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Championing better work and working lives

Talking about voice: employees' experiences

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

Report

Talking about voice: employees' experiences

Contents

Acknowledgements

(1) Foreword

Today the work relationship exists in a context often considered unique to the modern world: rapidly evolving business models, disruptive technological innovation, shifting demographics, globalisation, widespread inequality and heightened socio-political tension. In this unpredictable environment, many individuals rely on work as an anchor in a stormy sea. However, job security and the opportunity to shape work are not available for everyone. For many (particularly those on atypical employment contracts, in low-paid and low-skilled work, or outsourced in global supply chains), there is little prospect of expressing voice on issues relating to their working lives. As the CIPD's research on good work and job quality has shown, the reality of enablement through voice is far from being a mainstay of all UK jobs.

There are, however, exciting developments now emerging that might help improve the opportunity and impact of voice for workers. New flexible working practices, automation and AI technologies, and innovations in collectivism have the potential to empower employees currently lacking in voice. Technology, with the right checks and balances, and through well-thought-out design and application, could help to connect employees and heighten the impact their voice has on working practices.

To better help individuals navigate the modern world of work, we must first understand how employees might be able to influence and shape the working relationship. This is a central pillar of the concept of employee voice, which this report explores in detail. Through this work we hope to surface some of the important foundational concepts of voice in modern work, and illustrate how, through considered and purposeful action, the people profession can better shape jobs and workplaces to improve outcomes for both organisations and the individuals within them. In this first phase of our study we ground our thinking in a particular perspective: instead of viewing employees as powerless in shaping work, we instead posit how they might have the power, through voice, and with the support of the people profession, to shape work in their own way. Building on these insights, we will address practical solutions for organisations in the next phase of the research.

Edward Houghton
Acting Head of Research, CIPD

(2) Introduction

Having a meaningful voice at work is a primary mechanism by which individuals influence matters that affect them. It is a key aspect of the CIPD's 'people matter' principle, which holds that people are unique and worthy of care and investment, with the right to be treated as legitimate stakeholders in the work relationship.

Two potential purposes of voice are highlighted in the management literature. First, the 'organisational voice' perspective focuses on the positive benefits that voice can bring to the organisation, such as higher innovation (Shipton et al 2017), a more engaged workforce and lower absenteeism (Wilkinson et al 2004). Initiatives such as suggestion schemes, for example, enable this type of voice by allowing organisations to benefit from employees' ideas.

A second purpose of voice flows from the so-called social justice perspective. According to this view, voice is a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning, allowing worker involvement in decision-making through deepening industrial democracy.

This philosophy is exemplified within work arrangements such as worker co-operatives, where formal governance structures often overtly elicit voice, allowing employees not only to express concerns but also to exert influence in a more profound way, even shaping the organisation's aims and objectives (King and Land 2018).

In this report, we define voice as *'the ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these efforts to influence decisions at work'* (Dromey 2016, p4). This line of thinking treats voice as a fundamental democratic principle that offers genuine influence. Therefore, despite arguments that voice represents *'constructive challenge intended to improve rather than merely criticise'* (Van Dyne and LePine 1998, p109), we do not see voice as purely focused on organisational improvement. While conventional organisational models tend to view employee voice in this way, largely neglecting a social justice imperative, we conceptualise voice in a more rounded manner. Achieving a balance of perspectives that recognises individual as well as organisational needs where voice is concerned creates shared value and drives more sustainable organisational cultures (Baczor et al 2017).

Putting employee voice at the core of HR practice
Valuing people is a core element of the new Profession Map from the CIPD, which sets out the international standards for the people profession. This emphasises the key role of people professionals at all levels to put individuals at the centre of their approach, to build shared purpose and create a culture of enablement where individuals can thrive at work. Giving people a voice on matters that affect their working lives is central, and embodies our professional values of delivering a positive impact on people and the world of work. See Table 1 for a brief explanation of the alternative perspectives of employee voice.

Table 1: Alternative perspectives on the purpose of employee voice

	Organisational voice	Individual voice
Description	The purpose of voice is to increase performance through higher engagement and innovation.	Voice is a fundamental human right that is required for work to have meaning.
Purpose	Individuals share ideas and suggestions to improve the way the organisation is run.	Individuals articulate matters that are important to them.
Organisational example	Suggestion schemes.	Worker co-operatives.

The changing nature of work and importance of voice for job quality
A dominant focus in previous research on employee voice has been the institutional-level factors and collective arrangements that give rise to voice, such as workplace representation through trade unions or staff consultative groups. While important and valuable, this perspective offers less space for reflection on why, when and how people as *individuals* express their voice in the workplace. Hence, less is known about how employees experience voice across levels of the organisational hierarchy, and what effect the workplace setting has on individuals' willingness or otherwise to deploy voice.

Broader societal considerations underpin analysis of how voice plays out in organisations. Employee voice has been transformed by greater individualisation and union decline,

which has arguably reduced worker power (Dundon et al 2017). Key trends in the modern world of work such as remote working, increasing workforce diversity and alternative work arrangements are all creating new challenges, especially in terms of individuals' ability to influence their work conditions (Baczor et al 2017). The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017) highlighted an imbalance of power in the employment relationship, and the importance of effective worker voice for creating good work. The CIPD's previous research on the dimensions of job quality also confirmed that voice is a key mechanism by which people can influence their working conditions (Gifford 2018).

> **'Good work' and the role of voice**
> The growing agenda around creating good work or job quality is central to the CIPD's purpose of championing better work and working lives. Following the commissioning of the 2017 Taylor Review, the UK Government is committed to understanding, measuring and improving the quality of work and employment. To provide an evidence-based understanding of what good work looks like, the CIPD defined the dimensions that affect job quality (Wright et al 2018). Our *UK Working Lives* survey (Gifford 2018) showed that opportunities to have a voice at work is one of the most significant ways that individuals can influence their employment and ensure a good quality of working life.

Marginalised voices in the workplace can sometimes articulate their concerns outside the organisation, potentially damaging organisational reputation. Technology can play a significant role in enabling this, with sites such as Glassdoor providing workers with a platform to anonymously post comments about their employer. The wider public are all too aware of the efforts by so-called 'gig' economy workers (especially within Uber and Deliveroo) to take companies to tribunal over asserted violation of their rights. Furthermore, increased diversity in the workplace has raised questions about how to represent the perspectives and concerns of minority groups (Wilkinson et al 2018). Enabling voice is central to building fairness and transparency in organisations and wider society.

> *Voice is important not just for organisational effectiveness, but also by way of offering dignity and respect to workers.*

Purpose of this research

In this report, we investigate the forms of voice employees experience at work, and the voice channels that are available to them. We also consider the issues that people most frequently raise in the workplace, and the barriers and enablers that influence their willingness to do so. In this first step in an ongoing research programme, we explore how individual voice is experienced in the workplace, in order to help create organisational environments where people feel able to have a meaningful voice.

Drawing on a cross-sectoral survey of 2,372 UK employees, we distinguish between two forms of voice, starting from the premise that voice is important not just for organisational effectiveness, but also by way of offering dignity and respect to workers:

- 'Organisational voice' represents employees' efforts to help the organisation to perform better (for example, through sharing ideas).
- 'Individual voice' refers to the scope for self-expression at work, reflecting whether people feel recognised and valued as human beings.

We also explore 'silence' in the workplace, defined as an unwillingness to articulate matters of concern or interest, despite having something to say. The polar opposite of voice, employee silence is important in gauging the extent to which bottom–up communication is encouraged or even permitted in an organisational setting. This has become a pertinent issue in the context of the #MeToo debate and the Government's review of the use of non-disclosure agreements. Previous CIPD research argued that social media can to an extent circumvent employee silence by allowing lateral communication across hierarchies, as well as opening conversations to multiple stakeholders (Silverman et al 2013).

In the next sections of the report, we explore the following questions:

1 How does the employee experience of voice influence broader feelings of satisfaction at work?
2 What are the main channels for voice in organisations, and what issues are commonly raised by employees?
3 Are 'individual voice' and 'organisational voice' experienced differently across workplace settings and workforce groups?
4 What are the potential contextual barriers and enablers of voice?

We ask these questions with the purpose of mapping out the key concepts and themes that people professionals should look to incorporate into their thinking and practice. This report surfaces the barriers and enablers that will provide practitioners in HR, L&D and OD with insights they need to effect positive change.

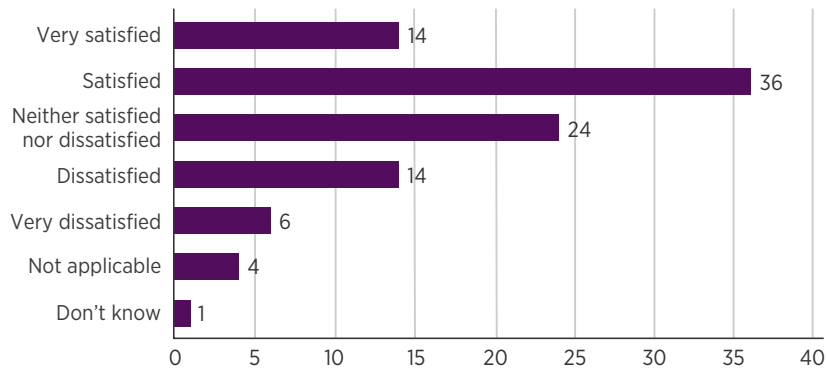## (3) Voice and job satisfaction

Key findings
- Employees working in small and private sector organisations are most satisfied with their involvement in decision-making at work.
- Satisfaction with voice matters for overall employee satisfaction at work.

In this section, we investigate individuals' satisfaction with voice, examining their involvement in decision-making and the scope they have to articulate opinions to senior management. We also explore the link between overall job satisfaction and employee satisfaction with voice.
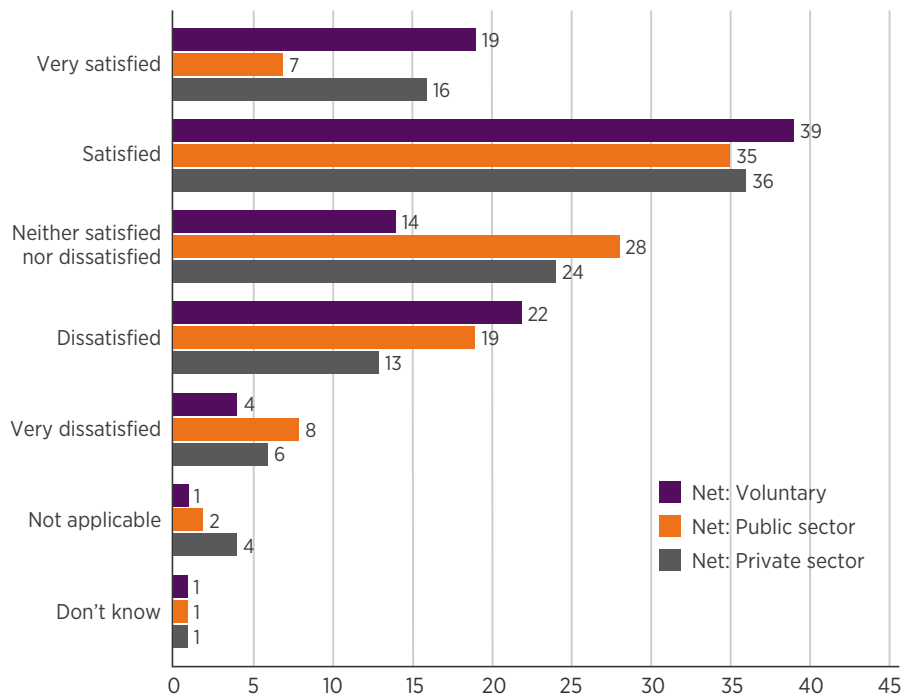
We find that employees in smaller organisations located in the private sector appear to have more involvement in decision-making than those working in larger and public sector organisations. Comparing this with previous research, the Work and Employment Relations Survey (2011) also found that employees in smaller workplaces were more likely than those in larger workplaces to feel involved in decision-making in their organisation. One explanation for these findings is that smaller private sector organisations tend to be less hierarchical, thereby offering more space and opportunity for employees at all levels to express their voice. Larger public sector organisations, on the other hand, may be perceived to be more bureaucratic and therefore less open to this direct form of voice, which could explain the low levels of satisfaction with involvement indicated by respondents working in this sector.
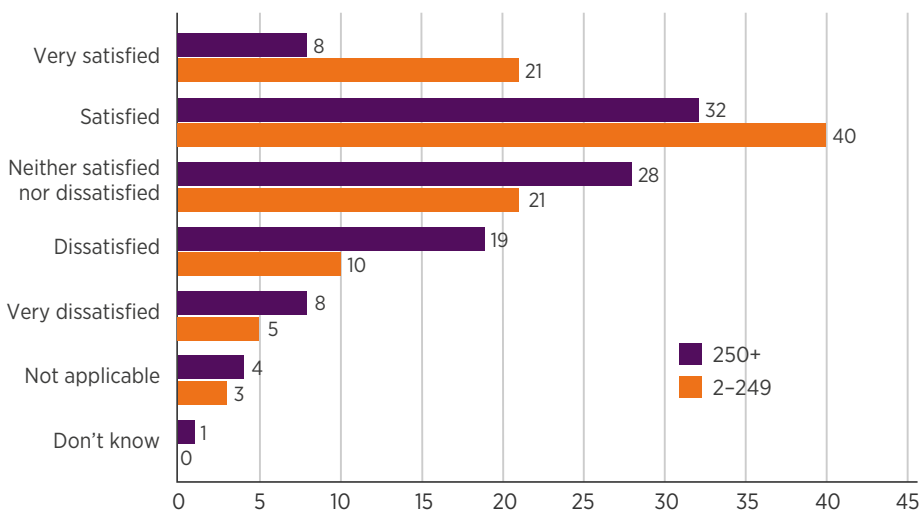
Figure 1: Overall satisfaction with voice (%)

Category	Value
Very satisfied	14
Satisfied	36
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	24
Dissatisfied	14
Very dissatisfied	6
Not applicable	4
Don't know	1

Base: n=2,372

Figure 2: Satisfaction with voice, by sector (%)

Category	Net: Voluntary	Net: Public sector	Net: Private sector
Very satisfied	19	7	16
Satisfied	39	35	36
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	14	28	24
Dissatisfied	22	19	13
Very dissatisfied	4	8	6
Not applicable	1	2	4
Don't know	1	1	1

Base: private: n=1,848; public: n=394; voluntary: n=130

Figure 3: Satisfaction with voice, by organisation size (%)

Category	250+	2–249
Very satisfied	8	21
Satisfied	32	40
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	28	21
Dissatisfied	19	10
Very dissatisfied	8	5
Not applicable	4	3
Don't know	1	0

Base: 250+: n=1,215; 2–249: n=1,157

Voice and job satisfaction

Our data shows that employees' satisfaction with involvement in decision-making is significantly and positively related to their overall job satisfaction,[1] suggesting that voice is an important component for employee well-being in the workplace. An alternative explanation is that those reporting strong voice feel more content with their work as a result (Klaas et al 2012). Comparing this with previous research, the Skills and Employment Survey (2017) similarly found a strong positive link between participation at work and both employee well-being and motivation.

> *Voice is an important component for employee well-being in the workplace.*

There are several reasons why voice and job satisfaction are strongly linked. First, employees who are satisfied at work may find that their positive emotion opens cognitive channels and facilitates their capacity to express voice (Fredrickson 2004). Second, employees exert agency by expressing their views, helping them to craft jobs in ways that speak to their own interests and expertise, in turn raising job satisfaction. Expressing voice may also foster an individual's self-efficacy, or confidence, as they communicate matters that are important for them and feel happier in the workplace as a result.

Implications for HR practice
People professionals should create mechanisms for all staff to be involved in organisational decision-making at an appropriate level and to influence matters that affect them at work. This can positively influence their attitude and sense of fulfilment at work, which in turn can boost efforts to achieve organisational goals and reduce intentions to quit.

④ Voice channels

Key findings
- One-to-one meetings with a line manager are the most common voice channel experienced by employees.
- Four in ten (38%) report that their working conditions are not negotiated at all.
- Just under a fifth of employees report using trade unions as a channel for voice.

A number of voice channels can be found in organisations, some of which offer a means of communicating shared concerns (through trade unions or employee representative groups) and others which allow individuals the space to be heard. Voice also occurs informally through everyday interactions between employees and line managers, in meetings, in corridors, through emails, telephone conversations and so on. It is inherent in the exchange of knowledge, based on openness on the part of management and employees to discussion within or outside of immediate task-related requirements. Voice might be exhibited through formal channels such as suggestion schemes, opportunities to participate in decision-making, and 'open door' policies.

Overall, the data support the interpretation that informal channels of communication, and particularly discussions with the line manager, offer the most important channel

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[1] r_s=0.582** (p<0.01)

for voice (see Figure 4). Our finding that only 17% of the sample mention the trade union as a channel for voice corresponds with a national picture of overall decline in trade union membership (Dundon et al 2017). Comparing this with other data sources, the 2016 Labour Force Survey indicated that 24% of UK employees were members of a trade union (BEIS 2017).

Figure 4: Forms of voice experienced in the workplace (%)

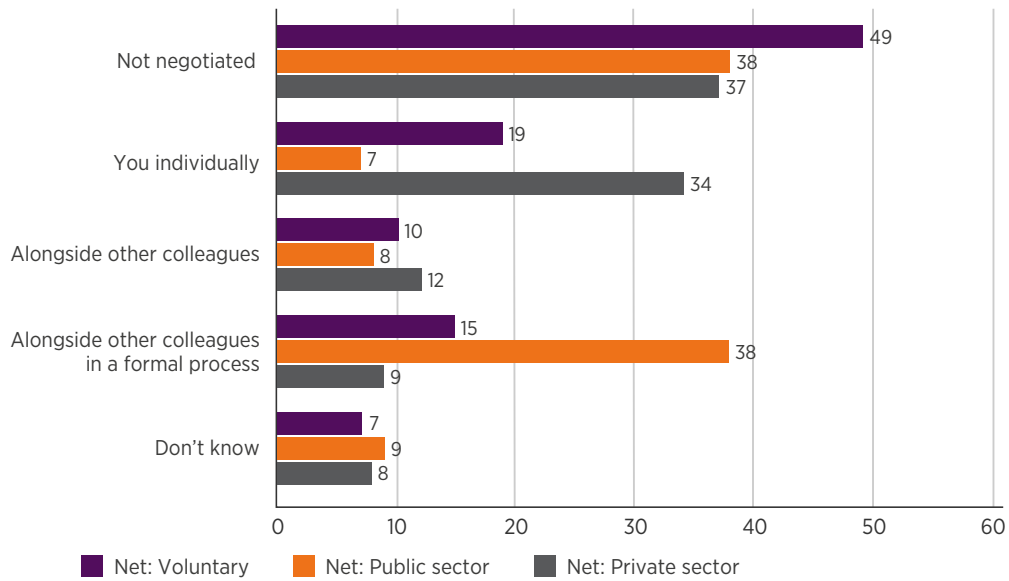Base: n=2,372   Yes   No
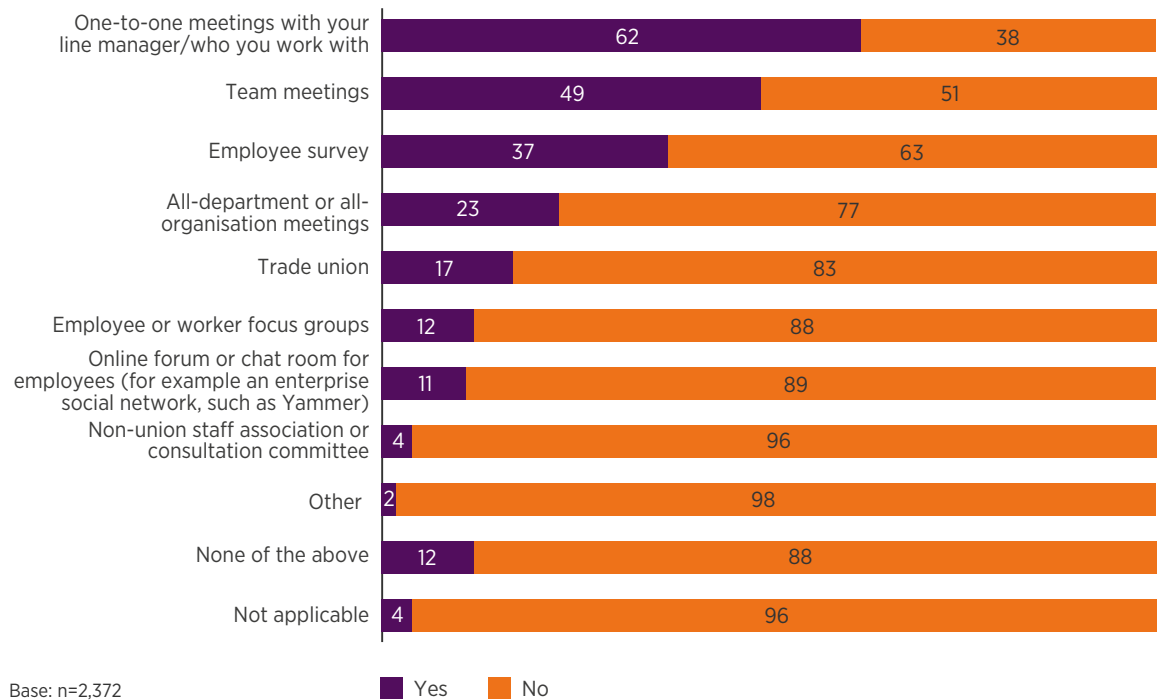
The experience of voice

We next explored how people experience voice as it relates to their terms and conditions of employment (pay, holidays, flexible work options, benefits and job parameters) (Figure 5). This is a crucial determinant of voice, since terms and conditions are so central in the employment relationship. Our findings suggest that a significant proportion of employees have little, if any, control over their terms and conditions of employment.

Figure 5: How working terms and conditions are negotiated (%)

Base: n=2,372
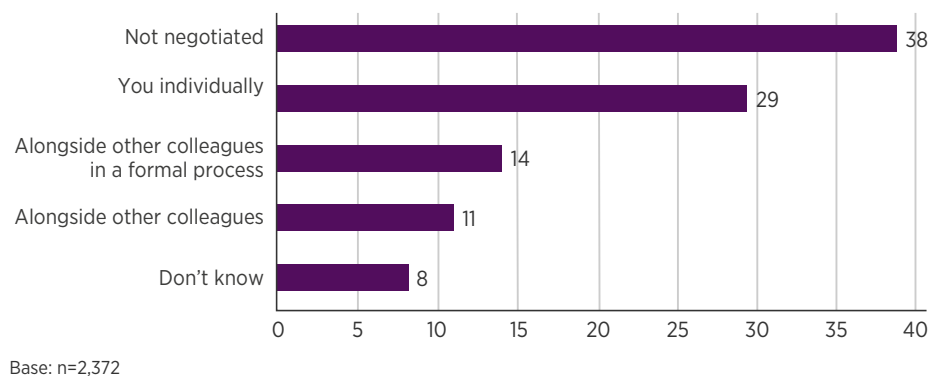
When we consider voice by negotiation across different sectors (Figure 6), we find that employees within the private sector negotiate more on an individual basis than those in the public and voluntary sectors.
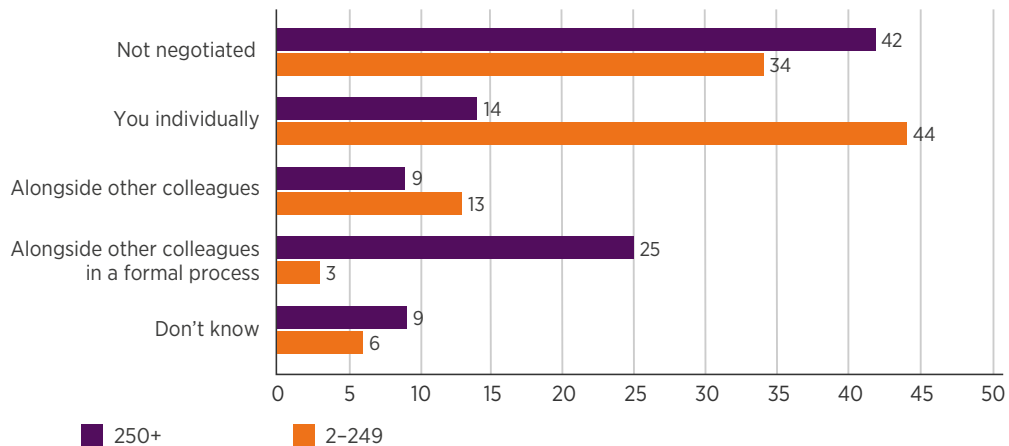
Voice channels

Figure 6: How working terms and conditions are negotiated (%)

Category	Net: Voluntary	Net: Public sector	Net: Private sector
Not negotiated	49	38	37
You individually	19	7	34
Alongside other colleagues	10	8	12
Alongside other colleagues in a formal process	15	38	9
Don't know	7	9	8

Base: private: n=1,848; public: n=394; voluntary: n=130

It's worth noting that satisfaction with voice is higher in private sector and smaller organisations, indicating that people working in these contexts may prefer to have a direct role in the negotiation of their terms and conditions, or at least for their specific situation to be taken into account.

Figure 7: Voice, by negotiation across large and small organisations (%)

Category	250+	2–249
Not negotiated	42	34
You individually	14	44
Alongside other colleagues	9	13
Alongside other colleagues in a formal process	25	3
Don't know	9	6

Base: 250+: n=1,215; 2–249: n=1,157

As these results show, a significant proportion of employees feel relatively powerless in expressing voice about important considerations relating to their treatment at work. Indeed, as mentioned, 38% stated that their working conditions are not negotiated at all.

Implications for HR practice
People professionals should provide training for all managers on how to facilitate open conversations during one-to-one meetings with their team members, since this is the main way through which employees express their ideas and concerns. As collective channels for voice are less commonly used, it's important to consider how individuals can be empowered to have a say over their working conditions through alternative mechanisms.
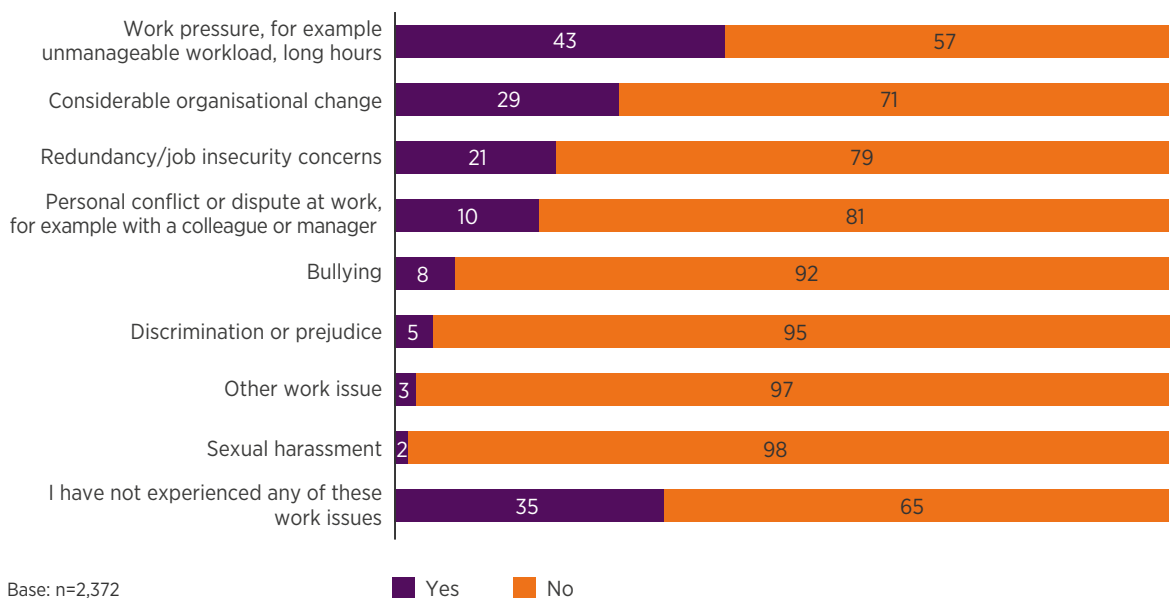
Voice channels

⑤ Issues raised by employees

Key findings
- Work pressure is the most common issue experienced by employees (43%), followed by considerable organisational change (29%) and redundancy/job security concerns (21%).
- Over a fifth (22%) of those who have raised an issue at work felt that they received no advice or support.

Employees may wish to speak up about issues that are important to them beyond the formal 'system', that is, through line or senior management (Baczor et al 2017). For example, people may share concerns or express their emotional states 'around the water cooler', in ways which are not supported by an organisational voice system and may be seen as counterproductive. The failure to hear these voices has the potential to negatively impact organisational performance and/or reputation (as shown recently by harassment scandals in several organisations), as well as employee well-being and motivation at work (Klaas et al 2012). Understanding issues that employees want to raise helps organisations to encourage their articulation before they become damaging. In this section, we turn a spotlight on the issues that people experience in the workplace and their perceived ability to raise them.
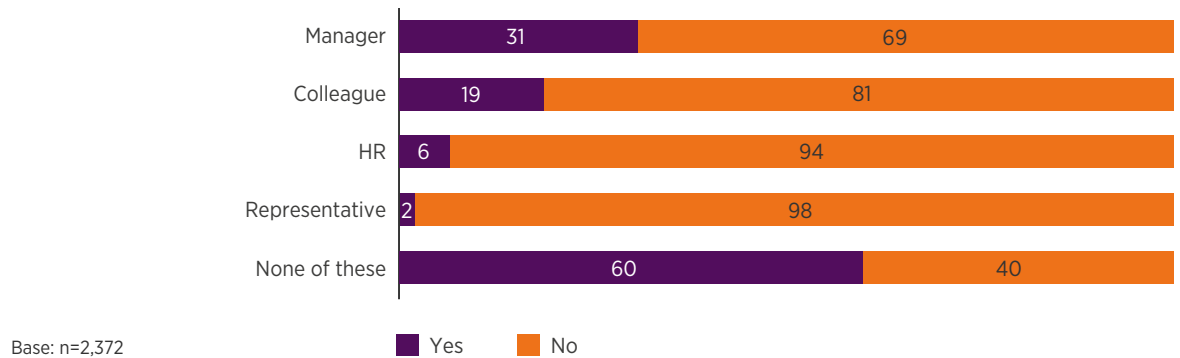
We found that two-fifths of respondents have experienced work pressures, including unmanageable workloads and/or long hours, while just under a third have been affected by considerable organisational change (Figure 8). The CIPD's *UK Working Lives* survey (Gifford 2018) similarly found that many people feel under pressure at work, with 30% reporting unmanageable workloads. This highlights an important issue that should be addressed by employers, for example through better job design or more effective delegation strategies.

Figure 8: Work issues experienced in the last two years (%)

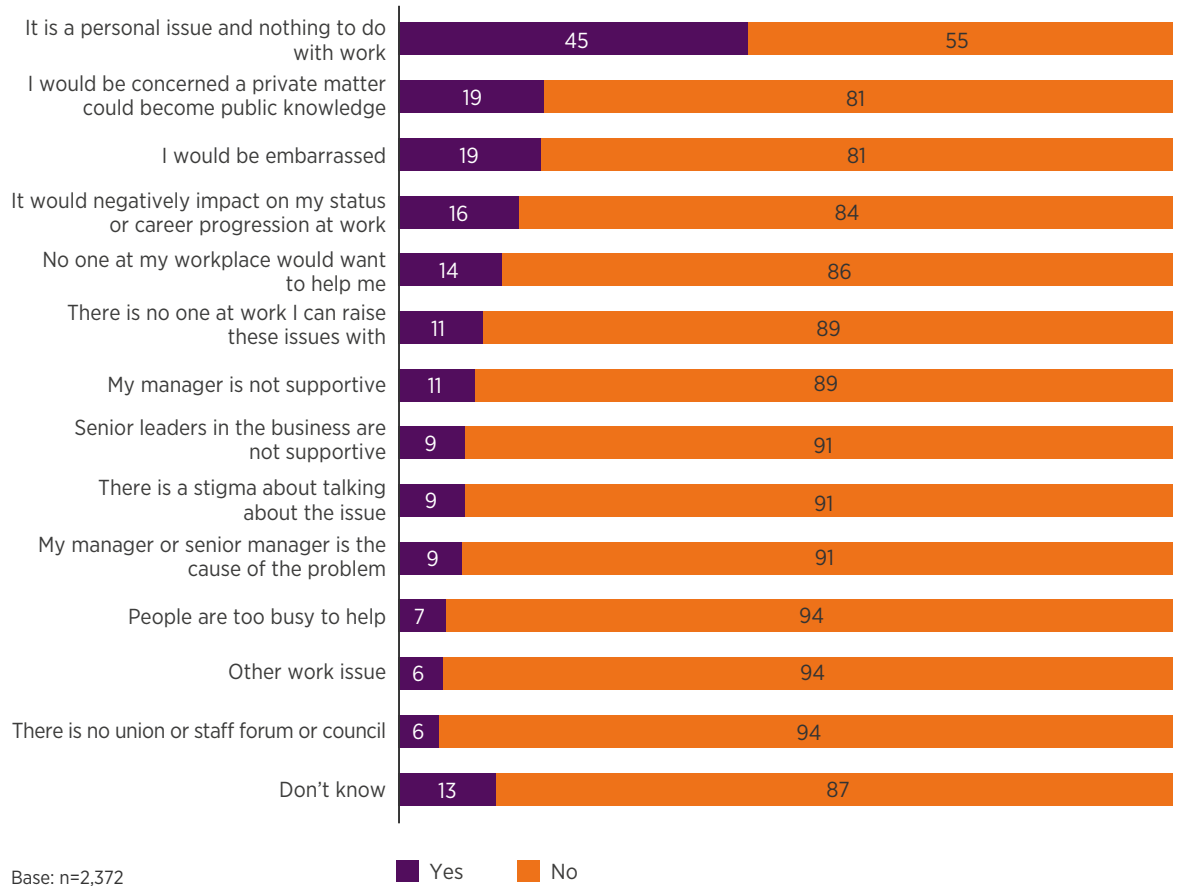|	Yes	No
Work pressure, for example unmanageable workload, long hours	43	57
Considerable organisational change	29	71
Redundancy/job insecurity concerns	21	79
Personal conflict or dispute at work, for example with a colleague or manager	10	81
Bullying	8	92
Discrimination or prejudice	5	95
Other work issue	3	97
Sexual harassment	2	98
I have not experienced any of these work issues	35	65

Base: n=2,372

We found that only a small proportion deal with these workplace issues through involving a selected representative, a member of HR or a colleague (Figure 9). Nearly a third of the sample have taken an issue up with their line manager, but over half have not raised it with any of these parties.

Issues raised by employees

Figure 9: Who work issues have been raised with (%)

|	Yes	No
Manager	31	69
Colleague	19	81
HR	6	94
Representative	2	98
None of these	60	40

Base: n=2,372   ■ Yes ■ No

We know that employees may choose not to express their voice. Our survey found that there are many reasons why this is the case, including a perception that 'no one in the organisation would want to help me' (14%). This finding is concerning, given that employees may at times need to share matters that are important for them, and to feel that issues they raise are acted on. This is particularly relevant in the context of whistleblowing. That most employees feel unwilling to express their voice in the organisation has implications not only for employee well-being and burnout, but also for the longer-term sustainability of the organisation, including external reputation.

Figure 10: Reasons for not reporting issues (%)

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

Base: n=2,372   ■ Yes ■ No

Issues raised by employees

People are often driven to express voice in order to seek support or raise an issue that requires attention. We found that over a fifth of those who have raised an issue felt that they received no advice or support (Figure 11). This is an important finding which suggests that more needs to be done to listen to and address employees' issues as they are communicated.

Figure 11: Usefulness of support when issue was raised (%)

Base: n=2,372
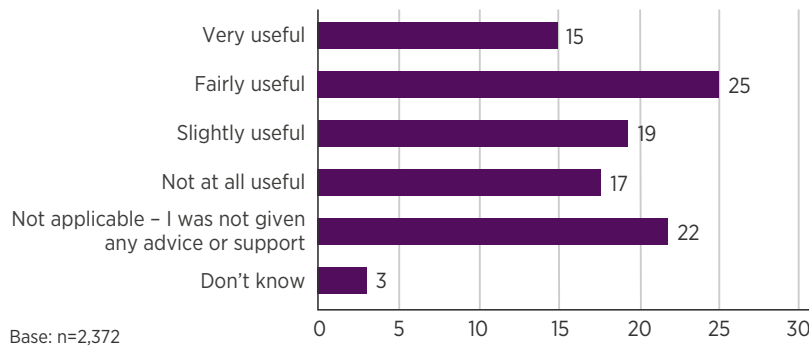
Whether voice deals with questions that matter (for those expressing voice) depends on power dynamics within the employment relationship (Dundon et al 2017). Voice *depth*, that is, whether employees have the opportunity to express voice about factors that are important to them, is often limited despite formal mechanisms to support voice being in place. Although voice can be viewed as on a spectrum of enabling employees to yield significant influence over questions that matter for them, overall our research suggests that few organisations are yet in this space. Many voice channels are quite superficial in terms of the scope for change that they present.

Implications for HR practice
In the current economic climate of uncertainty, it's crucial that people feel able to raise issues and concerns at work. Problems left unaddressed can harm individual well-being and organisational performance. HR can provide an employee assistance programme to offer independent advice on a range of work and personal issues. When an issue is raised in the organisation by an individual, it's important that it is acted on so that they feel supported and confident to speak up in the future.

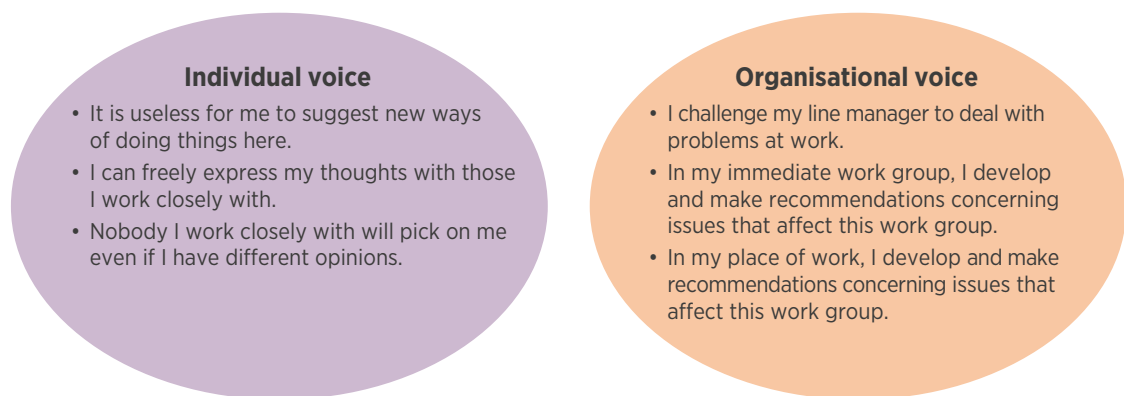## ⑥ Employees' experiences of different types of voice

Key findings
- Only a quarter of employees feel able to freely express themselves at work, and this is particularly low in the public sector.
- One quarter report that they often choose not to speak up at work, even though they have something they'd like to say.
- Just over a fifth (22%) report high levels of expressing their voice to create and implement new ideas.

As described in the introduction, there are two broad perspectives about the purpose of employee voice: one which regards voice as a tool for the development of the organisation, encouraging employees to share ideas that benefit organisational effectiveness ('organisational voice'); and the second views voice as a necessary tool for justice, which captures individuals' willingness or otherwise to express themselves in the workplace, feeling that their voice is heard ('individual voice').

Through factor analysis (see Appendix 1) we were able to confirm these two distinct forms of voice. The measure of 'individual' voice is made up of self-expression (that is, the ability to express your true feelings regarding your job) and voice efficacy (that is, the belief that speaking up will make a difference). The measure of 'organisational' voice, by contrast, reflects an individual's capacity to use voice for the purpose of improving the way things are done, through communication to the line manager or other team members (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Sample items from the individual and organisational voice variables

Individual voice
- It is useless for me to suggest new ways of doing things here.
- I can freely express my thoughts with those I work closely with.
- Nobody I work closely with will pick on me even if I have different opinions.

Organisational voice
- I challenge my line manager to deal with problems at work.
- In my immediate work group, I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group.
- In my place of work, I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group.

Innovative behaviour represents a form of (organisational) voice, although one that is often considered separately from other voice forms. We include this in order to compare and contrast voice forms.

Finally, we also consider the absence of voice: employee silence. Although harder to decipher than other voice forms, silence can convey important signals to managers and others about how employees feel about work and whether they have agency over the work environment.
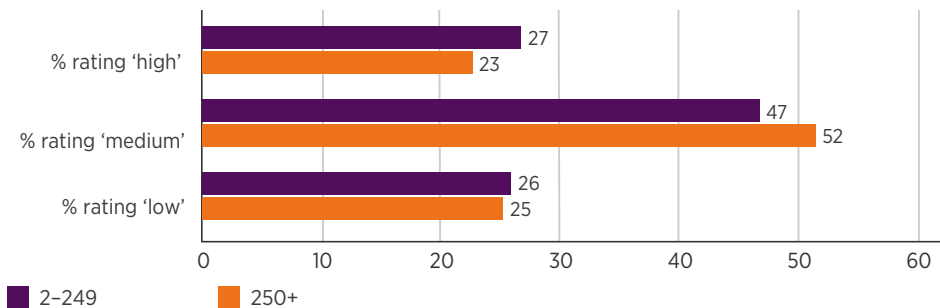
Organisational voice

The data reveal that 25% of the whole sample have weak organisational voice, that is, they rarely or never have the chance to express voice in order to enhance some aspect of the organisation's functioning (see Figure A8 in Appendix 2). However, a similar number of respondents report strong organisational voice, and this is even more the case for those working in smaller voluntary and private sector organisations compared with employees in larger and public sector firms (see Appendix 2 for full figures of voice forms by sector and organisational size). This reflects our earlier finding that employees within small and private sector organisations are more satisfied with their involvement in decision-making, compared with those who work in larger and public sector firms. This can suggest that there are greater opportunities to express views in order to enhance the functioning of the organisation in these environments.

Figure 13: Organisational voice, by sector (%)
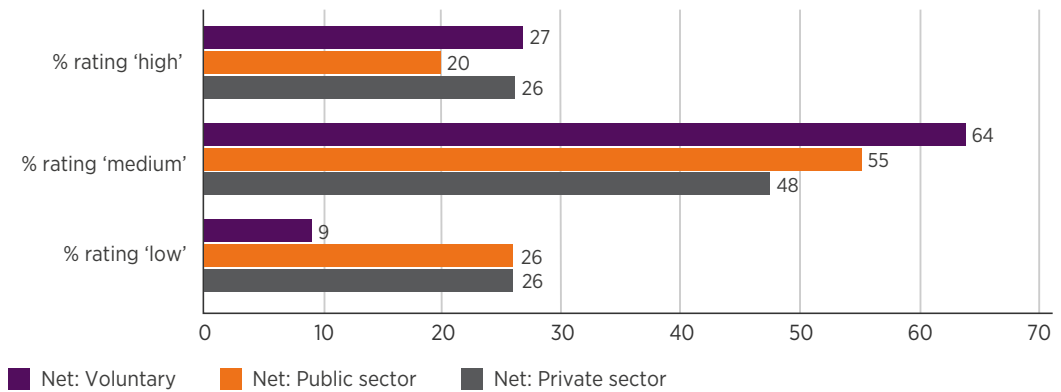
Base: private: n=886; public: n=230; voluntary: n=70

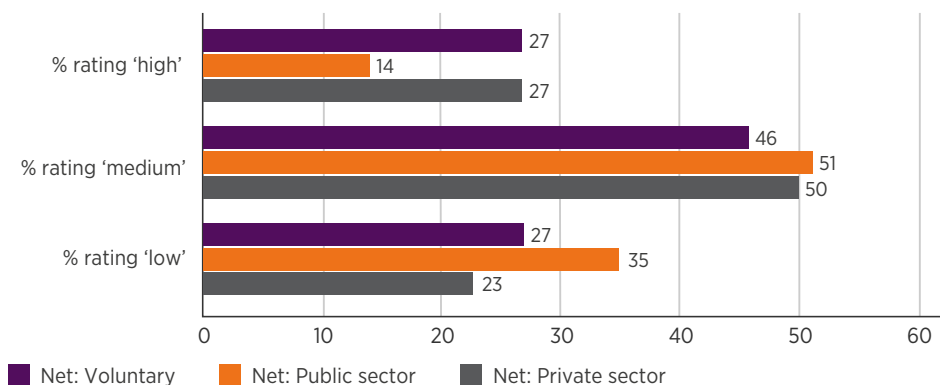**Figure 14: Organisational voice, by organisational size (%)**


Base: 250+: n=720; 2–249: n=466

Individual voice

We find similar levels of individual voice among respondents, with around a quarter reporting strong individual voice and a quarter showing low levels. However, differences across organisational sectors and size are starker for individual than organisational voice: respondents within voluntary and private sector organisations report significantly stronger individual voice (28% each) relative to 12% for the public sector (Figure 15). Especially notable is the proportion of people from the public sector reporting weak individual voice (35%). Employees in smaller organisations are much more inclined to report strong individual voice than larger ones, possibly again because, being less hierarchical, work relationships allow for a more frank and open exchange (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Individual voice, by sector (%)

Base: private: n=911; public: n=181; voluntary: n=70

Employees' experiences of different types of voice

Figure 16: Individual voice, by organisational size (%)
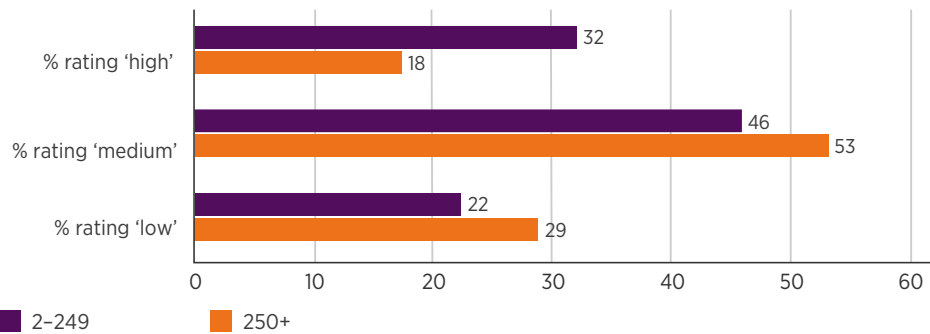
Base: 250+: n=587; 2–249: n=575

While just over 30% of the sample report high innovative behaviour, a sizeable minority report their innovative behaviours to be low (22%).

These findings suggest that for many employees, organisations offer limited scope for sharing matters that the individuals within them regard to be important. It could be that as a result issues remain buried, to the detriment of employee well-being. This omission could also impede the effective functioning or even the reputation of the organisation, since unaddressed issues can sometimes spill over into performance, or cause individuals to post negative reviews online (for example, on Glassdoor). The voluntary sector, often being more values-oriented than public or privately funded institutions, appears to connect better with people's need for individual voice, but the public sector clearly has some progress to make in this respect.

> *For many employees, organisations offer limited scope for sharing matters that the individuals within them regard to be important.*

Added to this, employees within the private and voluntary sectors rate themselves as higher in terms of their innovative behaviours, that is, devising and implementing new ideas, than those in the public sector. A higher percentage of employees within smaller organisations report themselves to be highly innovative (36% versus 27%). These findings suggest that public sector and larger private sector organisations may present barriers for employees seeking to enact new ideas. This is an important consideration for HR specialists in particular, since without careful attention, policies devised to ensure consistency and conformance may inadvertently have the effect of suppressing individuals' tendencies to make suggestions about improvements to existing practice.

The scores for 'silence' are normally distributed across the sample and suggestive of the disenchantment of a sizeable minority (see Appendix 2). One quarter (26%) of the sample as a whole report a high level of silence, that is, a regular reluctance to speak up on matters of importance to them although they have something to say.

Employee silence represents the loss of a valuable resource. It is notable that a high degree of silence is more prevalent within the voluntary and public sectors than it is within the private sector (30%, 28% and 20% respectively). It could be that speaking up is perceived to be more risky in values-driven organisations like those within the voluntary sector. Those within the public sector may fear that speaking up will entail escalation, where individuals are required to submit formal documentation.

Employees' experiences of different types of voice

Implications for HR practice
People professionals should consider how organisational design and processes influence employees' ability to express their voice – both on matters that affect them personally, and on those which could improve innovation and organisational effectiveness. Practitioners should also explore the reasons why individuals may choose not to speak up about issues that are important to them, and uncover ways in which they can be helped to do so by taking into account individual needs and motivations for voice. Some voice mechanisms may exclude particular employee groups – such as part-time or remote workers who may be unable to attend meetings.

(7) The impact of organisational hierarchy on voice

Key findings
- Both individual and organisational voice increase with seniority level.
- Perceived effectiveness of speaking out reduces once individuals start a job, and only rises at mid-career level.

For all forms of voice, previous research suggests that egalitarian ways of operating such as peer evaluations increase employee voice (Erez et al 2002). In contrast, a wide literature shows that voice is stifled by hierarchy in that individuals are reluctant to convey information, especially that which is negative to those who have a higher power status (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974). In the following section, we explore how the prominence of voice differs by position and level of experience in the organisation.

Our analysis found that the more senior an individual is in the organisational hierarchy, the stronger a voice they have (Figures 17 and 18). Although this might be expected for organisational voice, it is notable that senior managers also express their individual voice (that is, to raise issues that matter for them regardless of whether they have an organisational improvement in mind) more than other categories of staff. By contrast, a substantial percentage of those with no management responsibility report low levels of organisational voice, with a slightly smaller percentage stating that their individual voice is weak.

We also found that tenure has an effect on voice, in the sense that people's confidence to express voice fluctuates according to length of service (Figure 20). Individuals' propensity for organisational voice rises after the first six months in the organisation, corresponding with growing familiarity with the role and organisational environment.
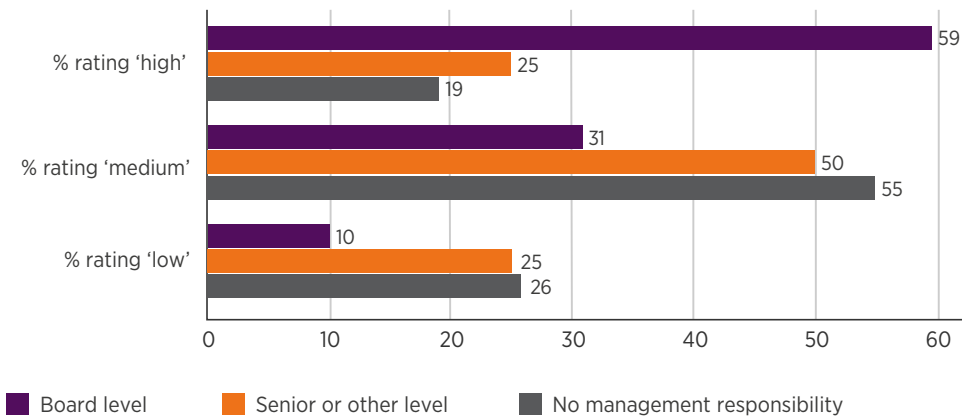
This trend aside, a similar pattern is at play for both forms of voice (see Figure 19). Both individual and organisational voice tail off at between six months and two years of service, remaining fairly constant up to around ten years of service. At this stage voice once again dips on the graph, only recovering at around 15 years of service. This marks the point when there is a significant increase in both forms of voice.

**Figure 17: Organisational voice, by seniority level (%)**

% rating 'high'	Board level: 51, Senior or other level: 33, No management responsibility: 16
% rating 'medium'	Board level: 40, Senior or other level: 53, No management responsibility: 51
% rating 'low'	Board level: 9, Senior or other level: 14, No management responsibility: 34

■ Board level   ■ Senior or other level   ■ No management responsibility
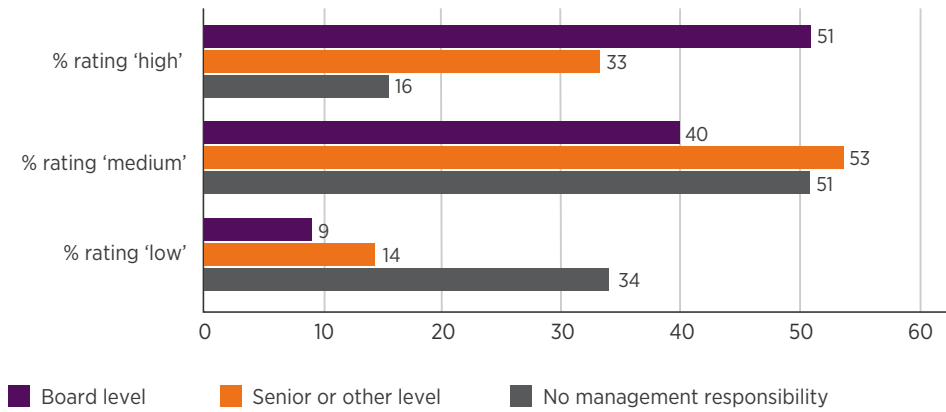
Base: board level: n=45; senior: n=573; no management responsibility: n=319

Figure 18: Individual voice, by seniority level (%)

% rating 'high'	Board level: 59, Senior or other level: 25, No management responsibility: 19
% rating 'medium'	Board level: 31, Senior or other level: 50, No management responsibility: 55
% rating 'low'	Board level: 10, Senior or other level: 25, No management responsibility: 26

■ Board level   ■ Senior or other level   ■ No management responsibility

Base: board level: n=81; senior: n=490; no management responsibility: n=319

Figure 19: Organisational and individual voice, by employee tenure

Organisational voice ── Individual voice ──
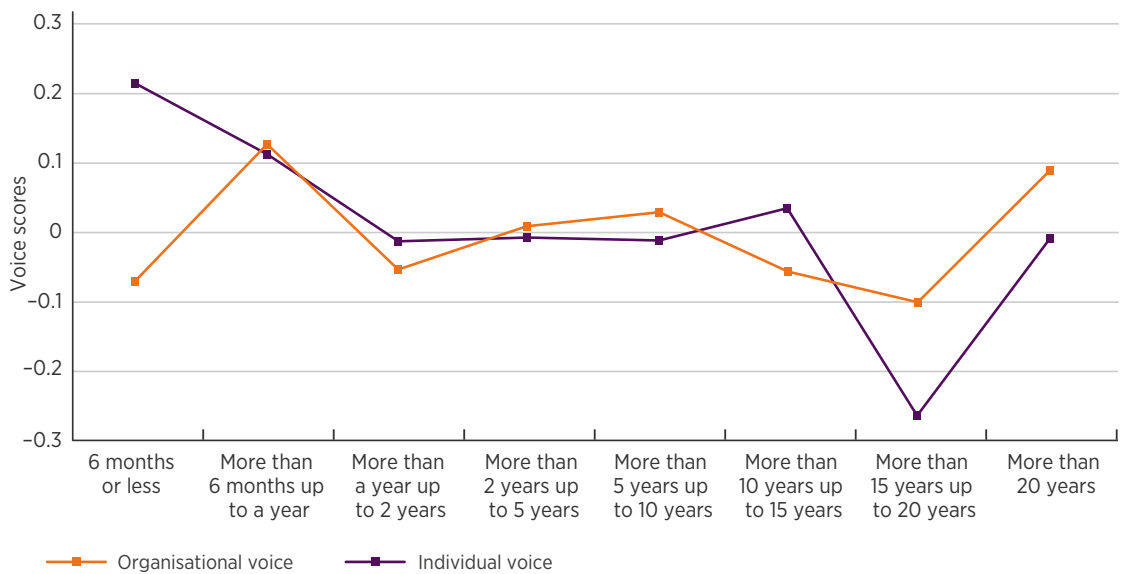
Base: organisational voice: n=1,186; individual voice: n=1,162

The impact of organisational hierarchy on voice

Figure 20: Voice efficacy and length of service
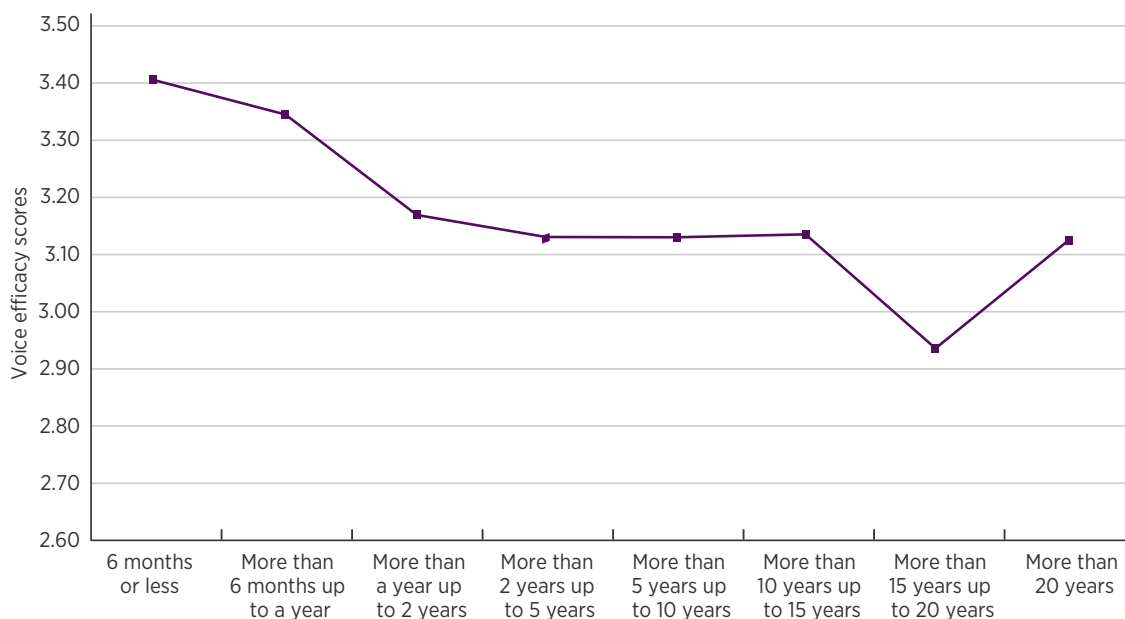
Base: n=2,184

Understanding the changing expectations and expressions of voice

Interpreting these results raises the question of why employees do or do not speak up, either for self-expression purposes or to raise some matter focused on the organisation. It appears that new employees start with high expectations of voice, but as they become familiar with the work environment, they may accept things as the norm and are less motivated to raise issues that initially seemed important.

Our findings highlight the concepts of voice efficacy and voice safety, and how they influence the expression of voice. When making a judgement about speaking up, an individual first assesses whether doing so is likely to be effective (that is, the perceived efficacy of voice). They then assess risks or potential negative outcomes associated with voicing, in other words, judging how safe it is to speak out. Where speaking out is viewed as futile, the individual is less likely to do so, especially where they consider that the costs of voicing are not worth the trouble that would incur as a result (Morrison 2011). People with longer service (15-plus years) may feel more safe expressing voice, while at the same time exhibit stronger voice efficacy, because not only do they understand how to position their ideas in order to increase the likelihood of success, but also because their knowledge and experience makes them less vulnerable (that is, voice safety is high). As can be seen in Figure 20, voice efficacy falls soon after starting a new role, only rising at mid-career stage, some 15 years into tenure. A challenge for organisations is how to build both perceived efficacy and safety of voice at an earlier stage in an individual's career.

Implications for HR practice
People professionals should consider how employees at an early career stage, and those who have recently joined the organisation, can be encouraged to voice their thoughts. Even more importantly, managers and HR professionals together need to ensure employees continue to feel supported to express what's on their mind throughout their employment. Seeing that their suggestions or concerns will be acted on, or not judged negatively by others in the organisation, can help individuals to feel safe in speaking out. A culture of openness and support must be role-modelled at all levels to help voice to be surfaced.

(8) Barriers and enablers of voice

Key findings
- Leadership makes a big difference in determining whether employees feel able to express themselves at work.
- Three in ten don't feel comfortable about taking risks and sharing thoughts with others in the organisation, which can have a negative impact on voice.
- An organisational climate of innovation and flexibility can foster higher levels of employee voice.

In this final section we investigate the effect of contextual conditions on employee voice, reflecting on line manager leadership style, the extent to which individuals experience psychological safety and the effect of organisational climate on employee voice. These are important concepts for HR functions looking to understand how they can shape work and the workplace to enable voice more effectively.

Leadership and employee voice

By measuring the concepts of ethical leadership, trust in management and line manager encouragement for voice, we have developed a scale based on three validated measures – ethical leadership, authenticity in leadership, and leader voice-oriented behaviours (for further details, see Appendix 1). Our analysis shows that this type of leadership is important in understanding voice outcomes.

We found that leadership elicits higher levels of both forms of voice (Figure 21). This suggests that senior figures play an important role in diffusing tensions and enabling employees to articulate concerns and issues (individual voice), as well as drawing out ideas for enhancing practice (organisational voice). The quality of leadership is especially important for individual voice, which is much less likely to occur where leadership as defined above is weak.

HR and people professionals should therefore provide training for all managers to build understanding of how their attitudes, behaviours and leadership style can influence employees' confidence to raise both personal and work-related issues. Ethical leadership, leadership that inspires trust and leader efforts to encourage voice are all important in enabling employee voice.

**Figure 21: Leadership, organisational voice and individual voice**
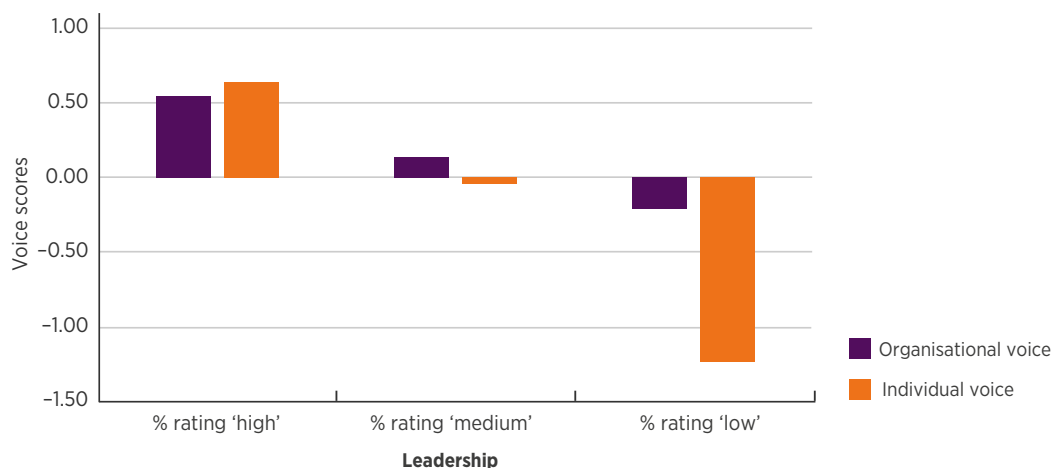
Base: organisational voice: n=409; individual voice: n=536

Although senior figures – particularly line managers – are important in encouraging voice, research suggests that people also look at the wider organisational environment in assessing whether or not to express their views.
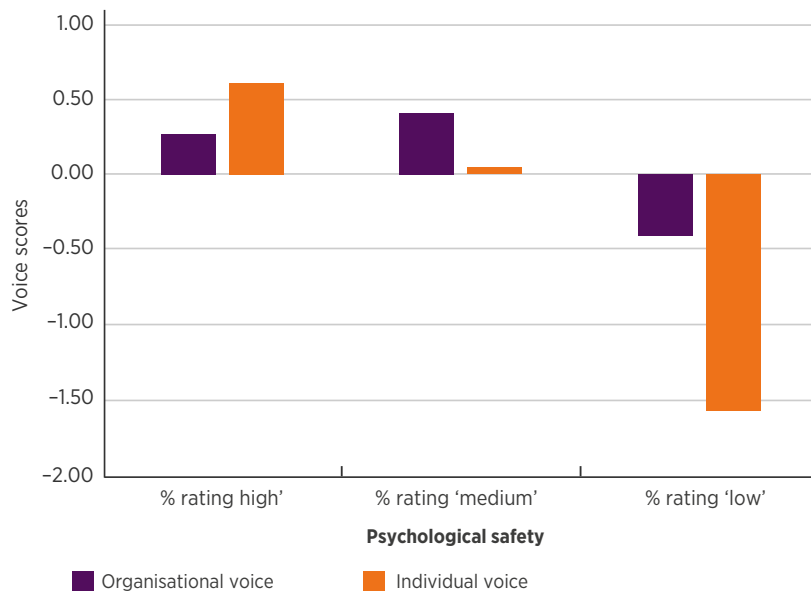
Psychological safety and voice

Psychological safety – that is, employees' feelings about taking risks and sharing thoughts with others in the organisation – provides a bedrock for voice (Edmondson 1999). Somewhat worryingly, we found that nearly three in ten (28%) employees report that their sense of psychological safety at work is low.

Figure 22: Psychological safety (%)

Base: n=1,006
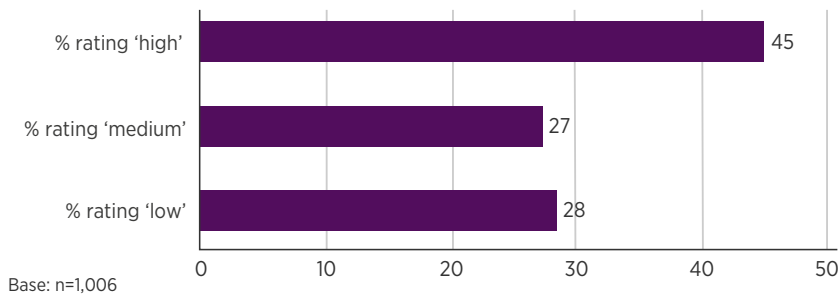
Our analysis also found that individual voice is especially influenced by the presence of psychological safety, although organisational voice too is stronger where psychological safety is high (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Psychological safety and organisational/individual voice

Base: organisational voice: n=552; individual voice: n=585

It's clear that although a low level of psychological safety negatively impacts both forms of voice, it has a particularly strong impact on employees' capacity to express individual voice. This suggests people's propensity to articulate matters of concern to them, and belief that there is interest in their well-being, is seriously undermined where the work environment is perceived to be unsafe to speak up. These results speak to a wide literature investigating the threat that employees often feel when coming up with new

ideas, especially when their suggestions challenge long-established ways of operating and the opinions of others (Shipton et al 2017). Unless they feel secure in that they will be rewarded and encouraged for speaking up, rather than penalised, employees are more likely to remain silent – even where their ideas offer important potential benefits for the organisation. This represents a loss of valuable insight that could benefit the organisation.

The impact of organisational climate on voice

It's well established that employee creativity and innovation are expressed in an environment that offers overt support, and is flexible enough to take on board new ways of thinking and operating (Shipton et al 2017). Our analysis reveals that this is also the case where employee voice is concerned.

The data shows that while just over 20% of the sample report their organisation's climate to be strong in terms of innovation and flexibility, nearly 30% of respondents perceive the climate to be weak in this respect (see Figure A11 in Appendix 2). This is clearly a significant barrier for organisations seeking to be more innovative. In addition, our data illustrates that employee voice can be adversely impacted by employees' perceptions of the organisational environment (Figure 24). Those reporting a climate that is high on innovation and flexibility report stronger organisational voice and also much stronger individual voice. Again, low scores in this respect impact negatively on both outcomes, but especially on individual voice.

These findings highlight the need for employers to develop an open and supportive organisational environment, where individuals feel empowered and motivated to take risks. This could include communicating a clear message that innovation is important and valued, and offering reward and recognition for employees who devise and apply new insights.

Figure 24: Organisational climate of innovation and flexibility, and organisational/individual voice
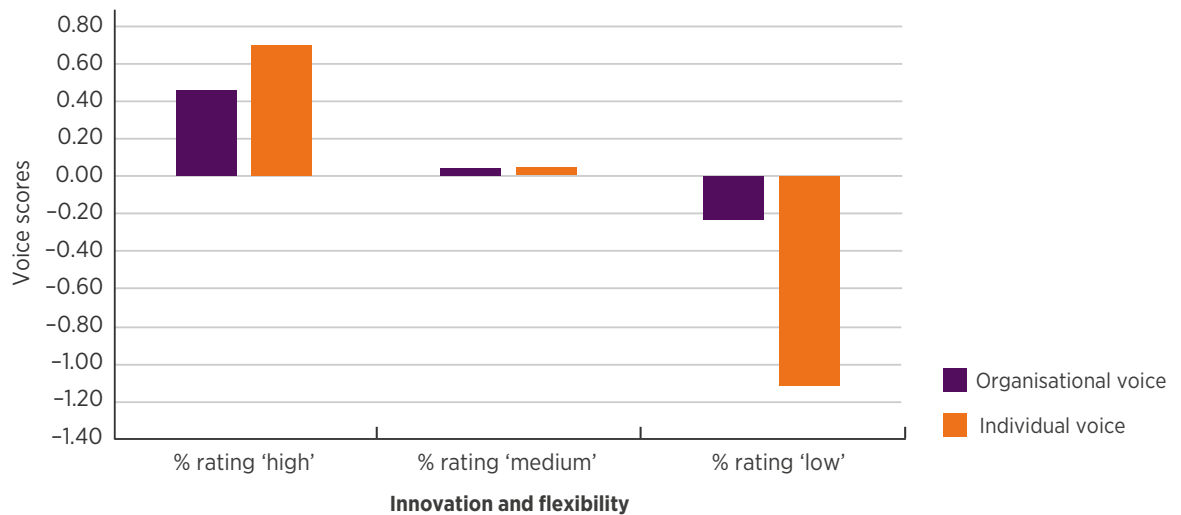
Base: organisational voice: n=1,038; individual voice: n=974

Implications for HR practice
To help employees feel safe and confident about saying how they feel, leaders and line managers need to understand the value of employee voice and demonstrate empathic listening. People professionals should develop an organisational environment which supports and rewards idea-sharing and open discussion.

Barriers and enablers of voice

⑨ Conclusion

In this report, we confirm that satisfaction with voice underpins overall job satisfaction, which, in turn, provides a solid foundation not only for new ideas to emerge 'from the bottom–up', but also for individuals to articulate matters that are important for them.

We explore how two different forms of voice are experienced in the workplace (organisational voice and individual voice), and how each form of voice is differentially impacted by organisational factors. Our data also illustrates the importance of informal mechanisms and the people management relationship for enabling employee voice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is one-to-one conversations with line managers that are the main voice channel for employees. Leadership and psychological safety are key factors that help individuals speak up, particularly for the purpose of self-expression.

However, overall, this research suggests that there are considerable gaps in organisations' current abilities to enable employee voice, both on matters that are important to individuals, and those which enhance the functioning of the organisation. Our results suggest that a significant proportion of employees feel unable to share matters that they feel are important. This may be detrimental not only to their well-being, but also damaging where organisational learning, resilience and innovation are concerned. Furthermore, many individuals have no influence over their working conditions, which may reflect an overall decline in collective representation.

These findings are important in the context of creating good work and quality jobs, because they point towards factors that can empower or disempower people in shaping their working lives. Our survey has provided a snapshot of how employees experience voice and has raised a number of questions about how organisations can develop better mechanisms. In the next phase of the research, we will explore potential solutions to these questions through a deeper study of organisational practices and HR systems that influence voice, and what good voice practice looks like in different contexts.

⑩ Implications for the people profession

Our findings highlight a number of key takeaways for HR, L&D and OD professionals:

- We provide **evidence that employee involvement in decision-making influences job satisfaction**. We have shown that mechanisms that create opportunities for individuals at all levels in the organisation to have some agency in decision-making (for example, by having input to meetings and shaping decisions that impact their work) can positively impact their overall attitude to work. People professionals should look to improve the extent to which employees are engaged in decision-making, and design mechanisms and systems that facilitate involvement at all levels.

- We further illustrate the **critical role of line managers in enabling voice**: one-to-one meetings are a primary channel for voice, and leadership fosters voice. Good line management relations are also key to developing psychological safety, an important prerequisite for voice. This points to the need for all line managers to be trained to understand the value of employee voice, encourage individuals to voice issues that are important to them, particularly during one-to-ones, and demonstrate ethical leadership. Given the importance of line management, improving this capacity and developing strong relationships between managers and their reports is a key role for people professionals.

- An important finding is that **while many people feel under pressure at work**, **they often don't raise the issue**, and many of those who have spoken up didn't feel supported. The survey also highlights that many organisations provide limited opportunity for individuals to speak up on matters that are important to them, and nearly three in ten employees report low psychological safety at work. People professionals therefore need to create safe environments for people to speak out, which can positively impact well-being and organisational effectiveness.

- We find that **building an organisational climate of flexibility and innovation enables voice**. However, our data shows a quarter of employees do not often suggest improvements to the way things are done in the organisation, or share innovative ideas. This points to the need for employers to create environments where people feel empowered to suggest new ways of working.

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(12) **Appendix**

Appendix 1: Factor analysis
Two primary factors were established from the four measures of voice, with the two organisational forms of voice loading heavily onto one factor, and self-expression and voice efficacy loading heavily on another. Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation was used to simplify the expression of these factors. The rotated factor loadings are displayed in Table A1.

Table A1: Factor analysis for individual and organisational voice

	Component	
	1	**2**
Self-expression		0.861
Voice efficacy		0.891
Promotive voice manager	0.930	
Promotive voice team	0.906	

Note: Factor loadings < 0.2 are suppressed.

The first component accounted for approximately 43% of the shared variance, while the second component accounted for approximately 40%. See Table A2 for examples of the questions that were asked for each of the initial variables as well as silence.

Table A2: Example items for the original variables as well as silence

Individual voice	Voice efficacy	It is useless for me to suggest new ways of doing things here.
		Nothing changes even if I speak up to managers.
	Self-expression	I can freely express my thoughts with those I work closely with.
		Nobody who I work closely with will pick on me even if I have different opinions.
Organisational voice	Manager	I give my line manager or those I work for suggestions about how to make work better, even if others disagree.
		I challenge my line manager to deal with problems at work.
	Team	In my immediate work group, I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group.
		In my place of work, I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group.
Silence		I chose to remain silent when I had concerns about my work.
		I said nothing to others about problems I noticed where I work.

Additionally, a principal component analysis was run on the variables that examined leadership styles and attitudes. This analysis included the variables of ethical leadership, trust in management, and manager attitudes. The same procedure that was used to examine forms of voice was used to investigate the components that existed between these measures. In contrast to the analysis of the voice measures, all leadership qualities loaded highly onto one factor (as shown in Table A3).

Table A3: Factor analysis for leadership

	Component
	1
Ethical leadership	0.934
Trust in management	0.918
Manager attitudes	0.883

This component accounted for 83% of the variance of the three measures included. We felt that this component best captured qualities of leadership of the managers, and thus this factor was labelled as 'leadership'.

Example items for the leadership component can be seen in Table A4. Participants were requested to indicate how strongly they felt about each of these statements, generally ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Table A4: Example items for leadership

Ethical leadership	Your line manager disciplines employees who violate ethical standards.
	Your line manager makes fair and balanced decisions.
Perceived manager solicitation of voice	My line manager asks me personally what skills I have that s/he may not know about that might contribute to our performance here.
	My line manager is willing to learn from others.
Trust in management	I think my line manager is fair in his/her treatment of me.
	Line managers make employees feel valued.

For all three factors, the standardised regressed scores were saved and used as individual variables throughout the proceeding analysis.

Appendix 2: Additional figures and tables

Figure A1: Satisfaction with voice to senior management (%)

Very satisfied — 16
Satisfied — 33
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied — 20
Dissatisfied — 15
Very dissatisfied — 11
Not applicable – I do not have the opportunity at all to express my views — 4
Don't know — 1

Base: n=2,372
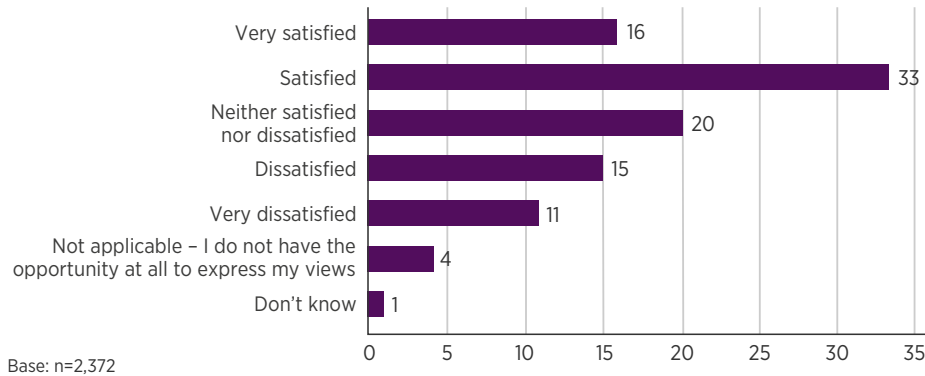
Figure A2: Employees' experience of innovative behaviour (%)

% rating 'high'
% rating 'medium'
% rating 'low'

Base: n=1,552
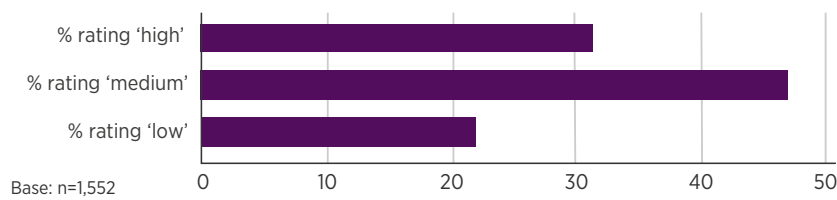
Figure A3: Innovative behaviour, by sectors (%)

% rating 'high'
% rating 'medium'
% rating 'low'

■ Net: Voluntary　　■ Net: Public sector　　■ Net: Private sector

Base: private: n=1,206; public: n=253; voluntary: n=93
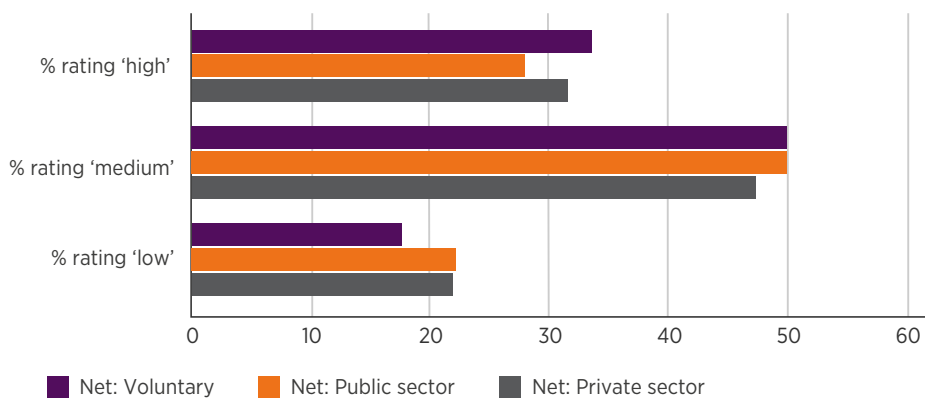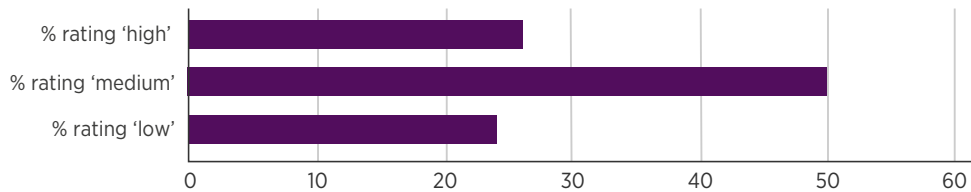
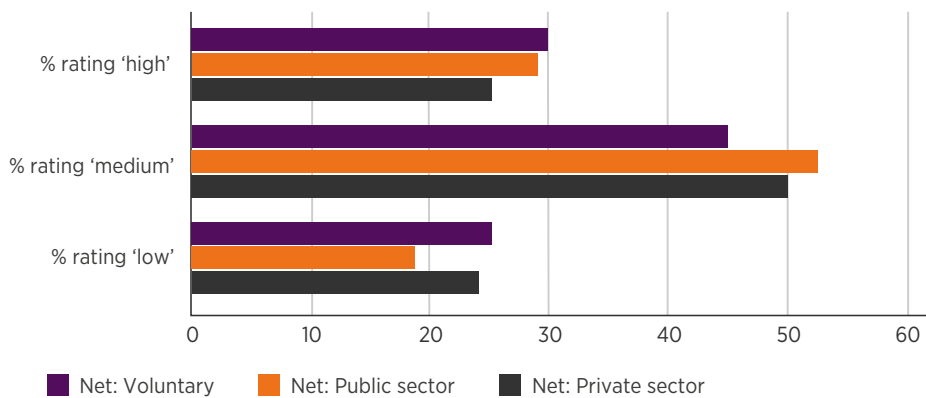**Figure A4: Employees' experience of innovative behaviour, by organisational size (%)**
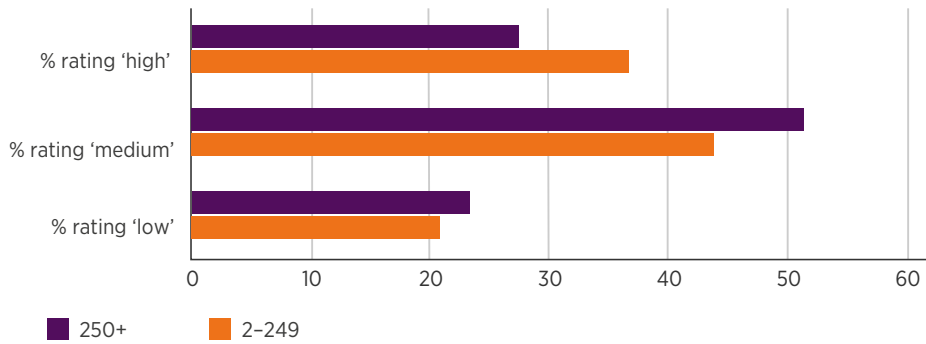
Base: 250+: n=773; 2–249: n=779

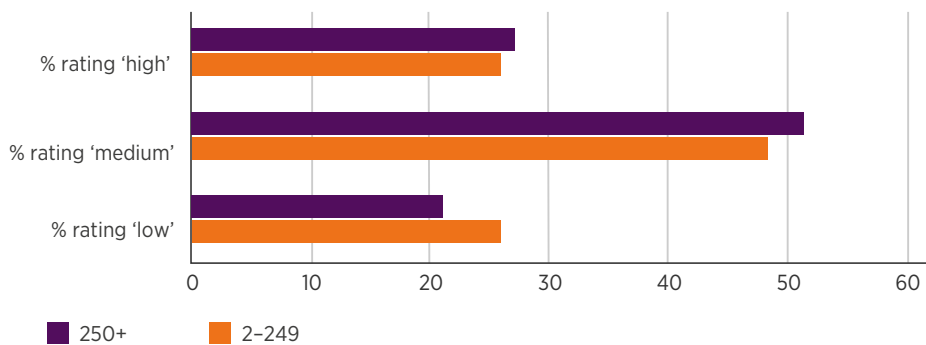**Figure A5: Employees' experience of silence (%)**

Base: n=1,862

Figure A6: Silence, by sectors (%)

Base: private: n=1,455; public: n=301; voluntary: n=106

Figure A7: Silence, by organisational size (%)

Base: 250+: n=967; 2–249: n=895

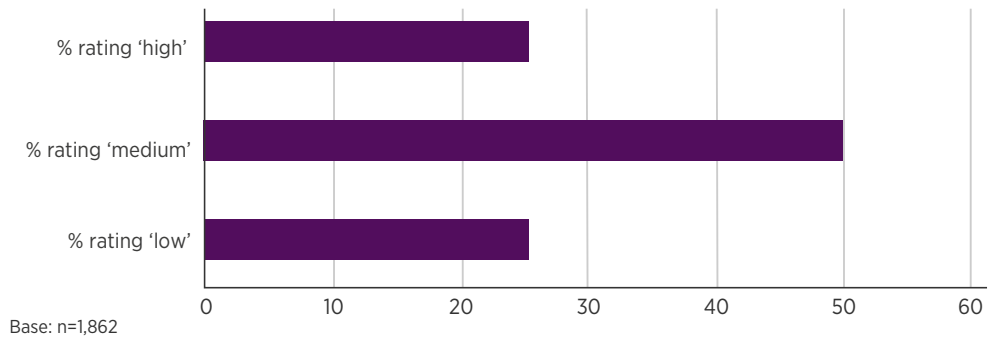**Figure A8: Employees' experience of organisational voice (%)**

Base: n=1,862

Figure A9: Employees' experience of individual voice (%)

Base: n=1,162
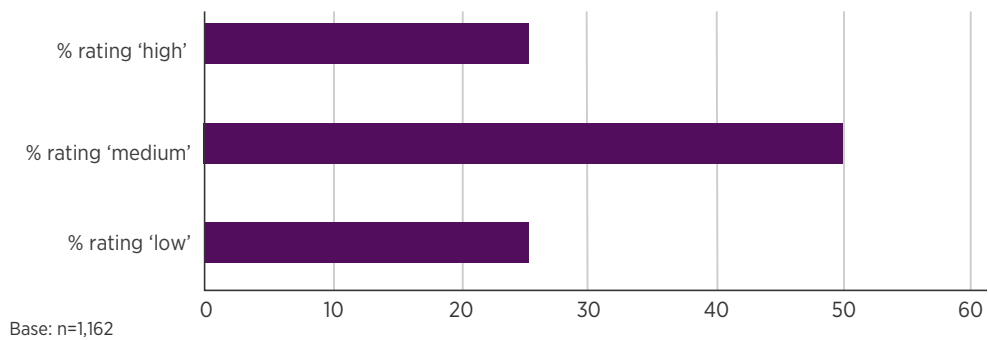
Figure A10: Employees' experience of leadership (%)
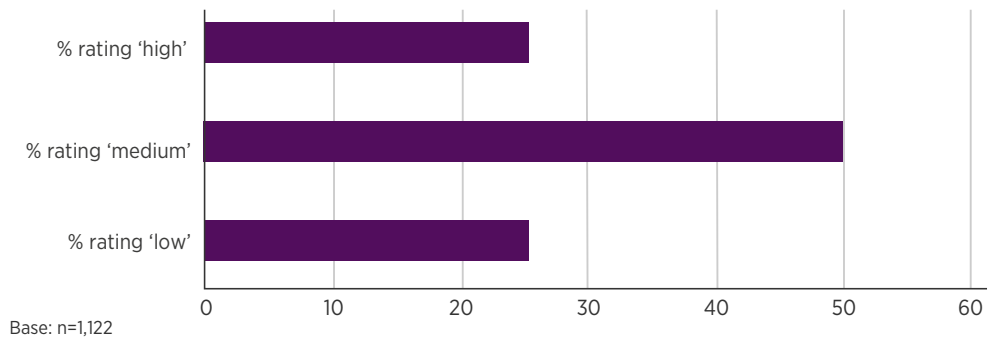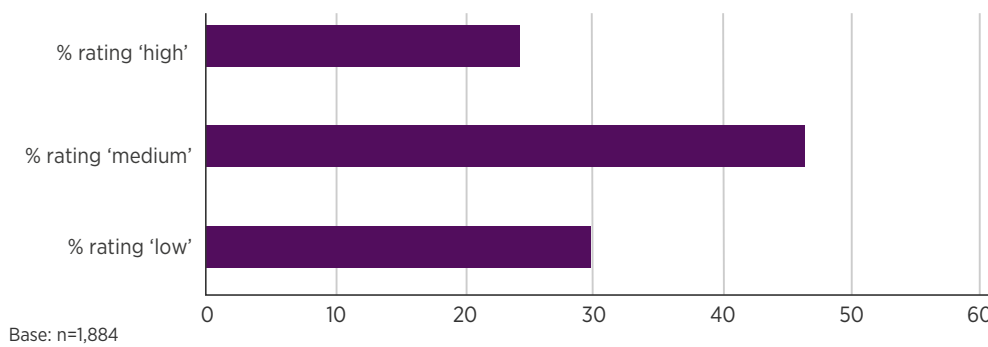

Base: n=1,122

Figure A11: Employees' experience of an organisational climate of innovation and flexibility (%)

Base: n=1,884

Appendix 3: Differences in organisational voice and individual voice across organisational sizes and sectors

Of the survey respondents, 56% worked in the private sector for smaller organisations, while 44% worked for larger organisations. This relatively even distribution of organisation sizes is contrasted with the public sector, where 86.6% worked for larger organisations and only 13.2% worked for smaller organisations. The voluntary sector had a similar distribution to the private sector, with 45.4% working for larger organisations and 54.6% working for smaller organisations.

Because of the unbalanced distribution of organisational size between the private and public sectors, by controlling for organisational size and focusing solely on sectoral differences, private sector employees had significantly higher individual voice scores than private sector employees, but no statistically significant differences in organisational voice.

When looking solely at organisational size, however, statistically significant differences existed in nine out of the thirteen outcome and antecedent variables measured in the survey. Some of these variables include individual voice, leadership, organisational commitment, and innovation behaviours, with smaller organisations having higher average scores. However, no statistically significant differences were found between organisational size and organisational voice. These outcomes suggest that while sector does play an important role in the ability of employees to have self-expression, the size of the organisation plays a much stronger role in determining the strength of many other outcomes. Importantly, neither organisational size nor sector lead to significant differences in organisational voice of the employees.

Appendix 4: Methodology

This report is part of an ongoing project investigating workplace voice. Based on an in-depth thematic literature review looking at various forms of voice, as well as key barriers, enablers and contextual considerations, we developed an online survey of people in the workforce across the UK economy.

The survey was carried out by YouGov between 9 August and 3 September 2018. In total, there were 2,372 respondents to the online survey, and the sample was representative of the UK workforce in terms of gender, full- or part-time work status, organisation size within each sector, and industry. All respondents were drawn from the YouGov panel of over 1 million people in the UK.

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