

Exploring the Reality of Employee Voice in the Saudi Context: Evidence from the Private Sector

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Received: July 30, 2022

Accepted: August 16, 2022

Online Published: September 15, 2022

doi:10.5539/ijbm.v17n10p62

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v17n10p62>

Abstract

This research explores the current state of employee voice in the Saudi context with the aim of understanding workers' behaviours and managers' practices regarding participation and involvement in decision making. The empirical findings from the in-depth qualitative case study show that employees are barely heard by the line managers, and they are only informed of the decisions made by the management. The evidence reveals that only the highest managerial level is formally involved in decision making. On the other hand, participation does not take place at the department level with staff workers. The interviews show there is no place for discussions between staff workers and supervisors related to the workload, satisfaction, and wages. This has resulted in workers reducing efforts and noticeable and gradual increase in absenteeism and turnover. This article argues firms in Saudi Arabia can create a work environment that encourages line managers to be more receptive to employee voice. This can be achieved through forming labour committees and reducing the intensity of the authoritarian managerial style to allow for workers to convey their work-related concerns more openly and directly.

Keywords: employee voice, participation, involvement, labour committee, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Frederick Taylor's approach to management was made in a time when the uses of technology for repetitive tasks were limited compared to today's modern world. Although Taylor's method of impeding workers from participation in decision making and planning was spread across Europe and Russia prior the First World War, it was criticised by engineering societies in the UK for dehumanising factories and denuding management from emotions (Blake & Moseley, 2010). The new trend of Human Resources Management (HRM) is more focused on the direct participation of employees in the workplace, ranging from information sharing to decision making. There is a growing trend in contemporary innovative firms on focusing on releasing employees' skills and potential through involving them in shaping the organisations' decisions on different levels (Butler, 2009). A number of studies assert that listening to employees' voices leads to better organisational performance and enhanced overall productivity in the workplace (Chang & Huang, 2010; Ullah & Yasmin, 2013; Azevedo et al., 2020).

HR activities in most organisations are limited to selecting, training, and rewarding employees. However, recently, these activities are considered basic roles in any HR department. Recent studies (e.g., Bulter, 2009; Azevedo et al., 2020; Rani et al., 2021) show the aspect of employee voice should be introduced and adopted by HR practitioners due to its positive effects on both employees and organisational performance (Azevedo et al., 2020; Tedon & Bruk-Lee, 2020). Even though many studies have examined the relationship between employee involvement and many other aspects, such as employee productivity, loyalty, job satisfaction, and organisational performance, this concept requires further investigations and detailed evidence, especially in the Middle East region (Ullah & Yasmin, 2013; Jha et al., 2019).

Research on employee voice broadly focuses on the analysing opportunities for workers to be involved the decision-making process either collectively through trade unions or individually, which is defined as the 'non-union mode of representation' (Butler, 2009). Since trade unions have never existed in Saudi Arabia, this research focuses on exploring direct and informal means for employees to voice their opinions. To our knowledge, there is no qualitative research that has deeply investigated employee voice in Saudi Arabia. Little

quantitative research on employee voice in Saudi Arabia has been carried out (Alzlabani, 2009; Alzlabani & Nair, 2011; Alzlabani & Modi, 2014; Arain, et al., 2022). These quantitative studies have brought valuable insights into the impact of employee voice on different aspects of the workplace, such as satisfaction and productivity. However, little is known about workers' behaviours and managers' practices regarding participation and involvement in decision making in Saudi firms. Therefore, the main aim of this qualitative case study research was to explore the reality of employee voice in a Saudi organisation. The objectives of this research were:

- 1- To identify the reasons underlying the absence of collective forms of voice (i.e., labour committee).
- 2- To explore the means used by the management to involve/prevent workers in the decision making process.
- 3- To understand how formal and informal types of employee voice function at the workplace level.
- 4- To provide practical implications on employee voice in the Saudi context.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on employee voice and evaluates the current state of research on employee voice in the Saudi context. Section three outlines the conceptual framework to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem. Section four discusses the research methods, and section five presents the findings on the case study firm. Discussion and conclusions are drawn in section six.

2. Literature review

2.1 Voice in the Workplace

A defining feature of contemporary employment relations is the decline of trade unionism. New trends in HRM focus more on employee voice and the direct participation of employees in the management of the workplace, ranging from information-sharing to combined decision-making (see for example, Butler, 2005; Wilkinson et al., 2013). The concept of *employee voice*, the focus of this research, comprises all verbal communication from workers to managers regarding opinions, disagreements, and complaints about job-related issues (Tedon & Bruk-Lee, 2020). In the academic literature, employee voice seems to be a malleable concept as it comes under different terminologies, such as employee involvement, participation, and engagement. Scholars distinguish between direct and indirect forms of employee voice. Direct voice is when workers directly communicate to his or her direct manager/supervisor regarding job related issues. The indirect voice occurs when there are employee representatives acting as intermediaries between management and workers through different types of participation, such as collective bargaining (Amah & Ahiauzu, 2013). In addition, indirect employee involvement can range from solely consulting and informing employees about minor decisions to having full authority to influence new decisions. Therefore, employee voice, either in its direct or indirect forms, generally concerns the mechanisms that allow labour to have a say in matters such as wages, working hours, and work organisation (Farndale et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2013; Tedon & Bruk-Lee, 2020).

The employee voice concept consists of two main elements, the effect of employees on the decision making process and access to organisation information (Schreurs et al, 2013). Based on these two elements, Schreurs and his colleagues conducted their study on 134 organisations, including 22,902 employees in total, to examine empirically the effect of voice on pay-level satisfaction, job satisfaction, and commitment. They found that low level of pay can be compensated by employee involvement in the decision-making process. In addition, they recommend companies with modest financial resources use employee involvement as a tool by the HR function to compensate low pay-level and increase job satisfaction.

Means of employee voice can be grouped into formal and informal. Formal employee voice occurs mostly in well-established organisations and takes the form of written suggestions to managers or supervisors by workers. In contrast, informal employee voice can be oral or verbal involvement, and it occurs mostly in small to mid-size firms. Furthermore, employee voice varies in strength. The weakest voice comes when an employee only shares information, and the strongest voice comes when he or she influences final decisions at the departmental or organisational levels (Butler, 2009; Wilkinson et al, 2013; Azevedo et al., 2020).

Numerous studies (e.g. Cardy et al., 2007; Lawler & Boudreau, 2009; Chang & Huang, 2010; Kizilos et al., 2013; Rani et al., 2021) have shown that listening to employee voice leads to better organisational performance since it can help in solving problems and making more rapid and well-founded decisions. However, according to Budd and his colleagues (2010, p. 2), arrangements for allowing employee voice to be heard 'raise(s) major issues to do with the distribution of power and influence within organisations, and the legislative framework of the country in which the employing organisation is located'. Nevertheless, the bulk of studies on employee voice

were conducted in the western world, which differs enormously from the middle east region in many aspects. Next, we evaluate the current state of knowledge on employee voice in the Saudi context.

2.2 Voice in the Saudi Workplace

In Saudi Arabia, it is prohibited for both Saudis and migrant workers to conduct strikes, form trade unions, or attempt collective bargaining. However, in 2001, the Saudi Council of Ministers issued a decree that allows for the formation of a Saudi 'labour committee' in any company that has a hundred or more Saudi employees. Labour committees represent employees and are restricted to Saudi citizens. They require approval from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social development to be renewed every three years (Saudi National Committee of workers committees, 2022). The committees' responsibilities are limited to providing recommendations to management regarding the following issues:

- A- Improving working conditions.
- B- Increasing productivity and efficiency.
- C- Enhancing health.
- D- Assuring safety of the labour force.
- E- Improving training programmes.
- F- Increasing cultural and social awareness.

The labour committees have limited independence. For example, the Minister Ministry of Human Resources and Social development has the right to resolve any labour committee dispute, ask whomever he thinks suitable to attend a committee's meetings, and approve selected committee members. In addition, labour committees are not authorised to defend individual cases. At present, there are less than 30 labour committees in Saudi Arabia. The decline in the number of labour committees might be attributable to their limited powers; however, the decline may also indicate firms employ non-collective (direct) mechanisms of voice for Saudi workers to avoid the organisation of collective voice that typically gives workers more power.

The first study on employee voice and participation in Saudi Arabia was conducted by Hamdan (2009). He surveyed 300 employees in the Saudi private sector. The main findings show employees prefer direct communication over workers committees. However, 63% believe workers committees are ineffective and this might explain their preference of direct communication with the management. Another study was conducted by Hamdan and Nair (2011) on two huge Saudi organisations (Royal Commission at Yanbu and Saudi Arabia Basic Industries Corporation) to investigate the impact of employee empowerment on job satisfaction. In their model, employee empowerment has three main dimensions, restructuring of the organisation, motivation, and employee involvement in decision making. They used a sample of 123 employees from both companies in different hierarchical levels. They also conclude there is a positive correlation between satisfaction and participation, which matches earlier studies conducted in the western world.

Little empirical research on employee voice in Saudi Arabia has been carried out, other than the work by Alzalabani and his colleagues (Alzalabani, 2009; Alzalabani & Nair, 2011; Alzalabani & Modi, 2014). Alzalabani stated (2009, p.1) 'there have been no studies of employee voice in Saudi Arabia'. Hitherto, the literature on voice is limited to his and his colleagues' contributions. These studies were conducted quantitatively and focused on labour committees in three of the major petrochemical organisations. They examined the impact of employee voice on job satisfaction and commitment. Consequently, they offer a limited understanding of the direct and indirect voice mechanisms used within firms. Therefore, the main aim of this qualitative case study research is to explore the current state of employee voice in a Saudi organisation. In-depth qualitative data about both collective and non-collective forms of voice are greatly needed to reveal their dynamics, outcomes, and processes.

3. Research Conceptual Framework

Wilkinson et al. (2013) developed the framework of employee involvement and participation (EIP) to examine the extent to which different schemes allow workers to have a voice regarding work-related issues. Wilkinson and his colleagues propose the EIP model has four dimensions (Depth, level, form and scope of EIP). First, depth refers to workers' ability to have a verbal opinion (whether direct or indirect) about organisational decisions. The level of EIP indicates on which managerial level the EIP occurs. Some level examples are the corporate level and the department level. Also, the level of EIP indicates the degree of power the worker has to influence a decision. For instance, a high level of EIP exists when a top manager has complete authority to make a decision. The form of EIP refers to the degree of involvement formality and whether it has a direct or indirect impact on the

decision-making process. In well-established organisations, formal participation is structured and organised, and the outcomes are mostly predicted (Amah and Ahiauzu, 2013). The scope of EIP is the degree of importance of the decision being made. This can range from strategic decisions on the corporate level to minor changes in a department (see Wilkinson et al., 2013). The figure below shows examples on the four dimensions of the EIP framework.

Level of EIP	Form of EIP	Example of EIP	Scope of issues covered	There can be overlap between divisions
Individual	Informal	Off-the-record conversations	Workload, Personal matters	
Work unit	a) Formal direct (through line managers)	Department meetings	Department-specific issues, Downward communication	
	b) Formal direct (through teams/groups)	Team-working Task-participation	Operational matters	
Organisation	Formal direct	Cross-department committees Employee surveys	Health & Safety, Customer interactions, Employee satisfaction	
	Formal indirect (through unions)	Enterprise bargaining	Wages, Work Conditions, Grievances	

Figure 1. The four dimensions of employee involvement and participation

Source: (Wilkinson et al., 2013, p. 587)

4. Research Methods

The qualitative case-study approach was incorporated to investigate employee voice in Saudi Arabia in order to offer rich data on the experiences and attitudes of managers and employees involved/not involved in decision making. To our knowledge, issues of employee voice in Saudi Arabia have not been investigated through qualitative research; therefore, it is difficult to design a questionnaire that covers the main factors of the research issues. The qualitative case study design was ideal to offer deep and rich data on the experiences of both managers and employees to achieve the objectives of this research.

This research is based on information-rich evidence from a large Saudi firm in the Western region, anonymised throughout as SAWCo. The firm operates mainly in the real estate sector. It was established as a family-owned business in the late 1990s and has grown over decades to employ over 600 workers. Data was collected through observing the environment of the case study firm, analysing written documents, and interviewing participants. Fieldwork was predominantly conducted during the last quarter of 2021. Data was collected primarily through 15 face-to-face interviews, with workers and managers from a variety of nationalities and occupations. Interviews were conducted formally inside the workplace and informally outside it. This helped the researcher to gain the trust of the interviewees and gain rich information.

Table 1. Case study demographic details

Category	Number
Number of workers	623
Interviews with line staff	9
Interviews with managers	6

Data was analysed through the analytical technique of template analysis (King, 2004) as part of the general analytical strategy of case description. Template analysis is a hierarchical thematic approach to qualitative data analysis (ibid). The template analysis approach is suitable for this research since it ‘combines a deductive and inductive approach to qualitative analysis in the sense that codes can be predetermined [concept driven] and then amended or added to as data are collected and analysed [data driven]’ (Saunders et al. 2012, p. 572). Codes and categories were developed based on the conceptual framework of this research. The data was gathered as field notes from audio recordings from interviews. After converting all data to written form, the data was uploaded to

NVivo software for labelling by giving each code a suitable name. Then, similar codes were combined into broader categories.

5. Findings

5.1 Workforce and Organizational Structures

Based on the employment contract, workers in SAWCo are divided into two categories: direct hire labour and non-sponsored labour, who are employed by subcontractors. It should be stressed here that the findings of this study are only related to the non-manual labour in the first category (direct hire labour). Thus, the table below shows the key figures of this category.

Table 2. Workforce structure

Total number of workforce	623
Total number of managers/supervisors	119
Total number of staff workers	504
Total number of Saudi workers	312
Total number of manual workers (employed by subcontractors)	144

Despite the large number of workers in SAWCo, the firm operates with everything appearing to be controlled by the owner directly, who in turn delegates full authority over operational tasks to the CEO.

Under the CEO comes the first managerial layer, consisting of four managers called departments' heads. The four departments of the company are: marketing, human resources, finance, and architecture. Within these departments, there are smaller divisions led by a supervisor. Each department's head manages a team of supervisors that ranges from three to 14 supervisors. Each supervisor is then directly responsible for several staff workers ranging between five and 30.

5.2 Physical and Cultural Elements of SAWCo

SAWCo's headquarter is located in a large modern building in the Western region of Saudi Arabia. The building's main architectural feature is the integration of concrete and metal into a beautiful contemporary design. In this six-floor building, every floor consists of four huge halls, each containing about 20 offices close to each other in straight rows. Employees sit along both sides of these desks facing each other. Also, there are desks in the middle of these halls, surrounded by a complex of two to four offices with glass walls. The latter are occupied by supervisors, who can constantly see and hear each other and the office staff. The heads of the four departments are located on the fifth floor, and the CEO is on the Sixth floor.

Walking through the above-mentioned work stations, it becomes apparent that almost all the workers are Arab, with Arabic being the main language observed in that environment, besides being the official medium of oral and written communication in the firm. Moreover, the researcher observed the informal atmosphere appears to prevail in all the departments. For example, on many occasions, I saw managers and staff workers, especially Saudis, smoking together and sharing jokes during breaks in a way that made it difficult for an outsider to differentiate between managers and staff workers. Moreover, I noticed during the interviews that both staff workers and supervisors mention the compassion of the owner and the CEO.

A crucial element of SAWCo's organisational culture is it is centred on interpersonal relationships and family ties between workers and their managers. For example, nine of the total interviewees had at least one relative in the firm. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed these familial ties, on some occasions, led to tension between workers since many benefits, such as pay raises, were given to relatives in the firm. For example, one interviewee stated:

...what is annoying here is that some workers here were hired only because they have relatives in the company. Also now they enjoy good positions and high salaries. This is corruption and totally unfair.

The interviews with workers revealed the interpersonal relationship is evident in all aspects of work inside SAWCo, including employee voice.

5.3 The Absence of the Labour Committee

Although workers in SAWCo have the legal right to form a labour committee, the idea of forming one was never mentioned or thought about by workers. The interviews reveal line staff have no information about labour

committee legislations in Saudi Arabia. However, the HR manager knows about the labour committee and stated:

Yes, I heard about labour committees. I know that they do exist in some large companies. But here we do not need one. We follow the open-door policy. Workers can come whenever they want to talk about their problems. We are more like a family here.

On the other hand, workers showed interest to form a labour committee in the firm when the researcher mentioned its existence in other firms. One Saudi HR specialist stated:

I have no information about labour committees. In fact, I do not know how we can form one. I will search about it and I will talk to the HR manager. I think we need to form it in this company.

It should be noted that all other interviewed staff workers have no information about labour committees in Saudi Arabia.

5.4 Formal Participation

Although SAWCo is a large well-established organisation, it has not applied a formal programme of employee voice. Only supervisors and departments' heads can voice their opinions formally through two means: 1) Monthly meetings with the CEO and 2) written emails. The head of the HR department explained this procedure:

All of the managers here meet regularly at the beginning of each month. This is a company policy that was set by the founder. In these meetings we discuss strategic decisions and we are given the opportunity by the CEO to say our concerns about the operations and the future direction of the company.

On the other side, interviews with staff workers reveal that none of the supervisors or the departments' heads conduct any formal regular meetings. Most of the interviewed employees stated they need this kind of formal meeting to share their opinions and concerns formally in front of colleagues and supervisors. A Saudi accountant stated:

I think in the finance department we need to have weekly meetings with the department's head. Financial matters are so critical and they need to be conveyed formally so that the manager can take full responsibility of all decisions. Currently, if something wrong happens here, the workers are blamed for it, and this is not fare.

Likewise, an architect explained the situation in the architecture department:

My job as an architect is very stressful, and it affects my personal life too. My colleagues in this department also have the same problem. We need to talk about these kind of issues with the supervisors and managers here. With the currently workload and wages we paid, we will not be able to sustain this in the long run.

It is worth noting that some supervisors conduct an annual meeting with subordinates. However, there is no policy in the company stating supervisors need to conduct formal meetings with workers. One supervisor in the marketing department stated:

I make a meeting with all the people in my team at the beginning of each year. In this meeting I set goals for the team and later for each member. At the end of the year I use these goals to fill the performance appraisal form.

The statement of the supervisor above shows formal meetings are used for top-down communication and not for hearing what workers have to say about job-related issues.

5.5 Informal Participation

One of the key findings in the case study firm is the practice of the CEO hearing workers' concerns directly from them. Most of the interviewed workers stated they can easily reach the CEO in person to talk to him about a concern related to work. As one HR specialist stated:

The CEO is like our father. If I have any big concern about something related to work, I go directly to him. He listen to all of the workers in the company

Although the CEO listen to workers who are at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, not all middle and high levels managers follow this behaviour. It was stated by many workers that they cannot convey their opinions to their direct supervisors, and they are not involved to the decision-making process at the departmental level. For example, one employee stated:

My supervisor never listens to me. I remember one time I went him to suggest something that would

benefit the company. He responded to me by saying do you want to teach me how to do my work.

The interviews with workers show middle-level managers and supervisors do not encourage workers to voice their opinions at any time they want but only when they are asked to do so by their managers. One supervisor openly justified this practice:

If you give workers the right to say their opinions about work at any time they want to, you will loss control over them..... Maybe one time if you do not listen to them, they will complain to the CEO directly.

However, the practice of not involving employees in the decision-making process at the department level appears to have impacted workers' loyalty to the firm. Turnover and absenteeism are observed to be very high. One sales specialist stated:

Most employees in this department has lost faith in this company. Many of my co-workers already resigned this year... we do not feel that are opinions are valued by the managers in this company. The CEO is a nice guy and he listen to us when we want to complain about a supervisor. But I think in the marketing department we need more than this. We need to say our concerns about wages, annual bonuses and ways to improve sales and customer service.

One of the main elements that largely influences employee voice in SAWCo is the role of collaboration between workers to communicate their concerns to the line managers. It was witnessed that workers, especially Saudis, tend to collaborate with each other to affect a decision made by the supervisors. A one noticeable behaviour is when workers tend to misbehave, such as arriving late to work or delay tasks, making the supervisor call them into his office to ask about the reasons behind their behaviours. Using this tactic, workers manage to force the managers to hear their voices and take them seriously. However, workers tend to misbehave only when managers ignore or refuse to hear their suggestions and concerns.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative case study research was set out to explore the efficacy of employee voice in a Saudi organisation. The study contributes to the limited literature on employee voice in Saudi Arabia (e.g., Alzalabani, 2009; Alzalabani & Nair, 2011; Alzalabani & Modi, 2014; Arain, et al., 2022). Adopting the conceptual framework of EIP developed by Wilkinson and his colleagues (2013) enabled the researcher to explore different means of employee voice in the Saudi case study on the firm SAWCo. The research contributes to employee voice literature in Saudi Arabia in two ways. First, this paper brings rich details on the means that staff workers use to voice their job-related issues to the managers and how the latter respond to them. Second, the absence of a formal employee voice scheme does not imply the absence of voice overall at the workplace since the evidence shows workers are able to convey their concerns to the management through informal and indirect means, either individually or collectively.

Using the EIP framework developed by (Wilkinson et al., 2013), the researcher was able to see the range of the four dimensions of employee voice, depth, level, form, and scope. The findings show there is a shallow depth to employee voice since employees are only informed of decisions made by the management. In regard to the level, the evidence reveals EIP only occurs at the highest managerial level of the organisation since participation does not takes place at the individual or the department levels. The form of employee voice is informal at the individual level and, to some extent, formal at the organisation level. The scope of EIP is observed to be very minor at the department level since there is no place for discussions related to the workload, satisfaction, and wages.

The findings show the managers of the firm purposely avoid forming a labour committee due to an unproven fear of losing control of workers and probable increase in benefits given to workers, which will affect the profitability of the firm. On the other hand, interviewed workers showed high interest in forming a labour committee due to the limited opportunities they have to communicate their voices to their direct managers. It seems the lack of knowledge about the Saudi national labour committee and its regulation is the main reason behind not forming one (Alzalabani & Modi, 2014).

Another key finding from the case study firm is that all workers show discontent about the lack of ability to share their opinions freely with their direct managers. All the interviewed workers openly asked for their voices to be taken seriously regarding all matters related to work. In the worst-case scenario, workers tend to resign from work when they lose hope from having their voices unheard. Therefore, this evidence is congruent with a number of studies, which emphasised the need to enhance employee voice to improve organisational commitment and job satisfaction (e.g., Chang & Huang, 2010; Ullah & Yasmin, 2013; Jha et al., 2019; Azevedo

et al., 2020).

In congruence with previous studies (Rawat & Lyndon, 2016; Soomro et al., 2019; Nazi et al., 2020; Rani et al., 2021), the 'paternalistic' managerial style, characterised by high authoritarianism, hinders employees' productivity since it undermines their voices. The findings of this research reveal most staff workers are not involved in the decision-making process at the department level, and supervisors do not allow them to convey their opinions openly regarding basic rights, such as workload, pay, and work procedures. As a result, staff workers started to engage in negative behaviour, such as absenteeism and work delay, to increase their chances to convey their concerns to the higher managerial level.

The findings of this research have important implications for managerial practices in Saudi Arabia. First, allowing for a combination of both formal and informal means of employee voice can lead to positive outcomes related to work. Second, forming labour committees in large Saudi firms can help the management officially to listen to workers' voices, which has a positive impact on productivity and loyalty to the organisation. Third, since supervisors and line managers are the key players to enhance or hinder employee voice schemes in an organisation, firms can create a work environment that encourages line managers to be more receptive to employee voice. This can be achieved through reducing the intensity of the authoritarian managerial style and allow for workers to discuss their work-related concerns more freely.

6.1 Limitations

While providing detailed insights into a large family-owned business in Saudi Arabia, there remains some limitations to the study, as well as further opportunities for future research. The last data collection visit took place in the first quarter of 2019; thus, it does not cover the recent changes that have occurred since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the research relies on qualitative data from a single firm, which raises the question of the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, evidence from other firms in different sectors of Saudi Arabia would provide further insights, in particular, from a company that has a labour committee. Additionally, the findings of this study could be used to devise a survey to cover a greater number of firms to increase overall generalisability.

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