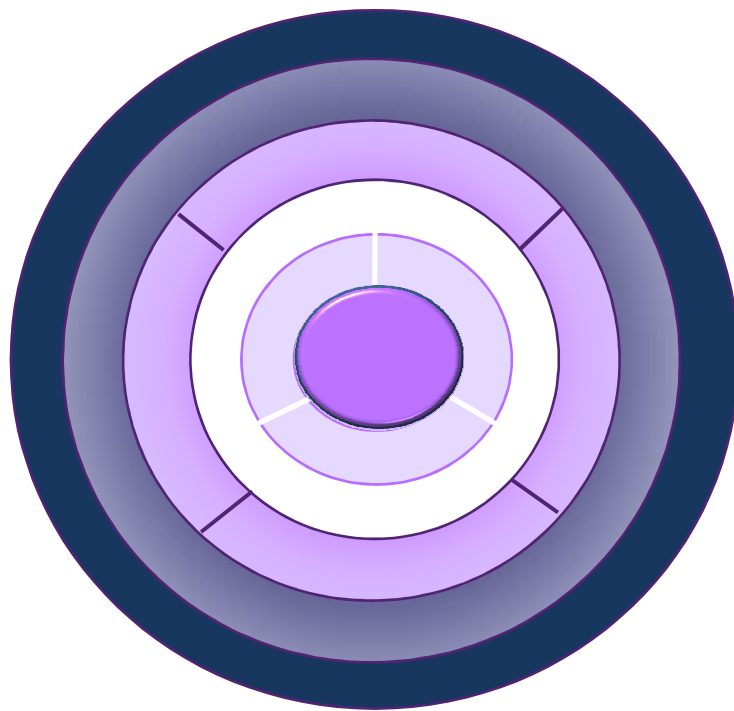


Rethinking employee voice

Employee Voice Survey



tomorrow's
company

Employee Voice

Employee voice is increasingly important in the modern workplace. Having a voice is crucial, for the organisation as much as for the employee. Voice is one of the enablers of employee engagement and it can significantly impact business performance. But employee voice remains both little understood as a concept and under-utilised in the world of work.

The IPA and Tomorrow's Company have therefore joined forces to explore in more depth the nature and importance of voice, working with some of the UK's leading organisations.

We take employee voice to mean the various forms of two-way communication between employers and employees in the workplace. It can be focused on accessing employee views, involving staff in decision making, resolving differences of opinion or gaining access to the knowledge and expertise of the workforce. Voice is about sharing information with employees, encouraging them to express opinions on decisions that affect them and making sure their views are listened to. Employee voice is one of the four key enablers of employee engagement, identified in the MacLeod Report, '[Engaging for Success](#)'.

Last year we published our initial report, '[Rethinking Employee Voice](#)'. Building on this, we will be publishing a final report in early October. This will bring together our findings and make recommendations.

This publication gives an early summary of findings from one part of the Voice research, a survey of employers. Our survey of employers aimed to investigate:

- What employers understand employee voice to mean
- The structures and cultures organisations have in place to harness employee voice
- The factors that enable and inhibit employee voice
- The benefits that are associated with employee voice

Our final report will integrate the results from this survey with our broader work on Voice, giving a holistic picture of the impact of employee voice in the UK today.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of respondents believe voice has a positive impact on engagement and performance.
- Respondents defined 'employee voice' not just as allowing staff to express of their opinions, but also actively listening and involving them in decision-making.
- 'Direct' channels of voice between employees and line managers/senior leaders are both more common and seen as more important than 'indirect' or 'representative' channels.
- Employers – particularly larger organisations – remain very wary about employees using social media to express opinions about them.
- Most respondents measure voice and the wider area of engagement through a staff survey. Some just use informal conversations with managers.
- One in two respondents correlate voice measures with other indicators. This was normally engagement overall or organisational health, but some correlated voice with performance.
- Employee voice focuses on both 'personnel' and 'business improvement' issues. It was used to negotiate the settlement between employer and employee and to allow employees to contribute ideas to improving their business.
- Respondents said that the main barriers to accessing voice arise from staff themselves. These include overcoming cynicism and getting their buy-in.
- Advice on accessing voice included getting manager buy-in; feeding back and acting on issues raised; using a variety of channels; and being open and honest.

Methodology and Respondents

The e-survey was open between 30/07/12 and 20/08/12. 205 people responded to the survey. The survey data can be accessed and analysed [here](#) using **OrgVue** an interactive data-visualisation tool produced by Concentra.

In terms of the size of the organisations represented belonged to, there was a relatively even spread.

Number of employees	Response (%)	Response (count)
0 – 250	27.5%	44
251 – 1,000	13.1%	21
1,001 – 5,000	25.6%	41
5,001 – 10,000	12.5%	20
10,001 – 50,000	11.3%	18
50,001 +	10.0%	16

In terms of sector and industry, there was also a relatively even spread. Of the 161 respondents, just under six in ten were in the private sector, three in ten were in the public sector and slightly over one in ten were in the third sector. The most represented industries were industrials and business services (both 12.4%), local government and not for profit (both 10.9%), financial (10.2%), central government (9.5%) and then retail (8.0%).

Definition of Employee Voice

There was a wide variety of responses to the question on people's understanding of what employee voice means. Many respondents identified voice with 'communication' between employees and managers/senior leadership. Responses included:

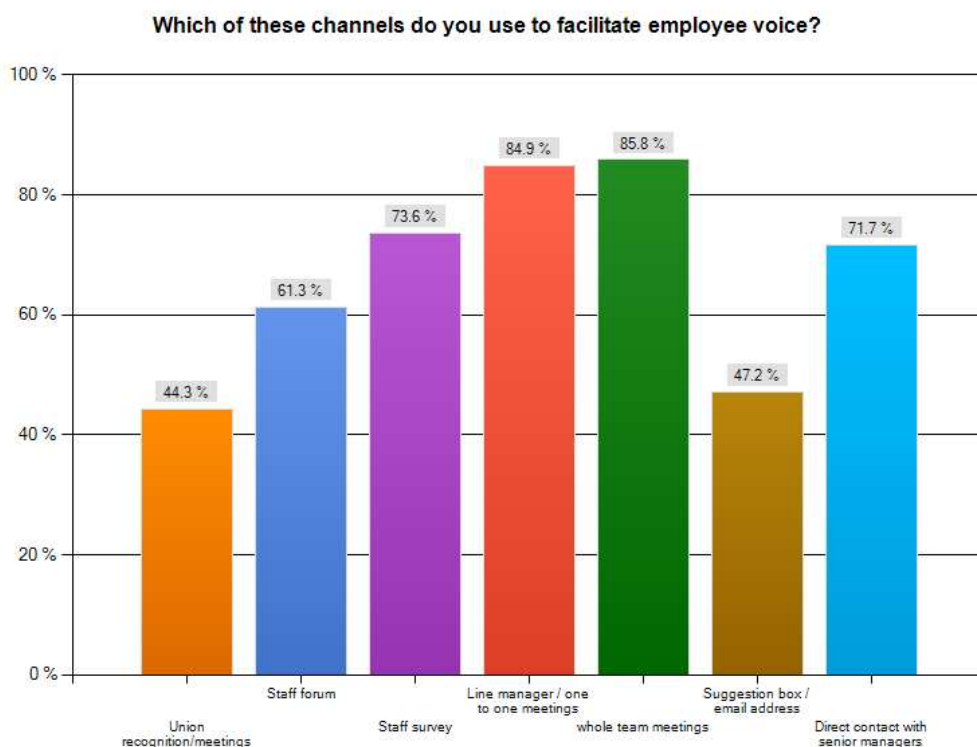
- *"Open employee communications"*
- *"Employees having their say and being able to speak at all levels of the business"*
- *"The collective and individual voiced perceptions, judgements, views and commentary of all employees"*

Voice Channels and Social Media

Organisations tend to use a variety of channels to access employee voice. The most regularly used channels were whole team meetings and line manager/one to one meetings which were both used by over 80% of organisations. This was followed by staff surveys (used by 73.6%) and direct contact with senior managers (71.7%).

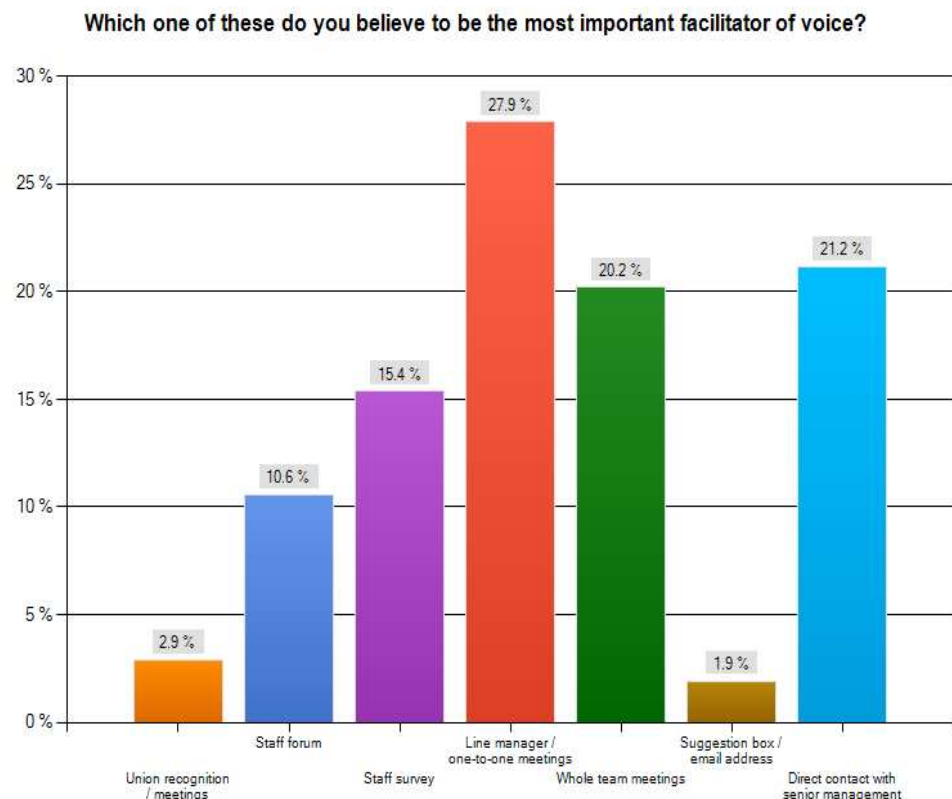
Interestingly, channels that involved direct contact between employees and managers/senior leadership (whole team meetings, line manager/one to one meetings, direct contact with senior managers) tended to be used much more than indirect or represent channels such as staff forums or trade unions.

There is a bias in terms of the size of the organisation here. Larger organisations were more likely to use trade union meetings to access employee voice whereas smaller organisations were more likely to use direct contact with senior managers.



There is a similar picture when it comes to perceptions of which is the most important facilitator of voice. The graph below shows that the most important voice channels were line manager/one-to-one meetings (27.9%), direct contact with senior manager (21.2%) and whole team meetings (20.2%) coming out far ahead of

representative organisations including staff forums (10.6%) and union meetings (2.9%).



Respondents were asked how regularly they used the channel which they viewed as the most significant indicator. Unsurprisingly, staff surveys tended to be carried out annually or less often. Staff forum and whole team meetings tended to be carried out every month. Line manager/one-to-one meetings were normally either weekly or monthly. People who identified direct contact with senior management as the most important channel said this happened every day, suggesting informal contact, or every month suggesting regular meetings.

As well as being used less regularly, staff surveys tended to take longer to feed-back with 76.4% saying it took over a month to feed back results to employees. In the case of those who identified the other channels, feedback tended to be much more prompt. The majority of organisations said that they fed back their results in terms of employee voice to the departmental or team level, suggesting a good degree of granularity.

We asked respondents whether employee voice was expressed more on an individual or a collective level within their organisation. The results showed that the

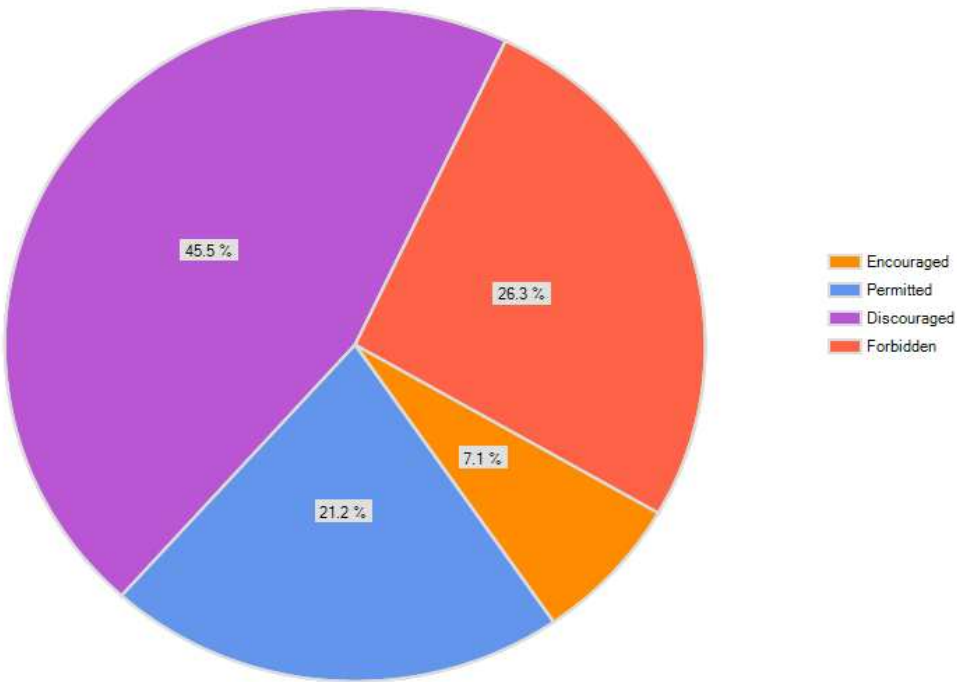
vast majority used a mixture of both individual and collective channels as is shown in the table below. There is a noticeable bias here in terms of the size; larger organisation (those with over 10,000) tend to rely less on individual voice than smaller organisations.

Question 15 - In your organisation, is employee voice expressed more on a collective or an individual level?

Exclusively collective	More collective than individual	Equally collective and individual	More individual than collective	Exclusively individual
0.9%	31.1%	36.8%	28.3%	2.8%

Employers are very wary of social media as a tool for employee voice. Most either forbade (21.2%) or discouraged it (45.5%) the use of social media to voice opinions about the company. One in four said they permitted the use of social media in this way (26.3%) and only a tiny number encouraged it (7.1%). Some highlighted the risk of dismissal if staff used social media inappropriately. Larger organisations (those with over 10,000 employees) were much more likely to discourage the use of social media. However, they are also slightly less likely to outright forbid the use of social media than smaller organisations.

What is your approach to employees voicing their opinions about the company using social media (twitter, facebook, linked-in etc.)?



Measuring and analysing Voice

We asked respondents what question or indicator they used that best measured voice. The most common response referred to staff surveys (or similar) as being the best measure of voice. Some respondents pointed to specific questions often found in staff surveys that they believe represent voice. Answers included:

- *“There are specific questions in the engagement survey: I am encouraged to put forward ideas and suggestions, I receive feedback on my ideas and suggestions, I am involved in decision making”*
- *“In our employee attitude survey we asked if people ‘have the opportunity to put forward suggestions’ to which we scored 85.8%”*
- *“I don’t think we successfully measure this yet but we have questions on our employee engagement survey relating to being involved, feeling consulted, feeling informed”*

Alongside this, many people referred to levels of satisfaction or employee engagement overall as indicating the strength of employee voice. This likely follows the belief that staff who are given an adequate voice are more likely to be engaged and satisfied. Engagement levels are therefore used as a proxy for effectiveness of voice. For example, answers on how voice was measured included *“employee engagement”, “overall satisfaction” and “staff satisfaction levels”*.

However, some respondents identified softer, measures of voice such as meetings with managers or the ‘feel’ of the workplace. These included;

- *“we don’t have a measure – it is more about the ‘perception’ taken away from 1:1s with line managers and senior manager visits”*
- *“1 to 1 with staff and listen to what they say”*
- *“the ‘feel’ and atmosphere of the office and weekly feedback sessions”*

Some respondents did not currently have a way of measuring voice.

[illegible]

However, some organisations are also correlating voice with other ‘hard’ indicators. These broadly fit into two categories. First some correlated voice with ‘organisational health’ measures which included staff turnover/attrition/retention, sickness levels and safety. Second, some organisations correlated voice directly with ‘performance’ in terms of sales, turnover, profit etc. When asked if they correlate voice scores with anything else – some of the responses included:

- 10**

- “Yes – based on the Michael West research about correlations between NHS outcomes and NHS staff survey results”

A word cloud for responses to Q12: Do you correlate your results on this indicator with business performance or anything else?



We asked respondents how they thought employee voice affected the performance of their organisation. Most respondents identified a positive impact of employee voice on their organisation. The most common link was that employee voice helped drive employee engagement. Others made the link to morale, motivation, satisfaction etc. Some responses linked these changes in employee perceptions/feelings to the performance of the organisation, suggesting that employee voice could drive up performance.

Other impacts of employee voice on performance included informing decision making, increasing innovation and understanding staff opinions. A small number of respondents said it had no positive impact.

When asked Question 13 – ‘how does employee voice affect performance in your organisation?’ - answers included:

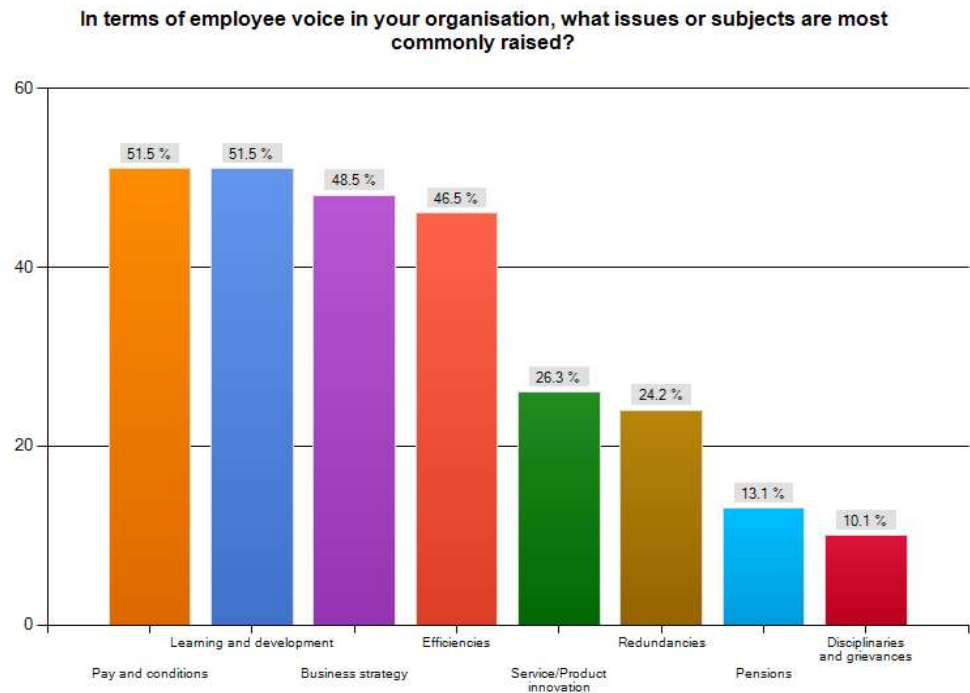
- “It is a key driver of employee engagement”
- “It has a positive effect on employee morale”
- “Improves moral and ensures increased productivity”

- The results are shown in a word cloud below.

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12



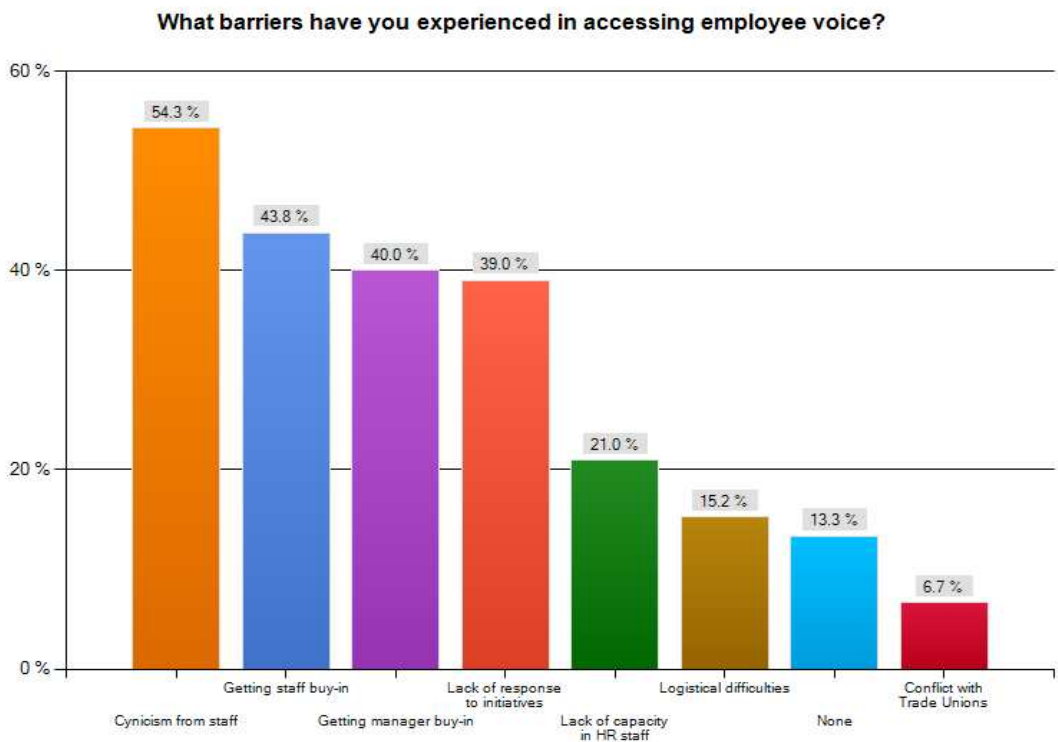
This demonstrates a balance between what can be seen as ‘personnel issues’ (including pay and conditions; learning and development; redundancies; pensions; and disciplines and grievances) and ‘business-focused’ issues (business strategy; efficiencies; and service/product innovation). This suggests voice is used both to negotiate the settlement between employer and employee, and to allow employees to contribute their ideas, experience and initiative to improving the business.

There is a noticeable sectoral difference in the results here. In the private sector, business improvement issues and personnel issues were raised in roughly equal proportion - 48% to 52%. However, in the public and social sectors, there was a much greater imbalance between business improvement and personnel issues – 39% to 61%. This perhaps reflects the difficulties the public and third sectors are currently facing in adjusting to the challenging financial situation.

Barriers to voice

When asked about the barriers to accessing employee voice, respondents tended to emphasise issues with employees themselves. Over half of respondents highlighted ‘cynicism from staff’ (54.3%). Around four in ten also identified ‘getting buy in from staff’ (43.8%), ‘getting manager buy-in’ (40.0%) and ‘lack of response to initiatives’ (39.0%).

Interestingly, larger companies were more likely to see 'getting manager buy-in' as a barrier. This perhaps suggesting a difficulty in engaging managers in larger organisations. Smaller organisations with under 250 employees are most likely to identify no problems in accessing voice, perhaps reflecting the greater ease of accessing voice in small, tight-knit organisations.



Advice to other organisations

We asked what advice people would give to other organisations seeking to promote voice. One of the most common themes was to ensure the buy-in and commitment of senior leadership as a first step. Related to this, many responses advised that organisations shouldn't look to encourage voice or consult staff unless they were genuinely prepared to listen, to act on the outcomes and to feedback to employees on what had been done. Again, linked to this was the importance of honesty and openness in order to build trust.

Many respondents included the need to use a variety of methods to access voice so that all people are heard equally. Some respondents reflected the need to encourage and support employees to express voice and to actively listen.

When asked – “what advice would you give to another organisation seeking to promote employee voice?” – responses included:

- *“Get high-level buy in first – the tools come later”*
- *“Obtain leadership buy-in and participation from the very top”*
- *“There’s no point in doing it unless you’re going to implement the reasonable outcomes”*
- *“Listen and then be seen to do something with what you are told, otherwise staff won’t share again”*
- *“If you ask for feedback, act on it otherwise staff will lose confidence”*
- *“As with all elements of staff engagement, this can be hard-won and easily damaged. Staff will respond to an apparent failure to listen with cynicism which may last for a long time and hamper other change efforts”*
- *“There is no ‘best way’ to encourage employee voice. A number of different options are necessary to suit individual preferences and meet the needs of the organisation”*
- *“Take a holistic approach, using different methods to communicate with different groups. Don’t rely on one method of communication”*
- *“A variety of channels and a culture of transparency”*

A word cloud of responses to question 18: “What advice would you give to another organisation seeking to promote employee voice?”



Acknowledgements

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About IPA

The IPA exists to promote the involvement and participation of employees in their places of work, and through doing so improve the quality of their working lives. The IPA is Britain's leading organisation dedicated to delivering partnership, consultation and employee engagement in the workplace. Through our research and practice we develop new ways of working, based on trust and collaboration, that deliver better workplaces and better outcomes – employee wellbeing, increased productivity and improved services. The IPA is a not for profit organisation, funded by membership subscriptions and fee income.

We are one of the few 'open spaces' in the UK where employers, trade unionists and other workplace representatives, academics, legal experts, human resource and employment specialists can come together with politicians and policy makers to discuss and debate employment issues and policy.

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About Tomorrow's Company

Tomorrow's Company is the agenda setting 'think and do' tank which looks at the roles of businesses and how to achieve enduring business success. We focus on strong relationships, clear purpose and values as the foundation of effective leadership and governance. In our programmes we challenge business leaders around the world to work in dialogue with others to tackle the toughest issues.

We promote systematic solutions, working across boundaries between businesses, investors, government and society. We believe that business can and must be a 'force for good'. This in turn requires a strengthening of stewardship by stakeholders in partnership with boards and companies.

We argue that the Age of Sustainability has begun, and that in the future success and value creation will come from recognising the 'triple context' – the links between economic, social and environmental sub-systems on which we all depend, and the opportunities this brings.

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