in their role, power, and influence in regulating employment relationships. It is also worth emphasising that the function of trade unions, as well as other workers' representatives, has undergone transformation over the years. They have evolved beyond the sole purpose of securing fundamental rights to actively promoting empowerment, diversity, and inclusion, which aligns with broader societal shifts. The ability of unions to advocate for and implement direct employee participation relies on various institutional and organisational power resources. These include the recognition of trade unions, the extent of collective bargaining coverage, the industrial relations model determining workers' representation at the company or workplace level, and the organisational density of trade unions.

Expanding upon Lansbury's (2015) perspective, workplace unions serve as the **formal mechanism**, essentially providing a prerequisite for engaging in negotiations, presenting a union agenda, and conducting bargaining. However, lacking enforceable rights, these unions run the risk of becoming ineffective entities, echoing Streeck's (1997) notion of void institutions. The absence of guaranteed informal processes of collaboration, participation, and involvement poses a challenge, as there is no assurance that spaces for collective voices to thrive will naturally emerge.

Trade unions traditionally exert a big influence on the development of employee participation, especially concerning the issues of role and power, each form of employee participation is determined by legal regulations (Knudsen, 1995). The presence of workplace unions has an impact on both individual and organisational outcomes. Gallie and colleagues (20017b) suggest that workers' power, specifically through **trade union membership**, plays a key role in fostering new forms of work organisation with increased direct voice and a focus on the quality of working life. While Poutsma et al. (2003) found no significant impact of workplace unionisation on direct participation at the workplace level, unionisation might be a more reliable predictor at the national level. In any case, it is questionable whether the same results would be replicated more than twenty years after the completion of this study, especially considering all the regulations and other societal changes that have occurred.

On the one hand, direct employee participation practices are seen as union avoidance strategies. Also, employers' interest in direct participation has often been perceived as a threat to unions' authority (Carley & Hall, 2008; Regalia, 1996). Studies suggest that these practices are effective in prompting managerial responsiveness and gaining potential support from employees, even beyond what collective bargaining achieves; on the other hand, the interaction between direct and representative voice can be **synergistic** or **ineffective** in enhancing organisational performance, with positive results often associated with a combination of both forms of voice to achieve a balance between efficiency and equity outcomes, and varying outcomes influenced by different institutional settings (Armaroli, 2022). However, other authors point to complementary and even synergetic relationships between the existence of both forms of employee participation (Eurofound, 2015; Wood & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005; Van Houten et al., 2016). Direct employee voice may become **a goal of trade unions**, being the expression of employee self-determination and human dignity (Armaroli, 2022). Scenarios of interchangeable, independent, and synergetic relationships between trade unions and direct employee participation are all visible (compare De Spiegelaere & Guyes, 2015). Xx This is, for example, dependent on the power of trade unions and the degree of conflictual relationships with the employer. There is more chance of a win-win relationship between both forms of participation in cases of strong trade unions, combined with low conflict between unions and the employer (ibidem). Another positive relationship can be illustrated by giving collective rights in training and education, and its participation. For example, a recent Italian study has explored the impact of workplace unions on training. The findings of this study affirm a positive association between workplace training and union activity at the firm level (Berton et al., 2021).

As Armaroli (2022) summarises, the literature on the relationship with unions typically views new forms of employee voice either as a **substitute** for indirect employee voice organised by unions or as a **complementary** agent to workers' representatives, aiming to balance efficiency and equity at workplaces; unions' attitudes toward these challenges vary, from cooperative and pragmatic to apathetic and confrontational, often reflecting a 'cautious skepticism' about the potential impact on trade union density and power, but there is no evidence of trade unions attempting to challenge the management-led nature of direct employee voice practices.

Single channel

Countries where unions serve as the primary workers' representation fall under the **single-channel system**, as observed in the Nordic countries and Ireland. This is evident even without the existence of formal bodies like works councils or other forms of employee representation. In these countries

trade union representatives are active at workplace level, so theoretically it can be assumed that they have higher opportunities to influence direct employee voice, compared to the dual channels models where works councilors are representatives at workplace level.

In a Nordic context, empirical findings do however indicate that representative and direct participation **support** rather than compete with each other (Hagen & Trygstad, 2009). The Norwegian case serves as a robust example in the examination of workers' participation at the company level, mainly due to its emphasis on formal participation arenas, a cornerstone of the Norwegian tradition. However, it is crucial to recognise that within this tradition, informal participation also holds significant value. From the employer's standpoint, this type of participation can be remarkably effective. In a recent study by Alsos and Trygstad (2023), the widespread adoption of this dual approach - incorporating both formal and informal arrangements - has proven crucial for trade union representatives to access knowledge and opportunities for influence. One of their conclusions is that this amalgamation seems to stem from the convergence of these two perspectives within many companies, describing it as the essence of the Nordic model at the company level. The established frameworks contribute to routine and predictability, while the informal aspect fosters the development of social relationships between the involved parties. These elements are considered crucial in establishing a relationship of trust, as emphasized by various scholars (Coleman, 1990).

Although the UK is no longer part of the EU, it is worth highlighting a study on workers' participation at British multinationals, which revealed distinct roles for different participatory channels: direct participation for information sharing, representative committees for consultation, and trade union channels for negotiation (Wood & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005). The study emphasised that employee voice was weaker in cases where only direct participation channels were present, suggesting the need **to foster representative participation to enhance employee voice through direct participation**.

Dual channel

In countries where trade unions as well as work councils are active, in so-called dual channel systems of workers representation, there is a **legal division** of their tasks on negotiating terms and conditions of employment (trade union) and being informed and consulted about HR-policies and organisational issues (work councils).

Within this system, it is possible to distinguish countries where works councils at the company level play a **primary role**, such as in Austria, Luxembourg, Germany, and the Netherlands. On the other hand, there are countries where **unions play the main role**, such as Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain. It is somewhat more challenging to categorise other countries unambiguously, as unions are mostly dominant, but works councils may be present simultaneously or as an alternative. The rights vested in works councils vary across nations, and alongside potential variations, national regulations further dictate whether a works council can undertake union-like functions, such as concluding a collective agreement.

Even in the case of ongoing decentralisation in labour relations and collective bargaining from sectoral to the company level, the divide between trade unions and works councils is still there in dual channel systems (Rosenbohm & Tros, 2023). Erosion of sectoral bargaining does not mean at all that works councils will fill the gap: lower trade union presence is often going hand in hand with

lower works councils' presence (Tros, 2023). An important difference in the interactions with the employer/management is that trade unions focus on **distributive bargaining** about higher wage shares and are more independent actors because of the strike weapon; works councils focus on integrated consultations based on mutual interests with the employers/management. Works councils aim more to expand the 'cake' than to have a bigger slice of it. Works councils in, for instance, Germany, Slovenia, and the Netherlands have a legally double role to represent the employees, interests in the context of the company interests (Van den Bergh et al, 2011). Because direct employee participation is supposed to benefit both employers and workers by increasing workers' commitment to the business, works councils seem to be more than unions **the natural partner** for management to initiate and implement direct employee participation (Tros, 2022). On the other hand, if works councils are too close friends with (or dependent on) management, workers might have too little confidence/trust in using channels of direct employee voice.

Works councils offer a sophisticated mechanism for participating in decision-making, particularly as a crucial institution for non-union worker representation (Jirjahn, 2024). However, in many countries, especially where works councils have a shorter tradition, they are still perceived as **competition** to unions. Consequently, they often channel their power towards securing a stronger position rather than pursuing other benefits for the workers (Franca 2009). Therefore, they frequently fail to recognize the potential for support and the development of direct participation, as they do not consider it within their jurisdiction or tasks.In **Germany**, since the 1980s, works councils have acted as a key transmission mechanism of acceptance and adherence to the new production model, so much so that they have been labelled «crisis managers, agents of change and drivers of modernization» (Muller-Jentsch, 2008: 270). The German case is frequently cited as a prime example where works councils wield substantial authority, encompassing not only the right to receive information and engage in consultations but also possessing veto power over managerial initiatives. Additionally, in certain instances, they have the privilege of co-equal participation in shaping and executing policies. Anyhow, works councils had to find a way to **both promote** employee participation and maintain their role in the new emerging bottom level hierarchies as team leaders. As Godard (2004) explains, coordinated market economies with robust workplace representation rights might encourage managerial interest in teamwork, even though these rights could render some direct participation practices unnecessary. Empirical evidence indicates generally low levels of various forms of direct participation in Germany, and some studies propose that German works councils could obstruct the growth of teamwork (Gallie, 2017b). In German small firms, the establishment of works councils was hindered by positive managerial attitudes towards direct participation (Helfen & Schuessler, 2009). While work councils have been progressively subsumed into managerial interests, trade unions, and particularly IG Metall, struggled to balance the representation of universal workers' interests and the representation of managerial ones, particularly when it came to temporary workers. This dynamic exacerbated the core-periphery dualism inside firms (Holst, 2014).

Certain Central and Eastern European countries are included in this group, although the influence of works councils in these countries is generally not comparable to Germany. In Slovenia, where the German model has been practically copied, neither works councils nor trade unions actively promote and develop direct employee practices (Franca, 2009). Instead, these practices are mostly left to the management, predominantly observed in larger companies and multinational subsidiaries. Similar apply also to Croatia. In the case of **Poland**, an analysis conducted reveals a widespread use of forms of direct participation in companies, though its extent and distribution are

less intense. The primary motives for introducing such participation in enterprises were economic reasons, particularly productivity, with the main benefit being the improvement in the quality of products and services (Skorupinska, 2013).

The third group of countries is classified as a **mixed channels system**, where more complex systems of unionised and non-unionised workers' representation exist in the workplace, as seen in France and Italy. The effectiveness of unionised versus non-unionised representative bodies in supporting direct employee voice is a subject of questioning. Pohler and Luchak (2014) propose that non-union employee representation serves a more promotive function, involving pro-social voice behavior, while unions and unionised works councils have a more remedial function, dealing with grievance filing and whistle-blowing voice behavior (Holland et al., 2019, 12; Pohler & Luchak, 2015; Pohler et al., 2020). Armaroli (2022) based on an Italian case study in the metal sector concludes that direct employee voice **may become a trade union goal**, being the expression of employee self-determination and human dignity. Pursuing this goal translates into a multifaceted change for the trade union, regarding both its internal (organising) and external (partnership) dimension.

In practice, there is often the so-called 'accumulation of functions', where one person simultaneously holds the position of a union representative and is also a member of the works council or another representative body. From a legal and formal perspective, this is generally not contentious (except for France for instance), and it does not appear problematic in the development of direct participation. This is because, typically, it is **less colored by conflicting interests** compared to other issues addressed by workers' representatives, such as production relocation, where the union may have a different stance than the works council. Indeed, the work of both workers' representations is intertwined and interconnected. On the one hand, the works council recruits members for the union (thus providing them with an indirect entry into the company where they do not have an institutionalized position). On the other hand, the works council heavily relies on the information, advice, and training provided by the unions (Brewster et al., 2007; Kuhlman, 2004).

There are also possibilities for appointing **board-level workers' representation** as a form of employee representation. However, this goes beyond the scope of the analysis in this report, as these workers' representatives are typically tied to the corporate role of the company's governing body, of which they are members, and are less connected to operations at the workplace level, which is at the center of research on direct employee participation (for an overview see Waddington & Conchon, 2016).

Various factors, such as digitalisation, remote work, non-standard employment, gig economy trends, and emerging technologies like AI, may impact the expression of voice. Workers in non-standard employment and other forms of atypical work are usually underrepresented in unions. Therefore, special attention should be directed towards this area, focusing on how to empower these workers to have their voices heard. Additionally, Wilkinson et al. (2021) raise questions about the organising structure for voice in newer working regimes, such as the gig economy, emphasising the need for further research. Trade unions might want to promote and support forms of direct employee participation to promote employee's voice in these new organisations and new employment relations.

Considering international perspectives, voice research should account for societal and workplace cultural differences, along with variations in national legislation that affect voice opportunities (Knoll et al., 2022; Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Szabo et al., 2002). Traditional channels of voicing concerns may not be applicable, and factors like age, race, sexual orientation, work in stigmatised

roles, higher status, power dynamics, and the presence of migrant workers can also influence the expression of voice. The broader context of globalization and cultural differences, both at the societal and organizational levels, further shapes the dynamics of voice in industrial relations.

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