Filling the gaps: Patterns of formal and informal voice

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The modern theoretical foundations for the development of the concept of employee voice within the employment relationship finds its basis in the exit-voice-loyalty framework designed by Hirschman over forty years ago. In his book, Hirschman (1970) explained that a dissatisfied individual in any form of organisation – whether it is a business or a nation – has two potential responses to their grievance. The member can either exit – withdrawing from the relationship or they can use their voice – communicating their grievance. Hirschman suggested that it is the more loyal member who will choose to use their voice; to stay and fight, rather than exit. Hence, organisations could benefit from reduced exits, but also the increased strength of the participant’s voice when they remain involved. Hirschman’s definition of voice was that it represented ‘any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs’ (1970: 30).

Freeman and Medoff (1984) saw the value in Hirschman’s model explaining the basis of collective employee voice through unionism. The authors suggest that where there is union representation (therefore voice), employee exits will be reduced. This effect can be explained by the reduction in managerial authority combined with an environment where rules are negotiable and employees have a right to appeal decisions (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Also, there were advantages in having a collective, as opposed to an individual voice. The union could mediate between employees and management, and they could aggregate individual grievances into a single submission. Taking the analysis further, with collective voice mechanisms there were not only savings in transaction costs, but there were reduced organisational costs as exits were reduced.
It is important to remember that voice and its collective representation can take many forms. Since Freeman and Medoff adopted the notion and applied it to the employment relationship, there has been a plethora of research developing the theoretical basis and empirical support for the notion of employee voice (for some examples, see Dundon et al, 2005; Gollan, 2006; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011; Willman et al 2010). In two recent articles which analyse the large United Kingdom national survey, WERS (Workplace Employment Relations Survey) suggest that union presence does not explain a statistical significance between the voice and job satisfaction (Wood, 2008) or labour productivity (Bryson, Charlwood and Forth, 2006). So despite the broad body of literature written about works councils, joint consultative committees, worker participation and, more recently a great deal of research on non-union forms of voice, some debates, questions and under-investigated areas remain (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). In particular as Marchington and Suter (2008) point out, there is an absence in industrial relations research on the notion of informal voice – that is, the way in employees voice their concerns to managers when they are outside formal meetings. This paper will contribute to our knowledge of ‘informal voice’ through a study of the voice structures and experiences within a luxury hotel. Here we focus primarily on the way that informal voice fills the gaps left behind by direct formal voice structures. We suggest that informal voice in this case compliments formal voice in most cases; however, we draw recognition to the possibility that informal voice can contradict the formal.

The remainder of this article is as follows: firstly, we will outline the theoretical basis of employee voice as it stands as a key part of the employment relationship. Secondly, we will review some of the areas where various voice mechanisms have been researched and understood. The third section of this paper will examine issues that are specific to the luxury hotel sector in which this study is based, and describe our case study organisation and our
research methods. After providing the data analysis that supports our two propositions, this article will reach some conclusions and outline areas for further research on informal voice.

**Voice Mechanisms**

One enduring problem with studies of employee voice is the key definitions framing any particular study. It is a broad term that holds considerable definitions from a range of authors (see for example Dietz, Wilkinson, and Redman, 2009; Poole, 1986; Sashkin, 1976; Strauss, 2006; Budd et al., 2010). Nevertheless, we can overcome the definitional elasticity of voice by seeing it simply as an opportunity to have ‘a say’: this concept is central to most definitions (Marchington and Suter, 2008, Freeman et al., 2007). It is also worth noting that even prior to Hirschman’s work; much of the modern literature in industrial relations recognises the historical work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb as providing the foundation for employee voice. Webb and Webb’s work on industrial democracy at the end of the 20th century concerned the right of employees to voice their grievances through the collective actions of labour unions. Of course, unions provided an opportunity to take action on grievances too. Although the unions remained the key source of employee voice representation for the majority of the 20th century, the demise of unionisation over the past few decades and recognition that other forms of voice apart from union based ones are possible has seen the concept become more encompassing. More recently, employee voice has been defined broadly as any union or non-union based method of communication between employees and management (Bryson, Charlwood et al. 2006). Furthermore, the focus of employee voice has evolved and is now viewed as not only an employee right, but a business prerogative that can, following Freeman and Medoff, lead to improved economic performance.
Although there is a growing business case supporting employee voice, research suggests that there are a significant number of firms who choose not to offer any voice mechanisms. For example, the 1998 British Workplace Industrial relations Survey identified 17 per cent of all organisations surveyed could be classified as “no-voice” firms (Willman, Bryson et al. 2006). Willman et al. (2006) suggested that such firms emerge where the cost of providing voice outweighs the benefits it will provide, and where exit costs are low for the employer and employee. These firms will often develop where there is a reliance on a highly casual, mobile or seasonal workforce, where a high rate of exit is typical and often essential for business (Freeman and Medoff 1984). The significance of maintaining a no-voice workplace and the consequences of firms being forced to introduce voice are issue which warrant further consideration by researchers, particularly as they represent almost one-fifth of all British firms and this figure is likely to be replicated elsewhere. However, while useful in illuminating the statistical presence and relationships between variables, research like Willman et al’s work is constrained by the WERS data and the questions contained within the surveys. We would argue that these workplaces are not likely to really be ‘no-voice’ at all, rather, they are workplaces where ‘informal voice’ is the key to employees having a say over what affects them. Hence, qualitative case studies provide an excellent opportunity to understand the nuances of informal voice not captured in large, national surveys.

In the majority of firms, when an employee or group of employees wishes to communicate with management, there are often a range of formal and informal voice mechanisms at their disposal. The academic literature typically discusses the context of formalised mechanisms whether they are union (indirect) or non-union (direct) based. Much research is concerned with the effectiveness and comparative effectiveness of the two approaches (Cox et al, 2006; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). From an industrial relations perspective, employee voice was typically associated with unions, and Freeman and Medoff
(1984) argued that only union based voice would result in benefits to management and employees. However, with continual decline in unionisation and new industry sectors developing all the time, it is clear that unions are not able to represent employee voice across the board. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, non-union and informal voice has always been present in workplaces, it is just that researchers in the area have typically privileged the study of union voice.

Many organisations have adopted non-union increasingly formal voice strategies to ensure that employees continue to have a say in the workplace. While union voice is driven by the tenets of industrial democracy, non-union voice may be more motivated by the potential business advantages. If voice is important, organisations can either pay for it through union structures and the often accompaniment of increased wages, or pay for it through non-union mechanisms with the core aim to increase performance through information sharing (Dundon, Wilkinson et al. 2005; Bryson, Charlwood et al. 2006). Non-union direct voice involves less formal two way communication between employees and management without the mediation of the union or firm representatives (Bryson, Charlwood et al. 2006). Despite the underlying motives, non-union voice mechanisms have become very common, appearing in the majority of organisations as collective or direct forms of communication.

**Employee Propensity to Voice**

Although management have instituted structures to capture voice, employees may not buy-in and use the structures implemented. The propensity of employees to engage in these formal mechanisms will depend on a range of personal and organisational factors and ultimately is the choice of the individual. A study by Landau (2009) suggests that there is no relationship between the number of voice mechanisms that exist and the propensity of
employees to speak up at work. The author suggests that perhaps the alternate voice mechanisms are not required if the employee has a competent and approachable manager. Alternately, the type of mechanisms available to employees may also influence the propensity to voice. Sako (1998) suggests that workers are more reluctant to use voice where there are limited formal mechanisms to do so, such as quality control or joint consultative committees. We provide evidence through our case study data than in fact, employees value and regularly use the informal opportunities to voice their concerns in the workplace.

Despite the number and types of voice mechanism available, or the individuals’ propensity to use them, none of this matters if the voice is not heard. Regardless of the number of voice mechanisms available for use, there is research to suggest that where an employee wishes to discuss a grievance they are most likely to communicate directly with a supervisor (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2002). Therefore, the role of informal voice and the managerial response to it when compared with individual and organisational outcomes like productivity, retention or other indicators should be subject to consideration. Freeman and Medoff (1984) stressed the importance of managerial response to employee voice (particularly union-based voice), however this response has been largely overlooked in the literature, possibly due to the difficulty in measuring response. While research is limited, a study by Bryson et al (2006) supports the perspective that managerial responsiveness to formalised employee voice leads to increased labour productivity. However, we have not adequately understood the role of the manager’s response to informal voice experiences and the factors governing this response.

Strauss (1998: 15) provides a definition for informal voice which we find adequate to frame our research: that informal voice is the “day to day relations between supervisors and subordinates in which the latter are allowed substantial input into decisions … a process which allows workers to exert some influence over their work and the condition under which
they work”. This definition captures the same motivation and outcomes of formal voice, just that influence which occurs outside the formal processes. We acknowledge that it could be quite difficult to measure ‘substantial input’ when using this definition. To overcome this problem we allow the employees and managers to decide what is substantial rather than impose any context-free *a priori* determinations of what constitutes a substantial level of input.

There is a clearly established line of research suggesting that small firms operate in a more informal manner, and certainly in relation to voice mechanisms (Gomez, Bryson, Willman, 2008). Boxall and Macky (2007) suggest that the success of small firms relies, in part on successful informal voice processes where there are not the resources for more formal mechanisms and processes. However, we would suggest that to some extent, many large organisations are structured in such a way that a department or division might be the size of a small business, and with the increasing responsibilities on line managers (see for example, Townsend et al, 2011) the departments/divisions can operate similarly to a small business in its own right. As such, even in large companies there can be much gained from the informal for all parties, the organisation, the managers, and the employees.

To develop our theoretical understandings of voice, we set out to test the following propositions in this workplace:

Proposition 1: Formal voice mechanisms in this service organisation may be present, but line managers and employees will find the formal mechanisms unable to provide employees with the voice that both parties want.

Proposition 2: Employees will experience opportunities for formal voice for just a few minutes each day. As such, the informal voice opportunities provide employees with a critical avenue to influence the work they perform on a daily and continuous basis.
THE LUXURY HOTEL SECTOR IN AUSTRALIA

The luxury hotel market within the Australian hospitality sector is an influential employer group with around one third of the total hotel employees and controlling approximately two thirds of the accommodation income share (ABS Catalogues: 8635.0; 8674.0). The sector is marked by high levels of non-standard employment, labour cost minimisation strategies (Barnes and Fieldes, 2000; Knox, 2010). Furthermore, high staff turnover is an issue within the hotel industry (Davidson, Guilding & Timo, 2006; Knox, 2002; Timo & Davidson, 2005). As such, the notion of exit-voice theory is one worth consideration in this context. With so many people leaving the sector, there must clearly be no opportunity for voice, or else other factors are at play suggesting exit-voice notions are less relevant in this sector. Previous research has suggested that the high turnover rates may be attributed to a number of factors including limited career advancement opportunities within the hotel industry (Davidson et al., 2006), and higher than average dismissal rates when compared with other industries (Knox, 2002). Approximately 85 per cent of managers and employees in the hotel industry have been employed at their current job for less than five years (Timo & Davidson, 2005). Granted, many larger firms have internal rotation policies between properties which would skew these figures (Nankervis, 2000).

Low wages are synonymous with the hospitality industry in Australia (Haynes & Fryer, 1999; Nankervis, 2000). Australian Bureau of Statistics’ research reveals that the accommodation, café and restaurant industry has for the past ten years, almost consistently reported the lowest average weekly wage for full time employees, when compared with all other industries (ABS Cat. No. 6302.0, 2000-2009). Literature more specific to the luxury hotel industry reveals it is not immune with workers earning between “…73% and 86% of the
all industry average” (Davidson et al., 2006 p 203). In 2005, some 85.7 per cent of
operational level employees (as opposed to managers) earned less than $30,000 per annum.
According to a recent study from Knox (2009), the luxury hotel sector has not demonstrated a
strong shift towards enterprise bargaining and remain largely reliant upon the Award system.
Without enterprise bargaining systems in place, formal voice mechanisms are likely to be
managerially constructed.

There is a high multi-national presence within the sector where organisational
mechanisms are well established to ensure formal reporting and knowledge sharing
internationally (Larkin, 2011). Relevant to this paper, Larkin’s evidence suggests that the
transnational organisations see both formal and informal voice mechanisms to be important
for their global brand.

Many aspects of the service industry operate on a continuous production model –
servicing the customer 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Here we can see some similarities
with previous research in hospitals (Townsend et al., 2011) and call centres (McDonnell et al.,
2010). Continuous service is an important factor in the central role of informal voice in the
hotels sector. Marchington et al (1992; 2001) indicate that many such contextual factors can
be obstacles to adequate voice mechanisms. While the increase in data management can
provide managers with better expectations of managing line balance in service sectors,
unexpected pressures brought about by sudden surges in customer demand remain. As such,
planning formal meetings can be difficult and furthermore, having large proportions of often
casual and part time staff available in a continuous service operation presents substantial
practical difficulties. These pressures are a direct result of the labour process and have quite
an impact on the success of any formal voice mechanisms. As such, informality will fill the
gaps left between the formal mechanisms.
CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The case study site selected for this study is a luxury hotel operating in an Australian capital city. It is part of a larger international operation employing more than 100,000 employees throughout the world. This hotel has almost 300 rooms and employs approximately 100 full-time equivalent staff members. The workplace is what would be considered non-unionised – there is one member of staff who pays union fees from their wages and there has not been a formal union meeting on site for more than five years.

Situated in the central business district, the Hotel is considered primarily a corporate hotel with the majority of their business stemming from conferences, and business travellers. The primary departments within this hotel are standard for this type of organisation, there is a front office department dealing with check-ins, check-outs and various other customer service requirements. There is the food and beverage department which covers all the bars and restaurants, room service and conference functions. Housekeeping employees include room attendants, public space cleaning, and laundry staff. Finally, there are administrative staff who are employed ‘back of house’ and who are engaged in a range of functions including HR support, accounts, sales and marketing.

For this project we interviewed the Regional Manager of the parent organisation, General Manager of the Hotel, the Human Resource Manager and the assistant Human Resource Manager, and the department managers for all four sections. In addition, we interviewed at least one line manager/supervisor from each department and between three and five employees in each department. The HR manager was interviewed three times throughout the course of the project and consulted informally to seek clarification on a range of matters throughout the data collection and analysis phase of the project. In total, twenty-four interviews were conducted. The research team used a purposeful sample of employees to
interview, asking for staff members who had been employed at the hotel for at least a year. With the high level of turnover, which is well documented within hospitality (Timo and Davidson, 2005), it was determined that employees who were recent recruits would not have had the appropriate level of experience with the hotel’s formal and informal voice mechanisms for our research purposes.

The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and an hour; were recorded and transcribed and coded in NVivo. Coding was based on a number of *a priori* nodes which related to employee voice, participation in decision-making and managerial prerogative. As interviews were being coded, the coding nodes were iteratively expanded to include sector and case specific matters and developing theoretical threads.

To supplement the interviews, the research team were silent observers in a number of various meetings held within the organisation. These included team briefs, supervisor meetings, Head of Department meetings, and staff focus groups. Finally, a range of corporate documents and records were provided by the hotel management to support the data collection and analysis. These documents included minutes of previous meetings and presentations to staff.

**CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

From here we focus on our first proposition: **Formal voice mechanisms in this service organisation may be present, but line managers and employees will find the formal mechanisms unable to provide employees with the voice that both parties want.**

Our case study hotel operates with *direct formal* voice at a moderate level. On a daily basis, employees within each section will be involved in a ‘team brief/changeover meeting’
where the workload for the day will be discussed and employees will be given an opportunity to speak about issues that concern them. Employees have an electronic ‘suggestion box’ to direct ideas and concerns, and each of the departments also have monthly departmental meetings. Again, this forum is primarily about department heads and senior managers communicating to the employees information that they feel is required, for example, upcoming specials within the hotel, major functions for the month, and overall hotel performance data. While employees have the opportunity to ask for items to be included on the agenda, or to raise them from the floor, however this was very rare. The Executive Housekeeper illustrates this point:

...sometimes it is quite difficult to... um ... draw people’s comment in a public forum, in particular in this department... some people will not just speak in public, so and again that goes back to communication strategies, so you have to think of ways around that outside of the public forum.

To comply with legislative requirements for an organisation of this size, there is an occupational health and safety committee (OHS), although the HR Manager makes the point that it is rather ineffectual, that employees are often do it ‘begrudgingly’ but more importantly for him, they provide a great deal of training, education and support to employees to make OHS an everyday part of their work. As such, this is another formal, direct voice mechanism that is not a high functioning avenue for employees to have a say.

On an annual basis the employees complete an ‘Employee Opinion Survey’ (EOS). The survey receives a high response rate (always higher than 90 per cent) and provides the managers with what is perceived as an excellent means of finding out what employees are thinking, at the same time providing a measure of the success of the managers in keeping staff happy and engaged. Given the low propensity for employees to use other voice
mechanisms at this hotel, this is just one more forum for employees to have a say. However, this is the key to multiple channels of voice (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011), all forms are inadequate so multiple forms are required. When one employee was asked if she was honest with her responses on the EOS she replied:

_The first one I did, but the second one I had to do it here in (my manager’s) office and I sort of felt under pressure because she was sort of making it real quick... and yeah I didn’t do that one honestly..._

As a follow up, the HR Manager hosts EOS focus groups a few times a year. In these focus groups an employee from each department is invited to come and talk about the areas where the organisation’s results were lowest in the EOS. The researchers sat in on one focus group that was about communication. With the particular EOS being performed in the middle of the economic downturn of 2008/2009 many employees felt they were not receiving enough information. However, all employees at the focus group noted that this had changed and improved. Two employees at the focus group were quite vocal, and seemed quite honest in their critique of the management team’s performance. But again, the majority of employees, despite encouragement from the HR manager, remained silent. The Assistant HR manager explains that the HR department see the focus groups as:

_A chance for frontline employees to sit down with the HR manager and talk about HR issues, but I don’t think that happens in every other department._

So if other departments do not host enough formal group opportunities to understand the employee experiences that will make a difference to the working lives of employees, then this formal voice must be captured by other means.
The final avenue for formal voice is more individualised and direct – one on one performance appraisal meetings. While these are not conventionally considered to be a voice component, Marsden (2007) provides evidence and explanation of why they are good opportunities for voice. These appraisal meetings are held annually with more brief, quarterly updates. This approach to people management has multiple goals within the workplace. Firstly, they provide the manager an opportunity to give the employee feedback about their performance; secondly, they provide a forum for the manager to quiz the employee on hotel policies and expectations; thirdly, the meetings provide the employee with an opportunity for development. All employees and managers note that the intent of development is not simply hotel specific; rather all provide details of experiences where employees have been provided support for developing a career within the larger organisation, or even outside the hospitality field completely.

**INSERT TABLE ONE HERE**

Based on the data collected in this hotel, our first proposition would be supported, that while there is adequate evidence to suggest that there are substantial benefits to the formal voice mechanisms within the Hotel, they are not adequate in providing the employees the opportunities they need to have a say over what affects them in their work. This supports the work performed by Marchington and Suter (2008) that informal voice is an important part of the hospitality sector, providing support for both managers and employees who find inadequacies in formal voice mechanisms.

We turn now to our second proposition, that employees will experience opportunities for formal voice for just a few minutes each day. As such, the informal voice opportunities provide employees with a critical avenue to influence the work they perform on a daily basis.
Evidence already outlined throughout the previous section demonstrates that there are multiple avenues for formal voice within the workplace, for example, staff surveys, focus groups, health and safety meetings, department meetings, shift changeover meetings and performance appraisals. However, managers made it clear that the service component of their organisation meant that continual meetings to allow employees to have a say was simply not possible and they needed to capture the thoughts and requirements of employees in other ways. When we consider a full-time employee’s standard forty hours of work each week or eight hours a day it is clear that with all the formal mechanisms in place, on average, employees experience opportunities for formal voice for just a few minutes each day. It is therefore critical for employees and managers alike to have other avenues to address concerns about work and the way the work is performed.

The Food and Beverage department manager makes the salient point that:

*In F&B, we don’t ever close so when can you have a meeting? We will never have a meeting where every single person is present, so that’s why we have quick daily briefings ... I don’t think it’s necessary that I have an F&B meeting ever week, especially with my managers because on a daily basis I am talking to them anyway ... it’s all there anyway, it’s all informally done.*

Without exception, employees and managers in this hotel provide explanations of informal voice and the central role it plays in the workplace. Starting from the top of the hierarchy, the General Manager explains the informal approach in his hotel:

*... 99 per cent of the stuff will be done informally, yes you will tick your boxes on workplace health and safety (meetings) and yes you will have your (formal) audit .... But 99 per cent of the stuff is solved outside, ... and we can address so much there before that cancerous feeling goes throughout your hotel ... People are not formal*
and people don’t want to be tied up in meetings ... and to be honest, they (line staff) know the business far better than we do, without a doubt in the world

He later adds “... my view again is that informality is king”.

The hotel manager (an operational position supporting the general manager) states:

I’m really informal. I don’t like notices, I like people ... I don’t like a formal environment, it’s just not my style, so when I first came here all the meetings ..., this is not me at all ... I will go up on the floors and have a chat with the housekeepers and pick up room service trays and walk along side of them and go into their rooms and help strip a bed ... last year we did a lot of hands on trying to save casual labour (throughout the GFC) and it is about breaking down that formality and saying ‘hey, we are all in this’.

This view is embraced by line managers and employees alike who value the capacity to voice their opinions and concerns informally. A housekeeping line manager suggest that he spends almost half of his day talking informally about things that are bothering his staff:

...it is a massive amount of time just spent on, because I suppose the issues that affect them are things that you might yourself, and you’ve got to be cautious because issues that affect other people you might just go that is ridiculous, but it is important to them... hospitality isn’t the best paying industry so you really have to I think work very very hard to make sure you address as much as possible all the little things.

Employees from indicate their comfort with this style of management and informality:

I just go straight to (my manager), just straight to him...if I’ve got anything at all to say, not in a harsh way, but anything about everything, I just say it straight away yeah (Housekeeping)
Everything I have concerns with, I just go straight to (my manager). Yeah, I don’t have any issues at all ... but I know if there was anything major or whatever, I could just go straight to her (Food and Beverage)

It would be timely to reconsider the Strauss (1998: 15) definition here that informal voice is the “day to day relations” where employees are “allowed substantial input into decisions” and to “exert some influence over their work and the condition under which they work”. The Assistant HR Manager explains that not all conversations between managers and employees fit the definition, but there are plenty of times throughout the course of a day, week, and year that issues arise that need to be addressed:

*It depends on what it is actually that they are bringing up. If it is an operational issue then perhaps it is something that the manager can fix then and there, um, I don’t see that escalating unless the employee or whomever, doesn’t get the result that they were looking for um, usually it would escalate to me or sometimes they would come straight to me if it is an issue of bullying or some sort of discrimination or something like that, that is when it turns into an HR issue ... sometimes when employees come to me, I just ask them have you actually spoken to your manager about this, so that I am not taking the manager out of the circle. I am here to support the employee in HR and to ensure that there is communication. Sometimes it can be a little bit hit and miss, in capturing to make sure that we are listening to our employees as well.*

The Assistant HR manager confirms that not all employee voice is captured within formal meetings; furthermore, it can slip through the cracks when presented in an informal manner. Nevertheless, the preferred mode in this hotel is to sort any issue informally at the source of the problem before escalation and formalisation. This relies on a great deal of skill from line managers.
Following the delayering of organisations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there is an increased HRM and IR role of line managers within organisations (Hunter and Renwick, 2009; Renwick, 2004). However, there is evidence to suggest that line managers do not receive adequate training in people management before they enter the role (Townsend et al, 2011). In a study of ward managers in hospitals, Townsend et al found that the skills of a line manager had a great deal of influence over the manner in which employees carried out their tasks and equally as importantly, the employees would rely a great deal upon daily, informal interactions with their line managers. There are many similarities between the structural aspects of hotels and hospitals (continuous service work) and we would expect similar results.

Importantly, line managers generally like to have the flexibility to adapt rules to reward and discipline workers on a selective basis (Brown, 1973). There are a range of studies from a labour process perspective that demonstrate that line managers do not always identify with organisational goals (for example, Smith, 1993). Considered beside leader-member exchange (LMX) theory which suggests that line managers treat employees subordinate to them differently depending on the quality of the ‘social exchanges’ that they share has important considerations for informal voice.

Stronger relationships between a leader and member lead to greater access to information, support and participation in decision-making and delegated power (Mueller and Lee, 2002). Where there is a low quality of LMX, commitment and performance will diminish. As such, it would be expected that the quality of the leader-member relationship would have an impact on, firstly the experiences employees have in raising matters and receiving appropriate resolution of matters and secondly, of a line manager’s approachability, willingness to hear the voices, and to adequate act and feedback on the employee concerns. Hence, the propensity of employees to voice their concerns in an informal manner would be
moderated by the relationship they share with their line managers. While we do not have to
space to adequately explore this proposition here, the General Manager and HR Manager at
the hotel agree that an important part of their manager training program is to ensure that line
managers have the skills and understanding that they need to work hard for all employees
within the hotel, not just those with whom they have close relationships.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

With a few notable exceptions, for example, Strauss (1998) and Marchington and
Suter (2011) the field of industrial relations has neglected the study of informal voice for the
more institutional based formal voice. We suggest that it is an important process in
workplaces that we must understand better. In 1976, Hespe and Wall presented a framework
to understand the preferences for participation in decision-making amongst employees. They
suggest that employees wish various, but increased levels of participation at three levels:
Local, Medium, and Distant. The Local level is where decisions are made with supervisory
staff (line managers); Medium includes those decisions including (middle managers and
department heads; and the Distant includes top management decision-making – or in modern
corporate parlance, strategic decision making.

This conceptualisation is useful for us in understanding voice, particularly adding
informal voice to the theoretical development. While in this 1976 conceptualisation has
employees preferred participation at the Distant and Medium level to involve formal
meetings and unions, the Local level is referred to as a preference for interactions with
managers. Supporting this notion, but also extending it for the modern era where unions play
a lesser role, informal voice appears to concentrated at the Local level with attempts to
influence what occurs in work processes and individual circumstances. There is some
evidence that informal voice does have spillover to the Medium level in this workplace.
Hespe and Wall explicitly state that these categories were not to be considered mutually exclusive, and we concur that in practice they are not. From our evidence we would infer that the spillover from a Local to Medium level is more pronounced a result of the continual service labour process in the hospitality industry.

There is a substantial effort on the part of managers in this organisation to provide employees with a continual opportunity to voice concerns over any issues. We acknowledge that many day to day operational matters may be seen by some as simply ‘doing the job’. However, relegating these interactions as such trivialises the important role of informal voice as it occurs and as it allows employees to have substantial input into decisions about how they work (Strauss et al, 1998). While the ‘open door policy’ may well be cliché, it is an ever increasing requirement of line managers who play a critical role in hearing the voice of employees, and just as importantly, acting on what they hear and providing feedback to those affected by the issue.

To this end, we must ask if informal voice is good, for whom is it good, and how does it become good? Our evidence suggests that it is certainly a preferred method for some people within the sample and a method of support beyond the formal for others. It is clearly a process through which employees can air grievances and seek changes to objectionable situations while providing managers the benefit of maintaining production and potentially, engaging better with their staff. Supporting previous work from Bryson et al, (2006), our evidence suggests that the best managers can capture employee voice and make it work, but in a causality dilemma not yet resolved, are the best managers capable of capturing informal voice or does informal voice work better for the best managers?

Throughout the analysis here, we have not included an analysis of power structures within the sector or the organisations. We do not blind ourselves to the notions of power
imbalance that are well understood in industrial relations research. However, we would suggest that the increasing role of line managers in managing the HR function will result in a greater level of informal employee voice right at the point of production. This may in fact mean that there should be greater concern for a theoretical consideration of power as it affects informal voice, however here we do not have the space to delve into such notions here.

As with all single cases, we are modest in our conclusions and recognise an inability to generalise from our data. Further research both within this sector is required to understand if the balance between formal and informal voice is an anomaly which develops because of the leadership philosophy, or whether it is a result of the labour process within continual service hospitality operations. Furthermore, is this theoretical development in relation to informal voice mechanisms and preferences something that is transferable to other areas of industry, for example, manufacturing?

We could also easily conceptualise situations where informal voice is not seen as something that ‘fills the gaps’ that formal voice leaves behind, but can act as an undermining process for people to deal with matters ‘outside the formal’ and achieve more palatable results. In such circumstances, informal voice is not necessarily something that will be seen as positive; rather it can be seen to have a destabilising impact.

While the General Manager of this organisation suggests that 99 per cent of things happen informally and outside of meetings, we recognise there was an element of ‘off the cuff hyperbole’ occurring with that comment. However it does raise some interesting questions around our capacity to quantify the balance between formal and informal voice. Following this, what is more effective as an avenue for employees to ‘change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs’ (Hirschman, 1970: 30).
REFERENCES:


Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2010) *Tourist Accommodation, Australia*, Cat. no. 8635.0 Canberra: ABS.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Type of Formal Voice Mechanism</strong></th>
<th><strong>Use</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Meetings</td>
<td>Annual whole of staff meetings with service crew left on duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Meetings</td>
<td>Held between monthly and quarterly depending on department with service crew left on duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Opinion Survey (EOS)</td>
<td>More than 90% response rate of annual survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOS Focus groups</td>
<td>Held quarterly with approximately eight staff representing all departments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team meetings</td>
<td>Infrequent across each department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift changeover meetings (or daily briefs)</td>
<td>Held in continuous service departments (i.e. not in Admin Dept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Health and Safety Meetings</td>
<td>Interested staff can attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Meetings</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Performance Appraisal meetings</td>
<td>All staff annually, with quarterly follow ups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>