

# **Inside the meetings: The role of managerial attitudes in approaches to Information and Consultation for Employees.**

## **ABSTRACT**

Managerial attitudes are often seen as critical to sustainable employee participation practices, yet very little is known about how managers act within employee voice fora. We examine managements' decision to actively consult with employees, and by doing so contribute to industrial relations debates concerning the role of managerial prerogative and trust to better understand the attitudes of managers towards elected employee representatives. Using evidence from a two-year longitudinal study of non-union employee representation, we report on how managements' perception of risk about sharing information with employee representatives influences their decision as to how to consult with employees. The findings show managers can be unwilling to share information with employee representatives, which constrains the depth and scope of consultation. The role of management decision-makers, typically the I&C fora Chairperson is highlighted as champion for, or obstacle to, consultation. Lastly, the data illustrates that I&C is viewed by management as a lower strategic organisational priority, and how extending worker voice is constrained by the importance management place on maintaining their presumed prerogative of control. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** Employee voice, information and consultation, trust, managerial (control) prerogative, managerial attitudes, joint consultative committees, employee participation.

## INTRODUCTION

While there is extensive research on a range of direct and indirect employee voice mechanisms, there is very little analysis of the processes that influence specifically ‘managerial’ approaches to handling workplace Information and Consultation (I&C) (Butler, Lavelle, Gunnigle, & O’Sullivan, 2018). This is surprising given the longevity of academic literature on representative participation and employee voice (Gomez et al., 2019; Dundon, Dobbins, Cullinane, Hickland, & Donaghey, 2014; Marchington, 2015). Several studies have assessed the potential utility of I&C for employees (e.g. Gomez et al., 2019; Hall, Hutchinson, Purcell, Terry, & Parker, 2013; Holland, Pyman, Cooper, & Teicher, 2009; Kougiannou, Redman, & Dietz, 2015; Kougiannou, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2021; Koukiadaki, 2010). These studies have found that employees (and unions) can impact joint decision-making outcomes.

However, there is little explanation of how management representatives within I&C fora influence the employee voice processes. Managerial prerogative, defined as ‘a presumed right of managers to lay claim to decisions on issues they usually reserve for itself’, often viewed in relation to property rights (Storey, 1983, pp102, 106), has been recognised in industrial relations literatures (Flanders 1970; Storey, 1983; McKinlay and Zeitlin; 1989; Poole, Mansfield, Gould-Williams & Mendes, 2005) but receives scant attention within voice and trust research. In addressing this gap, our research tackles two questions that allow us to consider directly managerial attitudes towards employee representatives inside I&C fora, and how such perceptions intersect with the broader control function of the managerial prerogative: i) what factors may lead managers to adopt an approach to I&C with a more consultative rather than informative-only character; and ii), what are the underlying factors that either hinder or enhance management decisions to involve (or exclude) employee representatives in decision-making processes? Answers to these questions can provide a greater understanding of how managerial attitudes impact approaches to consult employees over decisions, specifically when

there exist regulations designed to enhance employee I&C. These issues can be particularly salient in non-union employee representative (NER) fora given such bodies tend to be employer-led, with limited joint decision-making in the workplace (Dobbins & Dundon, 2020), relative to unionised voice arrangements.

Drawing on managerial attitudes to I&C in two organisations, we contribute to the literature on representative voice in three ways. First, we address the need for a greater degree of empirical attention concerning managerially focused data (Butler et al., 2018), and for research that explores relationship dynamics and lived experiences to provide a better understanding of how tensions between different groups can be managed (Collings, Nyberg, Wright, & McMackin, 2021). Thus, we offer new insights about the application of the managerial prerogative and its interplay with trust, specifically in relation to managerial perceptions of the role of employee representatives within I&C fora. Second, we identify the assessment of risk involved in decision-making as a contributing factor behind management's approach to consultation, and their (un)willingness to give up control of I&C and share information with employee representatives. To this end we unpick what managers mean by consultation which shapes their attitude towards worker representatives. Third, we offer a nuanced understanding of the direct and indirect relationships between management and employee representatives, showing the important role of managerial prerogative and perceptions of trust in promoting or inhibiting employee I&C.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first discuss the literature on managerial attitudes towards worker voice and the role of trust within I&C fora. We then report the methodology employed and the research setting, before presenting our findings. Finally, the implications for theory and I&C practice are discussed.

## **MANAGERIAL ATTITUDES, PREROGATIVE AND TRUST TOWARDS WORKER VOICE**

Managerial attitudes are often seen as key to the existence of highly developed employee voice practices (Poole et al., 2005; Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018; Kougiannou et al., 2021; Timming, 2006, 2012). Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers & Goodman (1994) argue that attitudes and behaviours of all I&C participants are prominent determinants of the consultation process. Further, Broad (1994) highlighted that consultation requires a high degree of commitment from management for voice arrangements to be effective. The processes for worker voice may be even more salient in non-unionised firms, where a unilateral managerial prerogative to decision-making is more embedded (see Roy, 1980; Gall, 2004; Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2005; van den Broek & Dundon, 2012). It can be argued that management's choice over the type of voice arrangement inside representative structures for I&C is an important yet neglected field of inquiry.

A related phenomenon concerning management attitudes towards worker representative voice is the importance of trust-building between the parties (e.g. Schulz et al., 2021; Kougiannou et al., 2015; Kougiannou et al., 2021; Timming, 2009). However, underplayed in the trust literature is the influence of managerial prerogative (control) and managers' attitudes toward employee representatives. Trust is defined as 'a psychological state that comprises the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998: 395). With a focus on vulnerability, this definition highlights the relevance of trust in complex social contexts that are by their nature shaped by risk and power (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). As Svensson (2018: 275) argues, 'trust is a resource that makes it possible to frame risk and engage in interaction with the unknown'. Importantly, the context of I&C for employees can partially adjust the distribution of power and the control prerogative in the relationship,

through increased information flows, access to confidential and sensitive information, and potentially rendering decision-making processes alterable (Dietz & Fortin, 2007). Thus, this context entails increased vulnerability and risks for all parties.

In our discussion above, trust is a judgement that the trustor makes about the trustee, shaped in part by power resources and positional authority of one or more of the parties. In contrast, trustworthiness is defined as ‘the characteristics and actions of the trustee that will lead that person to be more or less trusted’ (Mayer et al., 1995: 717). That is, included in perceptions of trustworthiness are the characteristics of the trustee (in our case the employee representatives) that shape the trustor’s (i.e. management representatives) attitudes about the trustee (Druckman, Lewicki & Doyle, 2019). Mayer et al. (1995) defined three key characteristics that apply to managements’ judgements of trustworthiness. Adapting the definition to the I&C context yields: *ability* – the employee representatives’ skills and competencies that will enable them to perform competently within an I&C context, *benevolence* – the extent to which the employee representatives are believed to be concerned for management, and *integrity* – the employee representative’s honesty and commitment to certain principles acceptable by management.

For management, relaxing managerial prerogative and sharing a degree of control over decision-making requires a level of risk to be taken. Spreitzer and Mishra (1999, p.156) talk about management’s paradox of how to ‘give up control without losing control’– echoing Flanders’ (1970, p.172) remark that to ‘regain control managers must first learn how to share it’ or, at best, ‘making a show of appearing to share it’ (Ramsay, 1976, p.137). In our case, management assess the risk involved in deciding whether (and how) to share sensitive information with employee representatives, and the latter accept or tolerate managerial control as a function of their presumed prerogative to manage. Additionally, management may interpret risk as the cost side of a cost-benefits type calculation. That is, if management see the

role for I&C primarily in terms of how it adds business value and whether worker representatives are qualified in such matters - effectively ignoring their representative capacity - then even with low risk, management have little incentive to share information and concede control if they do not see likely benefits. Within this calculation of risk, if the anticipated value level is greater than that of the perceived risk, then management may be more willing to relax control and engage in more consultative forms of I&C; that is to say, accept risk-taking as a feature of the managerial prerogative concerning I&C. In this research, we assess management representatives' perception of employee representatives' trustworthiness, consequent willingness to accept vulnerability and assume risk by sharing sensitive information with employee representatives (i.e. engage in trusting actions), and the degree to which those perceptions influence or alter the managerial (control) prerogative towards more consultative I&C.

Dietz and Fortin (2007) emphasise that I&C bodies are characterised by highly complex exchange relationships, arguing that trust can be used to explain the participants' attitudes. Potentially, the concept of managerial prerogative can provide insights about different managerial attitudes and their interpretations of trust and trustworthiness towards various employee voice arrangements. Of further importance is the relationships dynamics among participants within the I&C fora and how such dynamics impact decisions to share information and collaborate towards joint decision-making (Kougiannou et al., 2021). We argue, therefore, that to gain a more insightful and holistic understanding of the relationship dynamics inside I&C fora, and how these may affect their operation, managerial perceptions of the I&C process, and of the employee representative roles in particular, need to also be investigated.

## **THE RESEARCH**

This research uses a longitudinal qualitative case-study approach, with the data reported in this article drawn from the I&C fora of two UK-based organisations over two years; a Housing

Association (HA) (the Employee Consultative Committee (ECC)) and a Multi-national Professional Services firm (PSF) (the National Information and Consultation Forum (NICF)). Our research is concerned with managerial attitudes to I&C when the latter are required to inform and consult employees. In the UK, such an obligation remains live and active because of transposed European Directives for employee I&C, as well as newer voluntary arrangements, such as those contained in the UK Corporate Governance Code (2018), promoted as government policy to enhance workforce engagement with employee directors on boards and other experts to advise management on employee voice options (see Rees & Bri ne, 2021). Careful selection was required to identify suitable organisations that had implemented and/or adapted I&C arrangements to meet such legislation for I&C. Both organisations do not recognise a union in their workplace and have in place specific NER committees, introduced initially in response to the European Directive for Employee I&C. For data triangulation purposes (Creswell & Miller, 2000) we used several qualitative data collection techniques. Table 1 presents details on these sources and how they were used in our data analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

NVivo was used as a tool to code the qualitative data. Open coding was initially used to identify concepts, moving from in-vivo, which is a simple descriptive phase, to second-order codes based on thematic analysis (Maanen, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Observation notes, I&C fora documentation and minutes of meetings were particularly important for informing interviewees' recollections of events. Interviews complemented observations, by giving a rich insight into how managers and employee representatives experienced the I&C fora and the meetings and what issues were discussed.

Data analysis followed an open-ended abductive approach, based on iterative stages of thematic coding of our qualitative data in NVivo (Version 12). Thematic analysis is a method that is used to systematically identify, synthesize, and organise data which offers insight into

patterns of themes consistent with the framing of managerial prerogative, control, voice, and trust across our given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To develop the themes for this project, an abductive approach was used. This approach enables the researcher to engage in a back-and-forth movement between theory and data in a bid to develop or modify existing theory (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). Abduction allows for a tight but evolving framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), where the researcher can move between theory and participants' accounts, each informing the other in order to answer the project's research questions (Cunliffe, 2011). For control and managerial prerogative, codes for 'willingness to delegate authority' and 'share decisions' were used to capture managerial prerogative (Storey, 1983). With regard to trust, three elements of trustworthiness (e.g. searching for responses and signals of *ability, benevolence, integrity*) were used from Mayer et al. (1995). An extra code, 'risk taking', was added to identify any such activities as this trusting action is an important outcome of the trust process with implications for I&C. Throughout the process, triangulation with other sources and comparisons of interviewees' accounts helped us refine and strengthen our interpretations.

## **FINDINGS**

We find that management are influenced by past experiences they might have had with employee representatives. Moreover, what they mean by trustworthiness is related to a larger extent with whether employee representatives have the skills and ability to add value to the organisation, and less so to a general sense of integrity, as indicated in the three-characteristics of trustworthiness described earlier (e.g. to give voice as a way to express employee concerns and views to management). When looking at management attitudes and approaches to I&C, the degree of risk that management is willing to take, in terms of sharing information and delegating control by involving employees in decisions (Whitener et al., 1998), is influential. Lastly, a key factor was the influence exercised by the I&C Chair, typically a senior manager appointed (not elected) to the role. Specifically, the Chair's approach to, and level of support



for the I&C forum, are influenced by their perceptions towards employee representatives not only with regard to specific individuals, but moreover in response to them as a coherent group capable of exercising a degree of competency-based trustworthiness when questioning management authority to make unilateral decisions. In terms of trust, additional factors that influenced management approach to consultation were the degree of ‘risk taking’ managers felt was acceptable within the I&C forum, along with the extent to which they were willing to share and delegate control (Whitener et al., 1998). The above summary of findings is broken down further and detailed in what follows.

### **The Structure and Purpose of NER fora**

The ECC, created in 2008, is the formal consultation mechanism between employees and management in HA. Specifically, it was formed to be ‘*a forum of partnership working and information sharing, through which matters affecting HA staff can be discussed and jointly resolved*’ (ECC Terms of Reference document). The remit of the committee included a) the development of HR practices and procedures, b) changes to organisational structures, roles or working practices where these relate to the majority of staff, c) consultation on pay and terms and conditions of employment, d) other changes, developments or matters of policy where these affect the majority of staff and e) health and safety (ECC Terms of Reference).

The NICF, created in 2005 and re-vamped in 2009, was designed to strengthen the I&C process between the company and its employees at a national and strategic level. PSF established the NICF

to improve the mutual understanding of the company’s business, its performance and the challenges and opportunities that face the business in the future, and to promote communication, co-operation and employee participation at all levels of the workforce, in the interests of both the company and its employees. (NICF constitution)

The NICF would a) give information about strategic decisions and issues of importance to staff, b) promote an exchange of views between management and staff about those issues, c) test ideas and approaches with staff and, d) give staff an opportunity to influence the implementation of decisions, which will impact on all company employees (NICF constitution).

These documents, prepared by the companies' respective Human Resources (HR) departments show evidence, at least on paper, of management support towards a consultative approach for ECC and the NICF. Both companies are managed by a Senior Management Team (SMT): the National Leadership Team (NLT) runs the UK&I division of PSF and the Executive Management Team (EMT) runs HA. The SMTs do not have direct interactions with the I&C fora, apart from the PSF Managing Director's briefing session at the beginning of each NICF meeting, and the I&C Chairs being also SMT members.

### **Inside the meetings: relationship dynamics and prerogatives**

The data presented in this section are from observation notes, interviews and meetings' minutes.

#### *NICF*

The NICF has day-long meetings, starting at 10am and finishing at 5pm that are attended by the employee representatives, the Chair, the IR Manager, her deputy, and a manager from the Legal Department. Apart from the regular participants, managers with specialised knowledge on each item in the agenda attend and give a presentation of the issue. Participants can ask questions and debate the issue during or after the presentation. The agenda, which is set by management, is sent to all participants a week before the meeting and the day of the meeting a booklet is distributed to all containing a copy of the constitution, code of conduct, previous meeting's minutes and the list of the agenda items and presentation material. Additionally,

employee representatives have the chance to have an hour-long pre-meeting among themselves from 9am till 10am. This gives them the opportunity to discuss the agenda items and decide on their approach. An employee representative on a rotating basis chairs the pre-meetings. Table 2 below presents the agenda items for all observed meetings.

Insert Table 2 about here

According to the forum's constitution, the NICF can provide comments on the plans or proposals submitted to it by the company at a forum meeting and may request a meeting with company management representatives to discuss these. The decision as to whether to carry out a particular course of action rests solely with the company. Equally, the level of consultation provided was up to management control and most agenda items were in fact 'information-only' on decisions already made. There was consultation about redundancy (a legal obligation) and paternity leave, but there was no consultation about the desk-booking scheme, moving out of offices, performance management and the discretionary holiday. It seems management 'pick' items for consultation based on risk and discomfort sensitivities: first, items may be less consultative when considered to be commercially sensitive or controversial (e.g. pay determination, cost-cutting, redundancy), and secondly, management may regard a risk in terms of employees questioning their managerial prerogative and thus their authority (e.g. discretionary day, performance management criteria). These had a consequential effect on the impressions of employee representatives, who felt the company had no real desire to engage employees through the NICF in a more consultative way.

The 'performance management' item and management's response to employee representatives created friction in all meetings. For example, in 'Observed Meeting 1' (Table 2) one of the employee representatives (ER9), referring to the 'Performance Management' item, mentioned that so far consultation was happening '*post decision-making*' with a view on how to implement the decisions. However, he continued, it is the employee representatives'

wish to *'take it to the next level and consult before decisions are made'*. This debate started when employee representatives were asked for their opinions regarding performance management. Employee representatives challenged the process, saying that it is not clear to the workforce how certain aspects of it worked, and asked for more involvement in the future when introducing changes to the scheme. This involvement never came.

Lack of genuine consultation was an important recurring theme for employee representatives during their pre-meetings as well. A very animated conversation about consultation took place between the employee representatives at their pre-meeting for 'Observed meeting 2'. One of the employee representatives (ER3) inquired about the value the forum is adding and the level of consultation. In response ER9 commented that *'leadership are not comfortable with us yet'*, while ER11 questioned *'are we a communication forum or a consultation forum?'*, and others added that management do not actively support option-based consultation<sup>1</sup>, suggesting they *'are not made aware of the options'* before decision-making (ER1).

Furthermore, the data shows multiple interpretations associated with the 'value' of consultation. For example, ER9 added that employee representatives *'can only add more value the earlier they [e.g. management] come to us'*, and ER12 suggested that management *'should focus on things where we can add value'*, but commenting that adding value meant different things to different actors. Employee representatives considered value to mean expressing concerns and ideally influencing decisions on issues where staff had strong views, whereas for managers, it meant adding to the bottom line. The employee representatives believe that a contributing factor is the secretive culture of the company that significantly effects the NICF, with ER11 saying that *'things are being planned, but we don't find out about them. It is about*

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<sup>1</sup> Option-based consultation was presented to employee representatives during their I&C training, before starting their role.

*respect*'. Employee representatives concluded by saying there have been several issues that they were informed about at the last minute, rather than their views sought and considered at the forum.

In the meeting that followed, when the Chair asked the representatives how they felt *'about things, life, PSF, the economy'* and if they were happy with how things in the forum were going, ER12 replied saying that *'we feel we're going back to the communication forum rather than consultation: we should be involved earlier'*. Other employee representatives felt that they were not always being treated as a recognised consultative body, pointing out that they had not been consulted over key issues such as the performance management and the removal of the discretionary day. They also suggested that one way to be involved earlier in the decision-making process is to make the relevant team responsible for the decision, and that the NICF *'should be involved and feed in the process'*. The Chair responded defensively, saying that the company is sharing highly confidential information with the NICF – referring to the 'Business Update' standing item – and suggested that the reward options in the future be discussed as a consultation topic. However, by the time of the next meeting, changes were already implemented without the NICF's involvement and the item was once again 'information only' as management re-asserted prerogative. By then, employee representatives seemed demoralised and their contribution to this discussion was limited to giving feedback on how the changes were communicated to the workforce.

### *ECC*

A similar structure consists for the ECC. The meetings are shorter, usually two-hours long, and are attended by the employee representatives, the Chair, his Personal Assistant who is responsible for taking the minutes, the HR Manager and the Operations Manager. Here too managers with specialised knowledge on specific agenda items attend and give a presentation of the issue. The agenda material, which is solely set by management, is sent to all participants

a week before the meeting except for ‘ad-hoc’ meetings when the material is given as soon as it is available, often the afternoon before the meeting or at the meeting. HA does not offer the opportunity for a pre-meeting to employee representatives. Table 3 below presents the agenda items during fieldwork.

Insert Table 3 about here

Similar to the NICF, most agenda items were ‘information-only’ on decisions already made (based on observation data). Items for consultation with a more strategic nature were the ECC’s Terms of Reference, a discussion on the ECC’s role within the company (Observed Meeting 1), changes to disciplinary and flexi-time policies and part-day sickness absence (Observed Meeting 5). Management’s ‘cherry-picking’ of items for consultation is observed here too, with important issues such as annual pay and restructuring excluded from the forum agenda. As with the NICF, this gave the impression to employee representatives that the company had no real desire to try and make the ECC work as a consultative body. There were occasions that employees tried to add an item to the agenda, only to be rejected by the ECC Chair. For example, when ER21 asked to include an item regarding the company’s intranet and wrote a report summarising the problems, the Chair decided the issue was inappropriate for the forum and refused to have any further discussion. The response by the Chair had a negative impact on how employee representatives perceived the role of the trustor in this context (e.g. the Chair of the ECC):

‘I don’t think he actually wants to know what the employees have to say. I really don’t. I think it is his opinion that counts, he will tell you what he wants to tell you and the employees are just there to listen’. (ER21)

During interviews, the HR manager commented on the lack of clarity around issues that can be brought to the ECC, which further impacted trust among employee representatives:

‘Well how do we do things if we’ve brought it to the ECC several times and nothing has moved forward?...the Chair was obviously bringing the message from EMT, which was “this is not the way that we do things”...but how do we do things then? So, I think we’re in this kind of grey area at the moment, where there is this reticence to put things forward that could be a bit controversial because it’s clear to us that we don’t do it in that way.’

Observed interactions during ‘Meeting 1’ illustrate how the role of the Chair can be important in shaping attitudes toward consultation. Management representatives were sitting on one side of a large square-shaped table, whispering to each other. Employee representatives were on the opposite side of the table, sitting silently and waiting for the Chair to start the meeting. As soon as everyone was in the room, the Chair (MR5) commenced the meeting, starting immediately with the items on the agenda. There was a small presentation of each agenda item, then the Chair would ask if there were any questions or comments. Most of the time there were none. An exception that did stir some debate was about the role of the ECC (Table 3 – Observed meeting 1). MR5 asked the representatives the following questions: *‘do you think it is lip service? Is it meaningful? Are we actually addressing issues or is it just informational?’*. ER21 expressed a concern that they could not influence issues and MR7 commented that it is not clear if the ECC is intended to be just informational or something more and proceeded to explain that issues before the ECC are presented after management have made a decision. MR5 responded by suggesting the views of the ECC were taken into consideration before a final decision was made, at least with regard to the latest pay rise issue. MR5 further added that *‘nevertheless, there needs to be more clarity on whether it is information or not’*. ER17 pointed out that one example is not enough and that *‘more issues need to come to us beforehand’*, while ER20 requested more time for discussion over agenda items, with MR5 arguing *‘we need to clarify that it is OK to raise issues, it is OK to debate. And we need to be clear about the role of the reps and the ECC’*. However, during the following

year no action was taken to address these and other issues that had been raised, with fewer items brought to the committee. As a result, meetings were being cancelled because of lack of agenda items, and there was no consultation about major decisions that were made by the company (e.g. pay reviews, restructuring). In short without management being prepared to relinquish control the consultation process was hollow.

### **Managerial prerogative: a narrowing of information-sharing**

During interviews, several of the above issues were brought up, and in response management representatives suggested that a key concern was being able to trust employee representatives, mostly in terms of confidentiality and their business-focused competencies.

I'd trust them to stick to their role and the elements of the role about not disclosing things, which are confidential. I've got to assume they can do that otherwise the meeting is dead. Then I think another level of trust is actually, could you trust someone to do something? They say they're going to do something, but will they actually get it done? (MR2)

A decision to consult with employee representatives entails a willingness to share corporate information – and to an extent some control, which is a mandated condition of the regulations which motivated the creation of these I&C fora. The extent of risk-taking can fall disproportionately on different managers: those who are management representatives attending the forum may have narrow risk specific to their department or function, whereas SMTs and I&C Chairs can be unwilling to share higher order or corporate strategic plans with shop-floor employees, all of which can affect trust relations in the fora. For example, the NICF's Chair, interpreting employee representatives' roles from a calculative business value perspective, expresses doubt about the employees' ability (i.e. trustworthiness characteristic) to contribute to business decisions:



What am I going to hear from them that I don't already have a strong sense of? There're few examples I can think of where talking to the forum about a change, are they really going to surprise me?

This attitude is also reflected in the NICF Chair's comments about the approach the NLT adopts with regard to the forum:

I suspect if I was to go and talk to our UK&I leadership team about NICF I'd probably get quite a wide range of views and probably no one would say 'I would automatically choose to go and talk to that group and consult with them on anything which could potentially impact a number of our employees'.

The PSF IR manager elaborated further about NLT's risk-taking approach when it comes to consulting with NICF representatives. Interpreting the pay freeze decision as an issue that could provoke confrontation, the NLT were unwilling to relax managerial prerogative and accept the vulnerability that a confrontational situation might create, and share control (Rousseau et al, 1998; Whitener et al., 1998), thus engaging in a trusting action:

They're really a bit schizophrenic about it sometimes when it steps on their secrecy toes and their right to do what they think management can do, then they get a little anxious and grumpy. The latest was in early August when I was insisting that some issues around the pay freeze needed to go to the forum and I was told in an email from the HR director, of all people, that the pay freeze wasn't controversial, and no confrontation is necessary. (MR4)

The above responses could be interpreted as a managerially constructed blame narrative around a lack of trustworthiness as an excuse for their own unwillingness to relax their managerial prerogative.

### **Managerial perspectives: reluctance, (mis)trust and inability to voice opinions**

During the interviews, all management representatives from the ECC and two from the NICF, continuing the lack of employee trustworthiness blame narrative, identified reluctance and

hesitation from employee representatives to speak their minds about challenging issues. Management members of I&C fora tended to evaluate employee representatives not so much as agents representing employee interests that may diverge from those of management, but on whether employee representatives were organisational team players committed to corporate goals. For example, MR6 felt that the reason why some employee representatives were reluctant to speak-up was due to individual apathy, or that some employee representatives were unwilling to fully support and participate in how management viewed the I&C forum. This is interpreted, by management, as lack of caring about the organisation (i.e. benevolence as a trustworthiness characteristic): *'We've got some employee reps that I don't think ever wanted to be on the team'* (MR6).

Significantly, management representatives on the I&C fora did not see that information and consultation can be a power-centric dynamic between employer and employees. In the case of the ECC specifically, all management representatives, with the exception of the HR manager, articulated a narrative that sought to undermine employee representatives' presumed skill and competency (e.g. these being the skills deemed important by managers themselves). It is thus arguable that narratives of skill, as expressed by some leading management representatives, are used to justify their limited trust in employee representatives and reinforce the broader power-centric functions of a managerial prerogative that acts as a counterbalance to employees' incompetency. For example, MR6 commented: *'They don't have the right skills to represent their groups'*. The ECC Chair also remarked: *'I'm not sure they have enough experience to maybe question some of the wider impact decisions'*. MR5 did note that employee representatives might not speak their minds due to fear or backlash from management:

I think there's also an issue that they could be singled out by management as being troublemakers and so there's an element of fear in terms of actually saying something.

MR7 believes this to be due to past incidents where employee representatives did speak out and challenged issues and management's behaviour became defensive of their past actions:

I think there's still some history that's still being brought forward where there have been occasions where people have spoken out and it hasn't been received well and I think that's made some members who would normally speak out, made them reluctant.

Thus, at times a maintaining managerial prerogative and control explained behaviours towards employee representatives, as much as trust theory. For example, respondents explained that workforce representatives would '*stick their heads out*', only if they trusted that management would not '*shoot it off*' (ER20). A vicious circle is created in this way, especially within the ECC. On one hand, management say they do not trust, and do not see any value in consulting with employee representatives because of their seemingly apathetic behaviour (benevolence) and/or lack of necessary skills (ability) to contribute to the business. On the other hand, employee representatives are not willing to be more active and challenge management for fear of risking their jobs or careers because, ultimately, management exercise greater control over them.

### **Consultation – unwillingness to relax managerial prerogative**

The SMTs' sustained reluctance to properly consult with their I&C fora, evidenced by observable lack of consultation agenda items at I&C meetings (Table 2 and Table 3 above), is indicative of an unwillingness to accept vulnerability, relinquish some control, and thus engage in trusting actions (Rousseau et al, 1998; Whitener et al., 1998). One can observe that most items that came to the meetings for consultation are housekeeping rather than strategic issues, in direct contradiction to the ECC Terms of Reference and NICF constitution.

The apparent lack of consultation in both fora appeared to have a reciprocal impact on employees' trust in management. The employee representatives commented: *'They don't want us to have any input...We're not there to influence decisions'* (ER21).

The extent to which managers relax managerial prerogative and include employees in decision-making can influence the development of trust, from one based on calculative decisions, to one that is built on a reciprocal relationship. The lack of consultation that is observed in the ECC and NICF has a negative impact on employee representatives' trust in management. The IR and HR managers explained that the I&C fora do not add value because of lack of consultation per se, but rather because of diminished trust. For example, in the ECC, according to both MR6 and MR7, a lack of consultation is mainly because of EMT's concerns that highly confidential information will be leaked - a sign of mistrust: *'If management had trust in the ECC they wouldn't have left it till the last minute to announce the restructure'* (MR6). Likewise, the HR manager (MR7) admitted the difficulty of convincing EMT to consult before a decision is made, indicating how unwilling they are to take a risk and share control (Whitener et al., 1998):

I think it would be a challenge to get them to agree to that level of consultation. To get them to accept ECC in that role, in that way, I think that would be a challenge.

In sum, insistence on maintaining managerial prerogatives create barriers to consultation and consequently to the development of reciprocal trust within I&C. The lack of consultation is an outcome of managerial attitudes viewing decision-making prerogatives as the remit of the SMTs and creating a blame narrative around lack of trust to justify them. Specifically, concerns that highly confidential information might be leaked were an expression of perceived low integrity, despite no evidence or examples of such actions by employees to support this claim (at least during fieldwork). The SMTs saw little value in consultation and their actions made this self-fulfilling.

## Championing I&C? The role of the Chair

A further finding is the important role of the Chairperson's attitudes towards the I&C fora. Since the Chair is also a member of the SMT, the incumbent can either 'champion' the forum, be neutral to the process of I&C, or a negative messenger to the SMT and even a saboteur. The Chairs' approach appeared to be influenced by their perceptions of employee representatives' *trustworthiness*, defined less in terms of perceived risk and more in relation to a perception of limited benefits such as adding value to the business. Thus, if management see I&C primarily in terms of business value, and perceive the representatives as less qualified to add business value, then even with low risk, management have little incentive to engage in I&C, as they do not perceive likely benefits from the intended representative function of voice systems.

For the NICF there was a change in the Chairperson within the first two months of operation. During fieldwork the first Chair (C1) was already gone, and the observed meetings were chaired by C1's replacement (MR2). Both Chairs were also members of the NLT. From the interviews, employee representatives expressed concern about C1 and mixed feelings about MR2. Seven out of 13 employee representatives referred to complaints about C1's 'abrupt' behaviour: that he '*did not show much interest in the forum*' and concerns about him '*not being supportive of NICF from the beginning*'. MR2 identified clarity of role as the major problem of the forum, but, at the same time, in both rounds of interviews, he expressed doubts about the employee representatives' ability to '*add value to the business*', without appreciating that employee members of the forum are there to represent a workforce constituency:

There is a slightly weird dynamic where on the one hand they scream to be consulted on, and I give them half an opportunity and actually they're just not involved. If it was me, and I was trying very hard to build credibility and momentum, I'd seize any opportunity and then hopefully demonstrate why it's such a great thing to do, build positive presence at involving the forum. When you look at the meeting actions it's all one way, it's never the employee

representatives going back to the people they represent and ask them for their opinion on X. 90% plus of the actions tend to go to the IR manager, HR or me, it's very rarely the employee representatives that get them (MR2).

Additionally, during fieldwork there were awkward interactions between MR2 and several employee representatives surrounding a revised desk-booking policy, with misunderstandings between the parties about what employee representatives should share with their constituents. For MR2, this event of seemingly leaked information created a low trust disposition, impacting negatively on his perceptions of the employee representatives' integrity, and making him quite cautious towards the forum:

I'm now going to be more cautious because, even something as simple as that, they kind of failed at the first hurdle to keep my trust.

Another indication of MR2's low trust towards the employee representatives is the fact that he does not believe the views that they express in the meetings are the views of their constituents, and not exclusively their own. This implies MR2's low trust in their motives, general integrity and ability:

So there is a part of me that thinks, actually, are these really, they are elected reps, but how much do they really represent the people, and how much are they expressing their own view?

From the employee representatives' side, their first impressions of MR2 were positive in most of them (n=12), especially in terms of integrity and benevolence:

I'm hearing all the right things from him in terms of him wanting to make sure that we as a forum are visible and being valuable but also being seen valuable. (ER1)

Additionally, half of the employee representatives referred to the open and honest behaviour of MR2. However, after MR2 announced to the UK workforce the scrapping of a discretionary holiday, without prior consultation or even communication with the NICF (see Table 2, observed meetings 2, 3, and 4), a shift in the employee representatives' beliefs was observable,

highlighting the volatile and highly reciprocal nature of trust. Employees' main concern in the interviews was that they were not consulted before the decision was made, that MR2 '*went behind their back and completely disregarded the forum*' (ER2), and their involvement was confined to providing feedback on the possible reaction of the workforce to the decisions, and how to better communicate these decisions to the workforce. They had turned into a 'sounding board' for management. From that point onwards, all employee representatives reported low levels of trust in management. The vicious circle of (mis)trust had started.

## **DISCUSSION**

Investigating the potential factors behind managers' attitudes towards employee representatives within I&C fora has received scant attention in the extant industrial relations literature. Similarly, literature on trust, especially from an organisational behaviour perspective, tends to neglect underlying managerial prerogatives of power and unilateral control dynamics. These shortcomings are problematic to our overall understanding of representative voice and factors that influence the sustainability of such mechanisms, especially when there are regulations that require corporations to promote effective I&C arrangements. This article investigated management's approach towards I&C arrangements and their attitudes towards employee representatives inside two non-union employee voice fora, set-up (or adapted) because of legal rules for better employee I&C.

The findings offer new insights to knowledge, theory and practice. First, the theorisation of risk-taking decisions about sharing information and consulting with employee representatives cannot be dislocated from managements' position of control. The finding that some managerial representatives appeared to be cautious about sharing certain information with employee representatives can suggest that attitudes toward risk shape I&C outcomes, more so than trust itself. For example, a prevailing managerial prerogative meant there was an underlying power dynamic of control, which at times management would substitute as trust or risk appropriation.

The result had the effect of diminishing or weakening the role of employee voices inside the I&C fora as confirmation of managerial prerogative. Consequently, SMTs were likely to decide against, or for, consulting on an issue and a lot depended on managerial views about the role of employee representatives, the nature of the I&C process itself, and the presumed risks of sharing information. It was apparent from our data that what management mean by trustworthiness of representatives was not always confidentiality per se, nor the managerial allegation that employee representatives had a skills and/or competency deficient. There was at times a narrative of trust to buttress a managerial prerogative of control over the sharing of organisational and business decision-making, which had little focus on workforce interests.

The evidence speaks to a unitary approach to NER and I&C where employee voice is seen largely as a mechanism to improve corporate functioning and support managerial objectives (e.g. Morrison, 2011:375). Our data adds to this discussion and argues such an approach neglects employees as legitimate agents who also interact to affect managerial prerogative to some extent (Godard, 2014; Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Kaufman, 2020). In this regard, a managerial prerogative views tension or disagreement not as pluralist compromise and accommodation between competing interests of different industrial relations actors, but as a narrative around employee incompetence and managements' lack of trust in employee representatives. Moreover, it is management actions that engender mistrust, by not allowing the I&C fora to discuss contentious issues, which in turn undermines the representatives' faith in the forum's credibility.

Findings also reveal that the relationships between SMTs, the Chair and employee representatives are highly segmented, with parties constantly monitoring their respective vulnerabilities of self and other (Rousseau et al., 1998). These raise several issues for industrial relations more broadly. Significantly, these segmented relationships show variable and ultimately volatile levels of trust between the parties, depending on the attitudes of senior



managers towards I&C. Evidently, management were prepared to consult on ‘housekeeping’ issues but were less willing to discuss strategic matters which they thought might be confrontational vis-à-vis employment conditions, such as pay and performance management calculations. Arguably, the presumption of authority and the exercise of control underpinned the articulation of a pseudo-rational choice calculation of managements’ interpretation of the employee representatives’ capacity to add business value, or whether employee representatives were corporate team players. As a result, management were either unable or unwilling to recognise both the actual constituency that employee representatives were elected to serve, or that the regulatory objectives were designed to enhance better workforce inclusion through voice, rather than as rules for exclusive commercial gain. Additionally, it has been argued that sustainability of an I&C forum may be dependent on management’s willingness to proactively use I&C fora for information *and* consultation on a wider rather than narrow range of issues (Hall et al., 2013; Kougiannou et al., 2021; Koukiadaki, 2010). Our findings add to these debates by signalling the relatively low strategic priority placed by senior management on employee I&C across both cases, even when the committees were initiated in response to legislation for I&C rights and workforce inclusion (e.g. the EU I&C Directive and subsequent ICE Regulations). Furthermore, the data points to managements’ attitudes towards employee representatives, having a demonstrable influence on managements’ (un)willingness to share control (prerogative) to involve workers in strategic decision-making.

Finally, our two cases demonstrate the power of managerial prerogative in industrial relations about the role of the Chair in affecting representative voice. A Chair that proactively supports the I&C would be able to argue for the I&C’s involvement in decision-making where SMTs might be cautious about extending voice. However, such supportive behaviour from the Chair would be possible if the relationship with employee representatives was a trusting one. The relationship between the Chair and employee representatives is a dynamic and fluid one

that can evolve to enhance or break down voice. If the Chair is not trusted that could lead to a tense relationship that hinders employee representatives from expressing their genuine views openly and honestly. This can become an obstacle to employees demonstrating their trustworthiness to management, which is essential for trust development between the two parties. These interpretations of trust gravitate around control, the way prerogative is enacted, and how the attitudes of managers towards worker representatives are dynamic and can evolve over time, space and issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study makes three distinctive contributions. First, it builds new insights on the role of management inside I&C fora at workplace level; in particular, management attitudes and perceptions towards employee representatives in the operation of I&C. We found management primarily saw consultation as being about how the process adds value to the business, not about representing differing employee interests or promoting better workforce inclusion. Second, it adds to existing I&C literature by highlighting specifically the dynamic relationships between actors inside the I&C body, the type of consultation issues, and the development or collapse of the voice arrangement. Third, the data provide answers to questions posited in the literature about factors influencing management decisions to consult or not, and how far management adapt to the regulatory contexts for employee voice. Overall, while trust can be seen to be important, it seems that management's trusting attitudes are not necessarily sufficient to ensure genuine voice. In other words, managers can trust employee representatives as agents of the workforce, yet that on its own might not encourage joint decision-making or the sharing of authority over decisions that management typically reserve for itself. Thus, trust can exist, however consultation may be weak or partial because of management's desire to maintain control. Furthermore, while trust emerged as a narrative in management rationale for their views on employee representatives, it was also conditioned on a presumed value-added

function for the business, not employee interests. The contribution of seeing I&C in this way shows how managers bypass or weaken the representative role for voice, and even when there was low risk of having to concede control, management were not motivated to consult as they saw limited benefit. These managerial attitudes had a consequential effect on the impressions of employee representatives, who felt the companies had no real desire to engage employees through I&C in a more consultative way. A related academic implication is that scholars should not uncritically accept managerial pronouncements about trust and especially their reasons for allegedly not trusting worker representatives.

There are several practical implications that can be considered. First, the regulatory environment for employee voice continues apace with new and emerging demands on managers, trade unions and employee representatives. For example, the effects of EU rules in a post-Brexit industrial landscape need to be evaluated at both macro (policy) and workplace (enactment) levels. In addition, across continental Europe new proposed regulatory Directives for extended collective bargaining and minimum wage protections are being considered, which means avenues for employee voice and social dialogue remain high on the policy and practitioner agenda (Konle-Seidlpe, 2020). Furthermore, in the UK a new Corporate Governance Code from 2018, in response to Brexit challenges, specifically promotes the idea of enhanced voice with worker representatives on management boards and I&C fora (see Rees & Briône, 2021). Second are practical issues of how managers adapt and implement I&C arrangements. For example, managers can set commonly agreed expectations about the role and purpose of consultation, and consistently stick to it. These can help eliminate factors that hinder managerial decisions to take risks, such as consulting with the I&C forum before a decision is reached, at a stage where information is still highly confidential. This could be done with a jointly agreed I&C constitution, where the role, purpose and depth of consultation is detailed. Practitioners can also minimise doubt about employee representative competency by

organising regular I&C-specific training. Such training should be designed for both management and employee representatives, include trade unions as appropriate, and try to make sure that expectations are aligned towards building stronger trust relationships between the parties.

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**Table 1:** Data sources and use

<b>Source</b>	<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Use in the analysis</b>
<b>Forums’ official documents</b>	1. NICF agenda items and meeting minutes (February ’09 – March ’11)	Gather information regarding potential level of consultation.
	2. ECC agenda items and meeting minutes (January 09’ – September ’10)	Cross-check truthfulness of interview statements and observation notes.
<b>Interviews</b>	<p><b>First round–Summer 2009</b></p> <p>Interviews with <i>all</i> current management (MR) and employee reps (ER). NICF: Four MRs and 12 ERs. ECC: Three MRs and seven ERs. All audio recorded and transcribed for a total of 309 pages.</p> <p><b>Second round–Autumn 2010</b></p> <p>Interviews with <i>all</i> current management (MR) and employee reps (ER) NICF: Four MRs and 10 ERs ECC: Three MRs and five ERs All audio recorded and transcribed for a total of 250 pages.</p> <p><i>Note 1: All management representatives were senior managers. For NICF this consisted of the IR manager, Legal, and two senior executive members, one being the Chair. For ECC this consisted of the Managing Director (also the Chair of ECC), the HR and the Operations Manager.</i></p> <p><i>Note 2: Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, with an average duration of 1 hour</i></p>	<p>Gather data about delegates relationship history; delegates’ expectations about the forums; delegates’ perceptions about the forums’ processes; the role of trust these perceptions and relationships.</p> <p>Gather more detailed data about the aforementioned themes; examine in more depth how the relationships between delegates have developed since the first round.</p> <p>Compare and examine changes in perceptions at the beginning and end of research.</p> <p>Gather data on relationship dynamics, participants’ opinions about their counterparts and their approach to I&amp;C.</p>
	<b>Non-participant observation</b>	<p>Five NICF meetings: <i>August ’09, November ’09, April ’10, September ’10, March ’11</i></p> <p>Six ECC meetings: <i>July ’09, December ’09, February ’10, (x2) (second ad-hoc), April ’10, September ’10 (ad-hoc)</i></p>

**Table 2:** NICF observed meetings - agenda items

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Observed Meeting 1</b>	Voluntary Redundancy Reasons Analysis	√	
	Constitutional Amendments	√	√
	Business Update	√	
	NICF's Communications	√	√
	Human Capital and Diversity	√	
	Restructuring	√	√
	Alternatives to Redundancy	√	√
	Compensation Communications	√	
	Performance Management	√	
	Link between NICF and NLT	√	√
<b>Observed Meeting 2</b>	Business Update	√	
	Celebrating Performance	√	
	Performance Management	√	
	Desk booking/Discretionary Day	√	
	Update on Restructuring	√	
	Equality Bill	√	
	Paternity Policy	√	√
	NICF's Communications Update	√	
<b>Observed Meeting 3</b>	Restructuring Initiatives Update	√	
	HR Transformation Programme	√	
	Workspace Initiative	√	
	Performance Management/Reward Strategy	√	
	NICF's Communications	√	√
	PSF on Women	√	
	Discretionary Day	√	
	Business Update	√	
<b>Observed Meeting 4</b>	Performance Management and Reward	√	
	Business Update	√	
	Paternity Legislation	√	√
	Volunteering Policy	√	
	Health and Safety Policy	√	
	Restructuring Initiatives	√	
	Discretionary Day	√	
	NICF's Communications	√	

*Source: Meeting minutes; I = Information, C = Consultation*

**Table 3:** ECC observed meetings - agenda items (AH = ad hoc)

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Observed Meeting 1</b>	Terms of Reference	√	√
	Healthy Living Initiatives	√	
	Inspection	√	
	Suggestion Box	√	
	Role of the Employee Consultative Committee	√	√
<b>Observed Meeting 2</b>	Employee Suggestion Box Responses	√	√
	GPS Tracking System to Vehicle Fleet	√	√
<b>Observed Meeting 3</b>	HR – ECC Newsletter/People Matters Newsletter	√	√
	Employee Suggestion Box Responses	√	√
	Call Centre	√	√
	Cultural Change	√	
	Replacement ideas for Car Parking Permits	√	
<b>Observed Meeting 4 (AH)</b>	Pay Award	√	
	Rebranding of Employee Recognition Scheme	√	
<b>Observed Meeting 5</b>	Changes to the Disciplinary and Flexi-time policies	√	√
	Part-day sickness absence	√	√
<b>Observed Meeting 6 (AH)</b>	Re-structure to Property & Development Services	√	

*Source: Meeting minutes; I = Information, C = Consultation*