Reconceptualizing Employee Voice in Times of Permacrisis: A Theoretical Analysis of The United Kingdom's Employment Relations Landscape

Michael Oyelere,
Coventry University
Email: Michael.oyelere@coventry.ac.uk

Adejumoke Adeoti,
Brunel University
Email:

Okeoghene Enebeli
Coventry University
Email: ae1710@coventry.ac.uk

Zedias Mutema
Bangor University
Email: z.mutema@bangor.ac.uk

Bilikis Kazeem
Bedfordshire University
Email: bilikis.kazeem@beds.ac.uk

John Opute
Christ the Redeemer College
Email: jopute@christredeemer.ac.uk

Reconceptualizing Employee Voice in Times of Permacrisis: A Theoretical Analysis of The United Kingdom's Employment Relations Landscape

Abstract

This paper synthesises early conceptualizations of employee voice and unionism in the United Kingdom, tracing the evolution of the term 'voice' from Albert Hirschman's original definition to Freeman and Medoff's focus on union representation. Employing conceptual data analysis, the study reviews theoretical frameworks and literature to explore patterns and insights, emphasizing the UK context while selectively incorporating global perspectives. It reveals that while employee voice remains relevant, it often serves managerial interests or is ignored by management, particularly during periods of permacrisis. The study highlights how modern scholars have reinvented the concept of voice, yet its practical impact remains limited. By analyzing historical and contemporary perspectives, this paper not only maps the trajectory of employee voice but also projects its future in the UK, offering critical reflections on its role in employment relations. The findings underscore the need for renewed attention to employee voice as a tool for meaningful organizational change.

keywords: Employee voice, employment relations, labour process theory, organisational behaviour, permacrisis, power-sharing

Introduction

The use of the term 'voice' has increased in recent years, and both academic and practitioner literature are more frequently deploying the term (Wilkinson, Donaghey, Dundon & Freeman, 2020). Research on employment relations often adopts analytical frameworks primarily related to the concept of 'voice'. While the term 'voice' was originally defined as the effort to effect change by Hirschman (1970), its meanings and conceptualisations have since evolved. Later writers, such as Freeman and Medoff (2016), have described the concept from the viewpoint of union monopoly of representation, i.e., union articulation of workers' concerns. This paper is a synthesis and overview of some of the early conceptualisations of employee voice in the UK. Its goal extends beyond a simplistic sketch, catalogue, or historical analysis of voice and uses such analysis as an instrument for understanding the current state and trajectory of employee voice and unionism in the UK. The paper has been conceived in light of current

social, political, and economic developments that have led to a state of permacrisis. The paper reveals that the concept of voice has been significantly reinvented by modern-day scholars and practitioners.

The research of Marchington and Kynighou (2012, p. 1) revealed that the global financial crisis has had a significant impact on the practice of human resource management and has thus shaped issues concerning employee voice, employee involvement, and employee participation in their organisation. Similarly, there is a consensus among researchers that the voice, participation, and involvement of employees are used by employers as a tool for high commitment among employees at times when the world seems to experience a level of steady economic development (Wood, 2010; Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Marchington & Kynighou, 2012; Marchington, 2015). Although, the techniques used by organisations and in different industries vary. However, the consensus that employees are involved in their organisation's decision-making process at some level remains constant. This supposition immediately gives rise to one important question: *What is the state of employee involvement and participation during this period of permacrisis?* Alternatively, *how is employee voice construed during years that are characterised by economic, political, financial, and environmental crises?*

Interestingly, in the UK, the literature on employee voice has increased in volume, but not many works have focused on understanding voice during permacrisis. Although the term 'permacrisis' was Collins Dictionary's word of the year for 2022, it has always been part of our lexicon. The concept is a combination of two words 'permanent' and 'crisis', and succinctly describes the political and economic state of the UK (Turnbull, 2022). Inevitably, both the political and economic state of a nation determines the situations in organisations. Hence, the question of how employee voice is perceived today is highly relevant. To answer this question, we juxtapose two approaches: industrial and labour process theory (employment relations approach) with work psychology (organisational behaviour approach). Although there are several other relevant approaches, this paper focuses on these two given their similarities and some sharp contrasts. Labour process theory is a sociological approach according to which voice rationale is about power and control through the process of collective bargaining, work council, and partnership (Chillas & Marks, 2021). The approach is based on a radical-pluralist (power-sharing) philosophy. On the other hand, the organisational behaviour approach, a psychological approach, explains the rationale for voice through job design improvement. Its philosophical basis is mainly unitarist, articulated through the engagement and commitment of

employees (Barry et al., 2018). Consequently, this article explores the evolution and reinvention of the concept of employee voice within the United Kingdom, particularly during periods of permacrisis. By synthesising historical and contemporary perspectives, it seeks to understand the current state, challenges, and future trajectory of employee voice in shaping equitable and responsive employment relations. The structure of the paper is as follows: First, we discuss the methodological issues around the study before delving into the different conceptualisations of voice and theoretical perceptions of the concept. Next, we examine voice in the context of the permacrisis in the UK and then explore the future of employee voice. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the systematic review.

Methodological issues

This study employs a conceptual data analysis approach to explore the evolution and reinvention of employee voice within the United Kingdom, particularly during periods of permacrisis. The methodology focuses on synthesizing theoretical frameworks and abstract ideas rather than empirical data, drawing on a comprehensive review of extant literature. The analysis is grounded in key scholarly works, including foundational texts by Albert Hirschman and Freeman and Medoff, as well as contemporary studies that redefine the concept of employee voice.

The research process began with a systematic review of academic articles, books, and reports related to employee voice, unionism, and employment relations, with a particular emphasis on the UK context. While the scope of the study prioritizes UK-based authors and experiences, it selectively incorporates global perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the topic. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, relationships, and insights across the literature, enabling the development of a cohesive narrative on the historical and current state of employee voice.

This conceptual approach allows for a critical examination of how employee voice has been reinterpreted over time and its practical implications during crises. By focusing on theoretical frameworks, the study provides a foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities surrounding employee voice in the UK, offering insights for future research and practice in employment relations.

Organisational Behaviour and Industrial Relations Conceptualisation of Voice

The term ‘voice’ has increasingly gained prominence in both practitioner and academic literature on industrial/employee relations, human resource management and organisational behaviour. When referring to the term ‘voice’, academics from other disciplines often use terms such as engagement, involvement, participation, and empowerment interchangeably. This approach, however, does not capture the true essence of the word from the perspective of employees and their unions. Employee voice has often taken centre stage in the works of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Karl Max, and Adam Smith. More recently, the use of the term has eclipsed other managerial prerogatives (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey & Freeman, 2021), which again failed to define the word precisely. From the early days of conceptualisation of the term ‘employee and union voice’, it has experienced significant changes in meaning and usage. Academics and practitioners in different fields frequently give specific meanings to relevant terms in line with how they are perceived in their field. According to Wilkinson and Fay (2011), this difference in meaning arises because academics do not understand the conceptual and philosophical views of other academics in different fields.

One element of voice is considered from the organisational behaviour and managerial standpoint. This element articulates voice as an informal type of vocal communication aimed at providing constructive suggestions to a management team by an employee. This approach often focuses on the individual employee’s suggestions and feedback for the management team (Wilkinson & Barry, 2016). This is one of the reasons why much literature on voice within the field of management often takes the organisational behaviour perspective (Dibben, Cunningham, Bakalov & Xian, 2022). For example, the economic approach, whose roots can be traced to transactional cost economics, perceives voice as a form of ‘batter’, with implications in costs and benefits for both the management and employees (Willman, Bryson, Gomez & Kretschmer, 2021). In this instance, employees are seen as ‘customers’ who exit the patronage of the business if their voice is not heard. Meanwhile, the management may choose the most cost-effective option from the various options available to them. This is a utilitarian (transaction-efficacy) model. The work of Dibben et al. (2022, p. 4) seems to advance this position in that it suggests that studies of advanced economies often describe voice from a unitarist philosophical standpoint that emphasises job design and organisational improvement. A clear understanding of this individualistic utilitarian approach is essential for a thorough grasp of the approach to voice in a period of permacrisis.

Another theoretical approach that we consider in this paper is the human resource management/high-performance work systems approach. Voice from this theoretical standpoint is thought to be the response of an organisation to customers' attitudes towards their product or services (Hirschman, 1970). The rationale for voice according to this approach mainly concerns organisational performance (Allen, 2021). According to Hirschman (1970), voice is 'any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs' (p. 30). The most important point about voice here is how to ensure that improvement is made and that customers are kept happy. In terms of attempting to satisfy external customers, Dundon et al. (2004) reiterate that those internal customers (employees) who are dissatisfied with the work systems may be forced to act because of a lack of alternative employment. Hirschman's (1970) position is that voiced concerns or voicing are likely to lead management to make decisions (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

Several studies examine the factors surrounding the concept of voice. Examining voice from the organisational behaviour or psychological perspective is likely to give a clear picture of why employees want or do not want to voice their concerns with management. According to Dibben et al. (2022), such examinations often serve the interests of management. Employees tend to voice their concerns in cases in which employee voicing has previously led to a favourable outcome for employees. Detert and Burris (2007) note that employees are only active in advancing their voice if they perceive their manager to be 'open': 'that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised' (p. 871). Openness in this case is seen as reducing the inequality (especially of power) between employees and the management. Additionally, the study of Detert and Treviño (2010), which examines the influence of leaders on employees' perceptions, concludes that the expectations of employees concerning their use of their voice depend on whether the voice will be accepted or rejected by their managers rather than on their views about the framework or mechanism of voice employed. Research has shown that management can collate employee voices in such a manner that is beneficial to the organisation and the employees (Cox, Marchington & Suter, 2006; Dietz, Martins & Searle, 2011; Townsend, Wilkinson & Burgess, 2013).

Conversely, however, there are also situations in which managers are seen as discouraging employee voice. Instances, in which employee voice is met with negative outcomes, such as stigmatisation and villainization, can result in employees avoiding exercising their voice

(Robinson & Shuck, 2019; McNulty et al., 2018). Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon, and Wilkinson (2011) acknowledge that there has been an increase in the number of organisational behaviour studies reporting employee silence. The key observation of their study relates to management uses of agenda-setting and organisational structure to encourage silence concerning certain issues in the organisation. While employees may consider not exercising their voice as an option, this may also have some negative consequences for them. Their management is likely to construe employee silence as disloyalty and misbehaviour. Furthermore, the study of Wæraas and Dahle (2020, p. 1), which examines the relationship between human resource management, organisation reputation management, and employee voice, finds that organisations often follow a path of chosen reputation through their official voice and discourages prohibitive employee voice with coercive human resource management practices. Hence there is a tendency for management to use their prerogative in their management of employees' use of voice (Donaghey et al., 2011).

It is noteworthy that examining voice solely from the organisational behaviour perspective does not result in a sufficient understanding of the concept. In fact, according to Dibben et al. (2022), the growing 'psychologisation of voice' has been criticised because of the increasing focus on management prerogative and interests; the individualistic rather than collective approach; contextual factors; and the downplaying of the power wielded by institutions over its employees and the role of external stakeholders (Barry & Wilkinson, 2021; Burris, Rockmann & Kimmons, 2017). Moreover, academics within the organisational behaviour field criticise the approach as it is employed in the field for being too narrow. They argue that there is a tendency among organisational behaviour scholars to focus on voice that advances the prerogative nature and interests of management and to overlook the extent to which informal voice behaviour is influenced by formal collective voice mechanisms (Morrison, 2022). Conversely, however, the industrial relations or labour process theory considers voice as the inherent right and capacity of employees to demand and protect their interests. According to this approach, voice is considered in the formal, informal, and structured settings that allow collective action and divergence between management and employees' desires. The industrial relations approach to voice addresses some of the concerns that arise when following the organisational behaviour approach because it enunciates the basis of the relationship between employees and management and it focuses on broader social, political, economic, and environmental factors that have direct and indirect impacts on employment relationships

(Chillas & Marks, 2021), including legal enactments, labour laws, and the practice of human resource management (Edwards, 1986).

Employee voice refers to both the formal and informal techniques or mechanisms employed by workers and their unions to influence decision-making in their organisation. Due to the relevance of the term in the life of working people, it has consistently evolved and has now masked other organisational processes, such as involvement, participation, engagement, and empowerment (Chillas & Marks, 2021, p. 85). As earlier mentioned, some of these terms are used interchangeably to refer to voice, while in other situations, they signify a completely different meaning. The choice and meaning of a specific term are based on the relevant theoretical strand and the philosophical meaning employed within that theoretical strand. For example, as pointed out above, the human resource management/high-power work system approach defines voice as a process that involves employees in making decisions about their well-being and working conditions while ensuring that management can carry out the necessary improvement in the workplace (Chillas & Marks, 2021; Mowbray, Wilkinson & Tse, 2015). The industrial relations or labour process theory/approach is more critical of how employees' and employers' interests can be harmonised. It is this level of criticality that made this theoretical strand more acceptable as an approach that mitigates managerial prerogative and the misuse of employee voice simply for managerial gain. There has, however, been some criticism of this approach. Ramsay (1977) warned against the use of participation mechanisms as tools for furthering management interests. Ramsay (1985) further argued that a lack of state involvement is likely to leave the process at the whims of management. Due to the decline in trade unionism and individualisation projects by management, the power of collectivism and trade unions can be considered to have been eroded.

Regardless of the relevant conceptualisation, theoretical strand, and philosophical standpoint that is being considered, employee voice is centrally about the management of workplace relationships (Dundon et al., 2004). While management is doing all it can to control employees, the process of wrestling back some of the control and ensuring that workers' interests are at the fore has become increasingly important both to management and academics. Labour process theory captures the core of the processes and mechanisms that demonstrate the functionality of a system within organisations and especially between management and employees or employee representatives. Although the establishment of a single definition of the term 'employee voice' may be difficult given the divergent philosophical approaches employed in different fields, for

the purpose of this paper, we provide an articulate meaning of the term 'employee voice' as expressed in Table 1: 'Employee voice' refers to the formal or informal methods used by employees – either individually or collectively – to articulate their concerns, seek a better working environment for themselves, and foster the interests of management and other stakeholders.

Table 1. Multiple Meanings of Employee Voice

Voice as:	purpose and articulation of voice	Mechanism and practices for voice	Range of outcomes
Articulation of individual dissatisfaction	To rectify a problem with management or prevent deterioration in relations	Complaint to line manager Grievance procedure	Exist-loyalty
Expression of collective organisation	To provide a countervailing source of power to management	Union recognition Collective bargaining Industrial action	Partnership-derecognition
Contribution to management decision-making	To seek improvements in work organisation quality and productivity	Upward problem-solving groups Quality circles Suggestion scheme Attitude surveys Self-managed teams	Identity and Commitment disillusionment and apathy Improved performance
Demonstration of mutuality and cooperative relations	To achieve long-term viability for organisation and its employees	Partnership agreement Joint consultative committees Works councils	Significant influence over management decisions-marginalisation and sweetheart deals

Source: Wilkinson et al. (2021, p. 6)

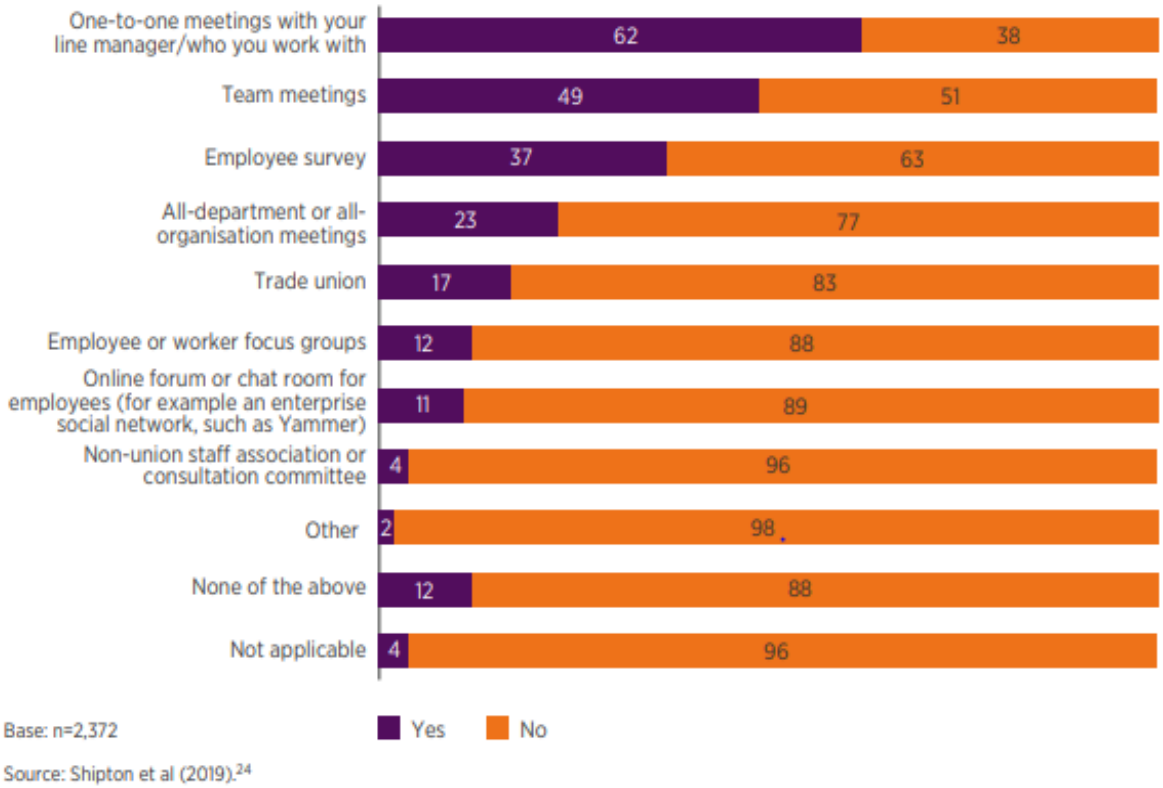
Contextualising Voice During a Permacrisis

While recent developments are important, we consider the long-term picture, including developments in relation to gig economy. We attempt to understand the new realism of what employee voice stands for and what it can achieve. Uber drivers spent about five years in court before they could be heard, and today, teachers, lecturers, nurses, and train drivers (to mention but a few) are all preparing for 'battles' with their employers. Can we conclude that employees' attempts to speak out are making their issues worse? Should employees accept this position and remain permanently silent? Where exactly is the voice of employees in the UK during this permacrisis? Historically, the UK is known for passing laws that support the rights of workers. Employment law emanates from parliament through the legislative process, and in the courts through judicial decisions. All these laws and processes consider the rights of employees, especially voice. However, since late 1970, there have been laws introduced that tend to curtail some of these rights or give prerogative to management (Kaufman, 2020). The frequent

argument given by successive governments is that there is a need to ensure that businesses develop and grow. However, some scholars have observed that surrendering the rights of employees to employers does not necessarily develop and grow businesses (Ioannou & Dukes, 2021).

Nevertheless, there now appears to be a continuous problem in the global economy. We therefore ask how employee voice is considered in today's Britain. There are indications that employee voice is increasingly being stiffened by employers and by the government during this situation of permacrisis. According to the CIPD (2022), 'the ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these to influence decisions at work' is constantly under attack. In some organisations, employees can no longer have their say through individual and collective channels, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for employees to speak directly to management or indirectly through employee representatives and trade unions. Although formal and informal voice techniques, such as employee surveys, consultation groups, team meetings, and business intranets are still open to employees, there is evidence that the voice expressed is hardly implemented, except in cases in which it aligns with the management's interests (Prouska, McKearney, Opute, Tungtakanpoung & Brewster, 2022). In an extensive study that examines large multinational, national, and regional organisations in airline logistics, fast food, education, health, and construction, King, Shipton, Smith, Rendall, and Renkema (2021) reveal the current dilemma facing employee voice. Their study suggests that even in cases in which the channels of employee voice are open, they are only open for issues that align with management interests. The study identifies the forms of voice experienced in the workplace and presents an overview of the study participants' responses (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Forms of voice experienced in the workplace (%)



Base: n=2,372

Source: Shipton et al (2019).[24]

Given the current economic climate, exacerbated by the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, political instability, Brexit, inflation, and recession, UK employers and the government are turning a deaf ear to employees' voice. While the research of King et al. (2021, p. 31) shows that the channels of employee voice are open, it concludes that these channels alone cannot guarantee successful exercise of employee voice. For example, the study shows that only 17% of its respondents experienced the use of voice through the trade union relevant to their organisation (Figure 1). Additionally, 96% were found to have had no experience at all with non-union staff associations or consultation committees in their organisation. It is therefore imperative that we re-examine the nature and application of voice in this period of permacrisis. It is insufficient to assume that employee voice has always been part of the industrial relations system and that employees are aware of the channels without considering the level of awareness and access to the channels or without transforming the expectations among employees (King et al., 2021).

The Future of Employee Voice in the UK

The concept of employee voice in the UK has evolved over the years and is continuing to develop. Initially, it was needed primarily in the collective format – through unions – for securing basic employee rights. From the 1960s, it was promoted by organisations as a means of incorporating workers' opinions and gaining a competitive advantage in the market. Voice has become even more prominent since the 1980s, with increased attention being paid to how managerial concepts, such as total quality, teamwork, and empowerment contribute to business performance (Wilkinson et al., 2021). The concept has, however, experienced changes as the employment relations environment continues to adapt to a dynamic labour market, shaped by major developments, such as Brexit, Prouska et al., (2022) and the resulting effects on businesses and increased globalisation. We consider two developments that have contributed to the evolution of voice: digitalisation and the growth of non-standard employment. First, discussions of the future of voice in the UK must acknowledge that the context of voice in the UK is the outcome of several considerations, including the social, economic, legislative, and cultural contexts within which businesses and employees operate. Legislation plays a key role, as different countries have different amounts and levels of employment legislation and voice opportunities. The more organised the regulatory structure is, the more likely it is that employee relations measures are in place and that employees are protected (Oyetunde et al., 2021). The UK is typically classified as a liberal market economy, characterised by the devolution of wage negotiations, defensive union tactics, constrained employment policies by the government, easy recourse to flexible working arrangements, extensive external labour markets and restricted employment protection. This supports the managerial tendency to regulate employee voice and silent opposing views (Gegenhuber et al., 2021). Yet, while voice is challenged, it remains prevalent in the country (Prouska et al., 2022), particularly in large organisations.

Non-standard Employment

Recent years have seen the advent of new sectors, business models and employment arrangements. There has been a growth in non-standard employment opportunities (Wilkinson et al., 2021); freelance or gig-economy jobs; self-employment; seasonal work; outsourced contracting; agency and part-time jobs; disguised employment; multiparty employment; on-call/zero-hour contracts; temporary employment; and precarious working arrangements, which are all characterised by insecurity, instability, and temporal flexibility. It has been projected that the number of employees taking up such jobs will continue to rise (ILO, 2016), and indeed, it has risen because of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on work designs and the increase

in non-traditional and remote jobs (Oyetunde et al., 2021). Traditional jobs typically have income protection, long-term career prospects, continuous work, required working hours, and contract longevity. Conversely, employees working in non-standard jobs have a high level of flexibility in their working location and hours; regulate their work processes and schedules; have a reduced level of employer control; and have restricted administrative, physical, and temporal attachments to their employer. These jobs are often flexible with more influence on working arrangements (Haapakorpi, 2021). The term 'disguised work' refers to employees with concealed legal standing due to the nature of the role in which they are engaged (gig employees and freelancers). Zero-hour employment typically involves a high degree of irregularity in working hours. Multiparty roles have multiple parties involved in the employment process (temporary agencies). Part-time employment involves condensed working hours, accompanied by some level of perpetuity compared with other temporary employees (Zeytinoglu & Cooke, 2008). Fixed-term contracts run for a set amount of time and are terminated at a set date, either based upon the completion of a task or event. Temporary work arrangements include fixed-term roles, project-based contracts, casual work, and seasonal work (Oyetunde et al., 2021).

Much of the extant literature on voice has focused on the outcomes, inhibitors/determinants, and dimensions of voice for traditional employees, and less attention has been given to non-traditional employees' voice – the voice of those who occupy the aforementioned atypical job positions. Existing literature also assumes the uniformity of employees, and less attention has been given to the particularities of atypical employees. Therefore, there is an opportunity to develop the theoretical models of diversity in voice literature (Syed, 2014). The absence of theorisation for these employees has resulted in a limited understanding of employee voice. As more and more people are undertaking informal employment, it has become important that these employees have a voice and can express their perspectives. Research suggests that non-standard employment arrangements can facilitate the exploitation of employees, without consequence. According to Wilkinson et al. (2021), the growth of informal jobs and the accompanying precarity pose unresolved challenges regarding voice, as the employees have reduced voice opportunities. It has been found that 25% of gig employees are not aware of the voice channels through which they can voice their concerns about their work (CIPD, 2017). It is also more likely that the companies that offer informal or temporary jobs take advantage of employees or disregard and subdue voice. Hence, there is a need for indirect representation and unions (Woodruff, 2016).

However, traditional roles do not necessarily offer better opportunities than non-traditional ones. Some employees in the gig economy or informal sector are highly skilled and have skills that are valued and in demand, so they have some level of influence in the labour market (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Non-standard employment is an alternate option to standard work, adopted by some by choice (Katz & Krueger, 2019). Furthermore, the qualities ascribed to standard or non-standard jobs can permeate or intersect with employees in standard employment increasingly working remotely and having flexibility in their working arrangements. Research shows that attempting to classify jobs as standard or non-standard is no longer sufficient, as the characteristics credited to each type are interconnected and overlap. This is even truer considering the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on work designs and the increase in non-traditional and remote jobs. Nevertheless, the voice experiences of non-standard and standard employees vary, and there seem to be many complexities and many voice techniques involved based on the type of employment. Recent literature points to the disparity in perspectives and standpoints in theorising employment arrangements (Liu, van Jaarsveld, & Yanadori, 2022). While disparate, the majority view non-standard employment as having different qualities and traditions from standard employment. Exploring the means through which employees in non-standard jobs experience participation, representation, and voice in the workplace is significant for understanding the psychological structure of their employment relationships (Mowbray, 2022). Voice for these employees can exist in different forms and at various levels.

Employees in standard jobs are typically protected by employment legislation, have long-term career prospects, are economically reliant on their employer, have mutual employment relations, and have a great degree of individual subservience, with employers taking control of the employment relationship (Prouska, McKearney, Opute, Tungtakanpoung & Brewster, 2022). In contrast, the degree to which the stated characteristics are present or absent for non-standard employees differs. For example, zero-hour, part-time, and temporary employees typically share similar experiences to standard employees with regard to having mutual employment relations and individual subordination (Mowbray, 2022). They, however, have little or no protection through employment legislation, defined work periods, short-term career intervals, and economic liberation. In particular, employees working in disguised employment and with temporary agency services have more varied employment experiences compared to employees who have standard jobs (Mowbray, 2022), such as reduced protection;

indeterminate and irregular work locations; on-demand work arrangements; secondary compensation; and a lack of mutual commitment with employers or individual subordination.

The direct form of employee voice is more frequently used among atypical employees (Goñi-Legaz & Ollo-López, 2017). Indirect mechanisms such as grievance procedures and trade unions, are found to be less common. Some of the more common collective voice systems are virtual networks, professional networks, short-term task forces, joint consultative committees, quality circles and workgroups (Borghi et al., 2021). In cases in which such employees have joined a union, the effect on voice has been found to be nominal (Oyetunde et al., 2021). Agency and temporary employees have more reasons to collectively bargain, they have limited access to voice prospects due to the precarious and transitory nature of their jobs (Dundon et al., 2020). Freelancers and temporary workers often experience precarity, an absence of social relationships, and employment insecurity – and a resultant absence of voice privilege (Sluiter et al., 2020). Many such jobs are temporary or short-term, which contributes to disadvantaged voice prospects. It is therefore less likely for freelancers to be involved in direct consultations. There is an increased interest in using professional networks to achieve collective representation for this group due to the perception that unionism can inhibit their career prospects. The professional networks are usually separate from trade unions (Oyetunde et al., 2021).

It is therefore evident that informal and gig-economy roles are usually associated with reduced union involvement (Sluiter et al., 2020) and not much connected with organised voice prospects, with employers demonstrating hostility to unionism. The nature of this type of work and its associated restricted access to conventional voice prospects have resulted in new systems of mobilisation and collective action as a means of mitigating the absence of rights and voicing grievances (Wilkinson et al., 2021). There is increasing research on the alternative voice mechanisms available to atypical employees, the types of concerns they have, and the outcomes and determinants of their voice. It is noteworthy that the types of voicing available to atypical employees will impact the degree of their influence on managerial decisions and the concerns they convey. Consequently, in the next section, we examine the issues associated with digitalisation, i.e. the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media as well as their impact on employee voice.

Digitalisation: Artificial Intelligence, Social Media and E-voice

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the workforce has adopted new models of remote and hybrid work. This has been accompanied by an increase in workload and an increase in the variety of roles performed by employees. New technologies have been introduced in order to manage the increased complexities of work. The workplace has become more digitalised, and this is reflected in human resource management discourse (Dutta et al., 2022). Digitalisation in this context signifies the alteration of organisations and cultures through the application of digital technologies (Hanelt et al., 2020). There has also been an increase in the use of voice channels through electronic tools such as social media, resulting in the concept of 'e-voice', which refers to how workers contribute to decision-making and raise their concerns through electronic communication devices (Bernauer and Kornau, 2022). This has been accompanied by an increase in the use of emerging technologies, such as biometrics, speech recognition, virtual reality, geo-tagging, the Internet of things, mobile technology, machine learning, big data, and AI for managing work and employees (Hughes et al., 2019). The term AI is used in this paper to refer to a wide category of technologies that enable computers to execute roles that typically require human cognition (Budhwar et al., 2022).

The use of these sophisticated technologies has transformed the ways in which organisations operate globally and locally. They have had a substantial effect on how work is designed and how voice is expressed. Research has shown that technology can have a limiting effect on direct voice, which is significant for employees who already have restricted voice prospects, and even more so for those in the platform and gig economy. Employees were also more silent during the coronavirus pandemic than they were before, as the pandemic created a prosocial silence culture. As Woodfield (2022) notes, voice is more difficult to hear and process in online environments. However, while voice may be adversely affected by the increased reliance on technology-facilitated communications, digitalisation equally offers new patterns, such as reduced hierarchy, and more channels for communicating (including social media) that may enable voice. Social media offers employees the opportunity to voice their concerns and is also an avenue for them to communicate and connect with union members and build solidarity. Additionally, while the Internet can enable solidarity and activism (Frangi et al., 2018), it can also produce counter-mobilisation, as was done by Amazon to avoid collective bargaining (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

Digitalisation offers opportunities to surmount geographical boundaries and has been utilised by gig employees for organising collective action, strikes, and union influence. For example,

the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain is a bottom-up trade union formed specifically for Deliveroo riders to challenge the absence of collective employment rights (Wilkinson et al., 2021). The interactional and communicative elements of AI products allow for a tailored and customised approach to employee management and the enhancement of voice (Dutta et al., 2022). Within the context of human resources, applications aided by AI are being used for essential tasks such as coaching, training and development, performance management and recruitment and selection. It is utilised during recruitment for the initial screening of candidates. Data may be sorted to identify which candidates' characteristics are linked with enhanced job performance and to select the most suitable candidate for the advertised positions. The application can therefore contribute to the acquisition of talent (Rani, 2019).

Furthermore, AI software also offers new types of learning and development programmes. Algorithms can be used to inform employees of appropriate training. IBM, for example, utilises algorithms to advise workers on suitable training programmes based on the experiences of workers in similar roles (Cappelli et al., 2018). It is also used for monitoring employee engagement during training programmes and for assessing the efficiency of development opportunities. Additionally, AI has been used for managing performance and conducting appraisals. It can deliver information regarding employee turnover rates and contribute to employee retention. More importantly, AI-enabled chatbots have been found useful for building engagement among employees, as they offer a method of direct voice. Chatbots are used by human resources to facilitate openness to voice (Dutta et al., 2022). The interactive nature of these chatbots allows for a more individualised experience for workers, generating feelings of influence and control in the workplace. Dutta et al. (2022) relate these findings to AI-facilitated exchange theory, which suggests that having workers interact with or use AI-aided chatbots helps generate favourable outcomes, such as improved engagement.

Besides the effects on direct (and indirect) voice, digitisation offers increased spatial and temporal flexibility in working arrangements (Spreitzer et al., 2017). As Wilkinson et al. (2021) note, digitalisation has reduced the limiting elements of time and space and has obscured the boundaries between work and home. Technology, including social media, can therefore be valuable for creating new voice systems. However, workers in the low-skilled, low-paid sectors may not have access to these technologies or Internet-aided devices as part of their job roles (Woodruff, 2016). Technologies also tend to focus on direct voice, which facilitates individual participation and involvement, with less emphasis on indirect means such as collective representation through unions and non-union organisations (works councils or advisory boards)

(Bernauer & Kornau, 2022). Employees in informal jobs may have restricted prospects for direct voice and therefore need the indirect systems of voice to enhance their voice prospects and outcomes.

Hence, while the digitalisation of the labour market may not necessarily constrain voice in the future, it may also not enable it, which can result in overlooked voices in the labour market. It has, for instance, been argued that AI could have an adverse effect on civilisation's very core and essence (Budhwar et al., 2022). Indeed, the use of AI in human resource management comes with many conceptual and practical challenges. The nature of data science analysis itself, when used in relation to people, can conflict with the standards typically seen as essential by society for making significant decisions regarding people (Cappelli et al., 2018). Yet, there is evidence that AI and related intellect-based applications can generate prospects for businesses to attain optimum strategic organisational outcomes. These developments can have both positive and negative effects on employee voice. Thus, a reassessment of the existing voice procedures must be undertaken in order to identify new trajectories. It has become evident that there may still be voices in the modern workplace that are not being heard (Wilkinson et al. 2018). As the labour market continues to change, there will be more challenges related to employee voice. It is imperative to consider the future of voice for the rising number of people working in non-standard employment. There is also a need for more research relating to digitalisation and the effects of technologies, such as AI-enabled chatbots on employee outcomes, including voice (Dutta et al., 2022). While the interface between human resource management and AI is popular among human resource specialists and academics, research on this topic remains at an emergent stage. Understanding how workers experience employment relations and how voice is mediated through AI applications, alongside the impact thereof on employee outcomes, would contribute to this field of interest.

Voice in all its forms will remain significant in the UK. The indirect (representative, collective) and direct (face-to-face, individual) forms will continue to exist in uneven ripples dependent on the strength of collective bargaining, labour market pressures, and regulatory systems (Donaghey et al., 2022). The future of the concept in both forms, however, remains unclear. Examining voice on multiple levels, ranging from the micro (individual), to meso (organisational), and macro (societal) levels would be useful. As Wilkinson et al. (2018) note, the micro level would examine individual-level enhancers and restrictions to voice, including employee perceptions and attitudes. The meso level would take into consideration the voice procedures used by companies and the degree to which these are used in practice; while

consideration at the macro level relates to the regulatory frameworks that determine organisational policies. There is an imminent need for research on the concept of voice in all these forms.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, we have provided a review and illustration of the term ‘employee voice’ within a particular context. We examined the historical approach to and current developments in the use of and factors affecting the term ‘employee voice’. Additionally, we focused on recent developments, especially the permacrisis in the UK. We considered extant literature with a specific focus on literature addressing employee voice issues in the UK as well as other literature that does not directly address the UK‘s issues but that has an impact on or has addressed theoretical issues. Our study revealed how employers now neglect acting on employee voice when such voice does not directly support management‘s views. Although employees (acting individually or collectively) can use any of the voice channels available to them, it is, however, the prerogative of the management to implement the desired action. In addition, we highlighted that there are many channels of voice open to employees of an organisation, and most of these channels are open in a standard work setting, while they are almost non-existent in some non-standard work environments. In our juxtaposition of two of the main existing theories, industrial, and labour process theory (employment relations approach) with work psychology (organisational behaviour approach), we realise that although these theories are relevant to our understanding and the processes of employee voice, it is clear that the current developments in different fields of study have resulted in different meanings being given to the term in different fields and professions. For instance, labour process theory acknowledges the complexities that exist in a capitalist production system and that there is room for differing views within the system (Smith, 2015). Like the pluralist approach, labour process theory attempts to challenge the monolithic view. Hence, this approach presents the best narrative of employee voice in a permacrisis.

Thus, while employee voice remains an integral part of and a channel for addressing employee concerns and achieving organisational objectives, the term has taken on different meanings and dimensions in different fields. Philosophically, different theoretical strands have different outlooks. For example, human resource management or high-performance work systems assume a managerial/unitarist philosophy that engenders loyalty and enhances corporate performance. Similarly, organisational behaviour also assumes a humanist/unitarist philosophy that supports engagement and commitment. On the other hand, the labour process theory is a

radical-pluralist philosophy that propagates power-sharing and countervailing power in an organisation (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey & Freeman 2021).

This study highlights two major implications: first, the need for a re-evaluation of Employee Voice Mechanisms in Times of Crisis. This study highlights the limited effectiveness of traditional employee voice mechanisms during periods of permacrisis, as management often prioritises its own interests over employee concerns. Organizations should reevaluate and redesign voice channels to ensure they remain relevant and impactful during crises. This could include creating more transparent and responsive feedback systems, fostering open communication, and ensuring that employee concerns are addressed promptly, even in turbulent times. Second, the finding echoed the need for strengthening collective bargaining and union representation. The study reveals that collective voice mechanisms, such as trade unions, remain crucial for protecting employee rights, especially during permacrisis. Policymakers and organisations should strengthen collective bargaining frameworks and support union representation to ensure that employees have a meaningful platform to express their concerns. This is particularly important in non-standard employment sectors, where workers often lack access to formal voice channels. Strengthening collective voice can help balance power dynamics and promote fairer employment practices.

References

Allen, M.M.C., (2021). Hirschman and voice in Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (Eds.). Handbook of research on employee voice (pp. 38-53). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Barry, M., Dundon, T., & Wilkinson, A. (2018). Employee Voice: Conceptualisations, meanings, limitations and possible integration. In: M. Barry and A. Wilkinson (eds.). The Routledge Companion to Employment Relations (251-265). London, Routledge.

Bernauer, V., & Kornau, A. (2022). E-voice in the digitalised workplace. Insights from an alternative organisation. *Human Resource Management Journal*, https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12460.

Borghi, P., Murgia, A., Mondon-Navazo, M., & Mezihorak, P. (2021). Mind the gap between discourses and practices: Platform workers' representation in France and Italy. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1-19.

Budhwar, P., Malik, A., De Silva, M., & Thevisuthan, P. (2022). Artificial intelligence – Challenges and opportunities for international HRM: A review and research agenda. The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 33(6), 1065-1097.

Burris, E., Rockmann, K. W., & Kimmons, Y. S. (2017). The value of voice to managers: Employee identification and the content of voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 60(6), 2099-2125.

Cappelli, P., Tambe, P., & Yakubovich, V. (2018). Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources Management: Challenges and a Path Forward. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1-29.

Chillas, S., & Marks, A., (2021), Labour process perspective on employee voice in Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (Eds.). Handbook of research on employee voice (85-102). Edward Elgar Publishing.

CIPD (2017). New research explores the future of employee voice. https://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/news-articles/future-employee-voice.

Cox, A., Marchington, M., & Suter, J. (2006). Employee involvement and participation: Developing the concept of institutional embeddedness using WERS2004. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 20(10), 2150-2168.

Detert, J. R., & Treviño, L. K. (2010). Speaking up to higher-ups: How supervisors and skip-level leaders influence employee voice. *Organization Science*, 21(1), 249-270.

Dibben, P., Cunningham, I., Bakalov, N., & Xian, H. (2022). Conceptualising employee voice in the majority world: Using multiple intellectual traditions inspired by the work of Mick Marchington. *Human Resource Management Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12473.

Dietz, G., Martins, A., & Searle, R. (2011). Trust, HRM and the employment relationship. In: Wilkinson A, Townsend K (eds) The Future of Employment Relations: New Paradigms, New Perspectives (141-162). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Donaghey J., Cullinane N., Dundon T., & Wilkinson, A. (2011). Reconceptualising employee silence: Problems and prognosis. *Work, Employment & Society*, 25(1), 51-67.

Donaghey, J., Cullinane, N., Dundon, T., Dobbins, T., & Hickland, E. (2022). Employee choice of voice and non-union worker representation. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 53(6), 503-522.

Dundon, T., Wilkinson, A., Marchington, M., & Ackers, P. (2004). The meanings and purpose of Employee Voice. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 15(6), 1149-1170.

Dundon, T., Lucio, M.M., Hughes, E., Howcroft, D., Keizer, A., & Walden, R. (2020). Power, Politics and Influence at Work. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Dutta, D., Mishra, S., & Tyagi, D. (2022). Augmented employee voice and employee engagement using artificial intelligence-enabled chatbots: A field study. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1-30.

Frangi, L., Noh, S., & Hebdon, R. (2018). A pacified labor? The transformation of labor conflict. In: Wilkinson, A., Dundon, T., Donaghey, J. and Colvin, A. (eds.). The Routledge Companion to Employment Relations (p. 285-304), London: Routledge.

Freeman, R., & Medoff, J. (2016). What Do Unions Do? *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, 38(2), 244-260.

Gegenhuber, T., Ellmer, M., & Schüßler, E. (2021). Microphones, not megaphones: Functional crowd worker voice regimes on digital work platforms. *Human Relations*, 74(9), 1473-1503.

Goñi-Legaz, S., & Ollo-López, A. (2017). Temporary contracts, participation in decision making and job satisfaction in European workers: Is there a buffering effect? *International Journal of Manpower*, 38(6), 875-892.

Haapakorpi, A. (2021). Freedom but Insecurity: The business consulting profession in the Post-industrial Service Society. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 11(1), 45-62.

Hanelt, A., Bohnsack, R., Marz, D., & Antunes, C. (2020). A systematic review of the literature on digital transformation: Insights and implications for strategy and organizational change. Journal of Management Studies, 58(5), 1159-1197.

Hughes, C., Robert, L., Frady, K., & Arroyos, A. (2019). Artificial Intelligence, Employee Engagement, Fairness, and Job Outcomes. In: Hughes, C., Robert, L., Frady, K. and Arroyos, A. (eds.). Managing Technology and Middle- and Low-skilled Employees (61-68). Emerald Publishing Limited.

ILO (2016). Non-standard employment around the world: Understanding challenges, shaping prospects. International Labour Office.

Ioannou, G., & Dukes, R. (2021). Anything goes? Exploring the limits of employment law in UK hospitality and catering. Industrial Relations Journal, 52(3), 255-269.

Katz, L., & Krueger, A. (2019). The rise and nature of Alternative Work Arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015. *ILR Review*, 72(2), 382-416.

Kaufman, B. E. (2020). Employee voice before Hirschman: its early history, conceptualization and practice. In Handbook of research on employee voice (pp. 19-37). Edward Elgar Publishing.

King, D., Shipton, H., Smith, S., Rendall, J., & Renkema, M. (2021). Talking about voice: insights from case studies. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Liu, X., van Jaarsveld, D. D., & Yanadori, Y. (2022). Customer aggression, employee voice and quit rates: Evidence from the frontline service workforce. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 60(2), 348-370.

Marchington, M. (2015). Analysing the forces shaping employee involvement and participation (EIP) at organisation level in liberal market economies (LME s). *Human Resource Management Journal*, 25(1), 1-18.

Marchington, M., & Kynighou, A. (2012). The dynamics of employee involvement and participation during turbulent times. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23(16), 3336-3354.

Morrison, E. W. (2022). Employee voice and silence: Taking stock a decade later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10.

Mowbray, P. K. (2022). Is anybody there? An examination of the voice experiences of Uber ride-share drivers. In Missing Voice? (pp. 175-193). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Mowbray, P. K., Wilkinson, A., & Tse, H. H. (2015). An integrative review of employee voice: Identifying a common conceptualization and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17(3), 382-400.

Oyetunde, K., Prouska, R., & McKearney, A. (2021). Voice in Non-traditional employment relationships: A review and future research directions. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(1), 142-167.

Prouska, R., McKearney, A., Opute, J., Tungtakanpoung, M., & Brewster, C. (2022). Voice in context: An international comparative study of employee experience with voice in small and medium enterprises. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(15).

Rani, S. (2019). Human Resource Management and Artificial Intelligence. *International Research Journal of Management*, 10(7), 17-25.

Sluiter, R., Manevska, K., & Akkerman, A. (2020). Atypical Work, Worker Voice and Supervisor Responses. *Socio-Economic Review*, 20(3), 1-21.

Smith, C. (2015). Continuity and change in labor process analysis forty years after labor and monopoly capital. *Labor Studies Journal*, 40(3), 222-242.

Spreitzer, G., Cameron, L., & Garrett, L. (2017). Alternative work arrangements: Two images of the new world of work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4, 473-499.

Syed, J. (2014). Diversity management and missing voices. In: Wilkinson, A. Donaghey, J. Dundon, T. and Freeman, R. (eds.). The Handbook of research on employee voice: Participation and involvement in the workplace (pp421-428). Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Townsend K., Wilkinson A., & Burgess J. (2013). Filling the gaps: Patterns of formal and informal participation. Economic and Industrial Democracy, 34(2), 337-354.

Turnbull, N. (2022). Permacrisis: what it means and why it's word of the year for 2022. https://theconversation.com/

Wæraas, A., & Dahle, D. Y. (2020). When reputation management is people management: Implications for employee voice. *European Management Journal*, 38(2), 277– 287.

Wilkinson, A., & Barry, M. (2016). Voices from across the Divide: An Industrial Relations Perspective on Employee Voice. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(3-4), 338-344.

Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (Eds.). (2021). Handbook of research on employee voice. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wilkinson, A., Dundon, T., Donaghey, J., & Freeman, R. B., (2021) Employee voice: bridging new terrains and disciplinary boundaries, in Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (Eds.). Handbook of research on employee voice (pp. 38-53). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wilkinson, A., Gollan, J., Kalfa, S., & Xu, Y. (2018). Voices unheard: employee voice in the new century. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(5), 711-724.

Wilkinson, A., Knoll, M., Mowbray, P., & Dundon, T. (2021). New Trajectories in Worker Voice: Integrating and Applying Contemporary Challenges in the Organization of Work. *British Journal of Management*, 32(3), 693-707.

Willman, P., Bryson, A., Gomez, R., & Kretschmer, T., (2021). Employee voice and the transaction cost economics project in Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (Eds.). Handbook of research on employee voice (54-67). Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.

Wood, S. (2010). 'High Involvement Management and Performance,' in The Oxford Handbook of Participation in Organisations, eds. A. Wilkinson, P. Gollan, M. Marchington, and D. Lewin, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Woodfield, R. (2022). Maximising employee voice in a hybrid working world. University of St Andrews. https://peopleprofession.cipd.org/insights/articles/employee-voice

Woodruff, L. (2016). What does 'voice' mean for the millions of UK employees who live in poverty? https://community.cipd.co.uk/cipd-blogs/

Zeytinoglu, I., & Cooke, G. (2008). Non-standard Employment and Promotions: A within genders analysis. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50(2), 319-337.