

## **WORKERS' VOICE FROM THE TRIANGULAR EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP LENS: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper examines the circumstantial state of mediated work to develop a conceptual framework exemplifying the determinants of voice of workers in triangular employment relationships. These workers are in work context involving two or more firms – agency/platform and clients/client firms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Paralleling employee voice research in the triangular employment relationship context, we theorised the influencing forces at four levels to propose 12 distinct antecedents of triangular workers' voice. External level (2) – legal employer ambiguity and legal regulation and protection; employment context level (3) – availability and presence, assignment duration, and autonomy; firm level (3) – institutional complexity, cost and control, governance structure conflicts; individual level (4) – perceived relative equity, voice skill, self-identity, transition opportunity.

**Findings** – The triangular workers' voice determinants framework provides a comprehensive outlook on how the external, employment context, firm and individual forces influence voice of workers in triangular employment relationships.

**Research limitations/implications** – Emanating from the framework are propositions that can be empirically tested for validation. Hence, as with conceptual papers, this paper is limited by non-empirical testing.

**Practical implications** – Managers of workers in these employment relationships should be cognizant of the different levels of forces that can influence their voice.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the employee voice literature by presenting a four-level framework that demonstrate a holistic view of how voice of workers in triangular employment relationships is influenced.

**Keywords:** Employee voice, Triangular employment, Temporary agency work, Platform work.

## INTRODUCTION

Triangular employment relationships involve a working relationship with two or more firms – the client/user firm and the intermediary/agency/platform. Agencies hire workers and second them to other organisations' premises to carry out job assignments. Another strand of workers in these intermediated employment arrangements are online co-employment platform workers (Duggan *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink and Arets, 2021). While there are other categories of self-employed workers in the platform/gig economy (eco-system of app-enabled activities involving exchange of resources between workers/providers and users) that are with freelance platforms, online co-employment labour platforms institute employment contracts with their workers and subject them to labour agreements and other human resource management (HRM) activities (Meijerink and Arets, 2021). These platforms engage in both overt and covert implementation of HR practices (Meijerink *et al.*, 2021) in their matchmaking of the demand and supply of labour.

Although, there is a clear contrast between freelance platform workers and temporary agency workers, the similarity between online co-employment labour platform workers and temporary agencies workers is striking (Meijerink and Arets, 2021). For example, freelance platform workers differ from temporary agency workers as the former are classified as self-

employed owning their businesses and set their hourly rates. They are freelancers who negotiates pay with the clients with little or no interference of the platforms. However, table 1 shows the commonalities between online co-employment and temporary agency workers. Similarly, scholars (Healy *et al.*, 2017; Stewart and Stanford, 2017) categorised these workers to be in triangular employment following legal court pronouncements and scholarly debates (see *Aslam v Uber*, UK Employment Tribunal, 2016; Healy *et al.*, 2017; *Pimlico Plumbers Ltd and another v Smith*, UK Supreme Court, 2018). As shown in table 1, the subtle difference between online co-employment platforms and temporary agencies is in the matchmaking structure and process, and degree of flexibility. However, their similarity is apparent in the speed of matchmaking, worker status, and other HR roles performed by the platforms and agencies. Hence, our understanding of triangular work will cover temporary agency and online co-employment labour platform workers.

‘Insert table 1 about here’.

Moreover, research and theorization in employee voice has made substantial progress. For instance, we now have greater clarification of conceptualisation and operationalization of employee voice across disciplines, voice dimensions, determinants and inhibitors of voice, benefits of voice for individuals and organisations, and consequences of voice presence or absence. Despite this welcome progress, scholars (e.g., Wilkinson *et al.*, 2018; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2021) have argued that more needs to be done. While Kaufman (2014) acknowledged the underdevelopment of voice theory and models, Wilkinson *et al.* (2018) acknowledged the diversity of workers and the opportunity to develop models explaining more institutional and employment-related factors that shape voice in the workplace amidst the diversities. The argument in this article is corroborating these claims. Although advancement has been

acknowledged in voice research, deep and integrated understanding of workers' voice has been downscaled by the lack of models to explain voice offered to non-standard workers, especially workers in triangular employment relationships. Although a few empirical studies (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020; Rybnikova, 2016) have examined voice among temporary agency and online co-employment platform workers, none developed a model depicting factors determining their voice. The consideration of the peculiarities of distinctive employment arrangements, especially for workers in triangular employment relationships, is highly important for the following reasons:

*First*, the share of global workers in temporary agency work amounted to 1.77%, (WEC, 2023). The WEC economic report (2023) estimates the temporary agency work penetration rate in Europe, Asia/Pacific, and America to be 1.37%, 2.17%, and 0.94% respectively. Similarly, 10% of the adult population have provided platform services in the EU countries (Behrendt *et al.*, 2019). This continuous trend occasioned by organisational restructuring, outsourcing, subcontracting, and technology (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017) has implications for HRM practices and particularly for workers' voice. Hence, the need for voice research to keep up with this trend.

*Second*, there is an underlying assumption of workers homogeneity in voice theorisation (Syed, 2014), yet in some contexts (e.g., Africa (Botswana, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, etc.), Europe (Armenia), Asia-Pacific (South Korea) (see ITUC, 2020)), workers are made to sign “*yellow-dog contracts*” (contracts which deny workers of a right to join a union, thus, restrict their voice; Green, 2010). This demonstrates that voice theory needs to develop, to acknowledge variations in voice experiences among different types of workers.

*Third*, the assumption of unwillingness to voice among these workers is eroding as they are continuously exhibiting actions that challenge the power relations between the parties to their contract. For example, there are reports of protests and “unrecognised” strike actions from these workers in the US, UK, Australia, and Nigeria (see Adelagun and Adediran, 2021; Greenhouse, 2016; Paul, 2021). This demonstrates that workers in triangular employment are willing and struggling to voice and it is important to understand the determining factors of their voice.

*Fourth*, available voice models (e.g., Morrison, 2011, 2014; Kaufman, 2015) did not capture the peculiarities of these workers. These models did not consider how institutional complexity, legal employer ambiguity, and other individual and contextual factors determine the voice of workers in triangular employment. While some of the identified determinants in our model may also hold for traditional workers (e.g., voice skill, duration of assignment, etc.), their omission from previous voice determinants conceptual understanding is surprising. This therefore demonstrates the lack of exhaustiveness of the previous models' attempts at determining workers' voice and offering the need for further development of voice determinants to accommodate these peculiar factors.

*Lastly*, Wilkinson *et al.* (2021) acknowledged work dynamics occasioned by social, economic, and technological developments, and argued that both platform-mediated and agency-mediated work arrangements precariously influence workers' voice. Specifically, they posited that the continuous rise in non-standard forms of work pose myriad of unsolved issues such as social isolation from standard workers, low status and power, algorithmic management, job precarity, and institutional and regulatory neglect, that may likely have

implications for voice. Hence, an understanding of what drives these workers' voice is pertinent.

Beyond understanding the determinants of voice of workers in triangular employment relationships, it is important to state that these factors are likely to have an impact on – 1) mechanisms employed by workers to voice, 2) the kind of issues they raise, and 3) their influence on management actions and decisions. Kaufman (2014) identified the aforementioned as the voice dimensions trio – forms, agenda and influence. Consequently, we ask – *what factors determine voice of workers in triangular employment relationships, and how do these factors influence the voice dimensions – form, agenda, and influence?*

Hence, this paper seeks to build on the previous models of employee voice and draw insights to propose a model targeting specific attributes of workers in triangular employment context and how it impacts their voice. This model is an important contribution to HR theory and practice as client organisations/platforms can deploy it to critically assess voice contributions of temporary agency and gig workers to ensure that anticipated ideas, suggestions, opinions, and feedback from these workers are not offset by the negative consequences that may result from their non-voice. Further, it advances employee voice literature by offering determining factors that inform triangular employment context and how these contextual variables matter in the workers' struggles for voice and representation. In addition, the model integrates ideas from the different disciplinary perspectives of voice to extend workers voice theory to capture workers in triangular employment relationships. Lastly, propositions that could be empirically tested in future studies were developed.

## VOICE OF WORKERS IN TRIANGULAR EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIPS

Our understanding of voice cuts across the different disciplinary conceptualisations. While the micro understanding of voice by the OB scholars emphasised individual, non-institutionalised, informal, and discretionary form of communicating ideas and suggestions, the macro-understanding of voice by the ER/HR and LE scholars emphasised collective, institutionalised, formal, structural ways of expressing concerns and grievances at work. Scholars have engaged in a rigorous analysis of the conceptualisation of employee voice and have a consensus to the integration of all definitions of voice (see Wilkinson, Barry and Morrison, 2020). The idea of the integration is to conceptualise voice to capture all the disciplinary variations. Hence, our understanding of voice will follow this integrative conceptualisation. Drawing from previous definitions (Morrison, 2014; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011), we understand workers voice to be – *the mechanisms, structures, and processes of voicing available to workers aimed at not just suggesting ideas and opinions, airing concerns and complaints, but high-level participation and involvement in the decision-making process of the organisation to influence not only employment terms and conditions but also work autonomy and other business issues.*

Voice has three dimensions: *form, agenda, and influence* (Dundon *et al.*, 2004; Kaufman, 2014). As illustrated by Kaufman (2014), workers can either exhibit voice directly or indirectly (form), speak about integrative or distributive issues (agenda), and have just communication or influence on management decisions. These dimensions stretch along a line scale from far left of direct/shared/communication to far right of indirect/contested/influence of voice and a mix at different degrees at any point on the scale (see figure 1). The applicability of the voice dimensions, traverse employment relationship types – traditional or

non-traditional (Prouska and Kapsali, 2020). Situating this within the triangular employment literature, previous studies admitted the usage of direct/individual (see Rybnikova, 2016) and indirect/collective voice forms (see Benassi and Vlandas, 2015; Hakansson *et al.*, 2017) among workers in triangular employment, and further elucidates the degree of communication and influence these workers exhibit in their interactions with both the user firms and the agencies/platforms/intermediaries (see Benassi and Vlandas, 2015; Rybnikova, 2016).

‘Insert figure 1 about here.’

Voice is a multi-disciplinary construct and each of the disciplinary studies grew in silos over the years and distinctive models have been developed to operationalize and theorize workers' voice. However, recent efforts from Kaufman (2015), Mowbray *et al.* (2015), Nechanska *et al.* (2020), Oyetunde *et al.* (2022), Prouska and Kapsali (2021), widen the scope beyond the disciplinary silos by putting forward integrative models. A perusal of these models indicates the voice conceptualisation, determinants, and outcomes (see table 2).

‘Insert table 2 about here.’

Although previous scholars have evidenced the nature of employment contract, and contract-related factors as a significant predictor of employee behaviour, there is a neglect of the specific employment-related determinants. For example, Morrison (2011) outlined contextual organisational factors but did not explicitly focus on the employment relationship. Kaufman (2015) also acknowledged employment relationship as a determinant of employee voice but did not consider distinctive employment arrangements. The model presented by Oyetunde *et al.* (2022) and Prouska and Kapsali (2021) does consider such arrangements.



However, while Oyetunde *et al.* (2022) converged non-traditional workers' voice determinants without targeting a type of non-standard work, Prouska and Kapsali (2021) only focus on project workers. Hence, our framework adds to the employee voice theory by identifying specific factors associated with triangular work that are likely to impact workers' voice. The identified factors are delineated in the subsequent section.

## **DETERMINANTS OF VOICE OF WORKERS IN TRIANGULAR EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIPS**

The framework (figure 2) illustrates the external, employment context, firm and individual level forces that determines voice of workers in triangular employment relationships.

‘Insert figure 2 about here.’

### **External forces**

**Legal employer.** The blurred understanding of the legal employer posed concerns for ER/HR scholars and practitioners over the years (Davidov, 2004). In the case of temporary agency workers, the client firm may assume the agency to be the employer while the agency might also assume the firm is the employer when offering placement services (Davidov, 2004), leaving the legal employer responsibility in the open. Legislations on the identification of the legal employer for temporary agency workers depend on context. For instance, the agency is the legal employer in many European countries, but in Canada it is the user firm, while in the US, both the agency and client firm are co-employer (Davidov, 2004; Mitlatcher, 2007). Similarly, there is a growing concern of whether platforms such as Uber, TaskRabbit etc., are

legal employers to platform workers or just firms providing platforms to source for clients (Healy *et al.*, 2017).

Consequently, the legal composition impacts how HR practices affect workers, and such practices in client organisations are highly impacted by the agency and vice versa (Mitlatcher, 2007). Dominance conflict exists between client organisations and agencies' HR practices with implications for workers, especially when moved frequently between organisations. For instance, it may be difficult for the agency to act as a full employer to the worker after deployment and uneasy for workers to always refer to the agency for HR issues. Hence, the legal employer's ambiguity may likely exclude workers in triangular employment from influencing the formulation and implementation of HR policies and practices. This perception of exclusion can indicate a deficit for these workers. It can represent a scenario where they come under the orbit of some HR policies and practices (e.g., health and safety training) but excluded from other HR practices, particularly voice.

Given the above, the inherent precariousness associated with triangular employment features voice exclusion. However, in situations where workers want to defy all odds to speak up, there is the dilemma of whom to speak to (Davidov, 2004) – the *de jure* or *de facto* employer (agency or user firm).

*Proposition 1a: The more ambiguous the understanding of who the legal employer is, the less likely it will be for the voice form of workers in triangular employment to be direct.*

**Legal regulation/protection.** There is evidence of an absence of legal regulations and protection for workers in triangular employment in many contexts (ILO, 2016). Although many European countries (e.g., Germany, Belgium, UK) have legislations to regulate

triangular employment and protect temporary agency workers, some countries (e.g., US) have minimal legislations and protection (Mitlatcher, 2007), while some countries in Africa/Asia (e.g., Nigeria) have none (Ojukwu, 2018). Similarly, in many countries, platform work lacks institutionalised legal employment regulations, leaving workers without legal protection amidst their contract's precariousness (Todolí-Signes, 2017). The argument for platform workers' exclusion is the non-recognisability of these workers as employees by the law, hence not covered by the current employment legislation in many countries.

Previous scholars (e.g., Håkansson *et al.*, 2020) argued that legal institutionalised regulations have implications for workers. Legal protection was found to enhance workers' rights, protect them from job insecurity and alleviate precariousness (Standing, 2011). The presence or absence of legal regulation and protection has implications for voice of workers in triangular employment, such that temporary agency workers in contexts with weak national regulation of temporary agency work are left vulnerable and devoid of collective voice (Håkansson *et al.*, 2020). For example, due to most temporary agencies' small business nature, especially in contexts where targeted labour legislations for workers are absent, work councils and union representation are rarely installed for collective voice (Rybnikova, 2016).

Scholars (e.g., Ackers, 2007) have argued that collective voice and union representation afford workers the opportunity for inclusiveness and challenge the employment contract's inherent power relations by voicing more contested issues. Dundon *et al.* (2004) further argued that institutional/collective voice enabled by legal regulation allows workers to influence management decisions and contribute to the formulation of HR practices. Similarly, Brewster *et al.* (2007) argued that strongly regulated labour markets strengthen effective worker collectives further enabling collective representation and other

complementary structures of voice. Conversely, in the absence of legal regulations indicating a weak labour market, workers collectives will be weak, and they are more likely to have individualised and direct voice than collective representation (Brewster *et al.*, 2007). Hence, we argue that when there are legalisations to regulate and protect triangular work, there is the likelihood that workers in triangular employment will be emboldened and empowered by such protective legislation to have collective representation. And that the rights to representation can encourage a culture where these workers can contest issues and influence management decisions.

*Proposition 1b: The more legal regulation and protection for workers in triangular employment is present, the more likely it will be for the workers' voice form to be indirect, their voice agenda to be of a contested nature, and their voice influence to be strong.*

### **Employment contextual forces**

**Presence.** Triangular employment has transcended work beyond traditional but permeable boundaries (Boudreau *et al.*, 2015), making workers' availability unpredictable. In the conceptualisation of non-traditional employment relationships, scholars (e.g., Cappelli and Keller, 2013) acknowledged the limited physical and administrative attachment of non-traditional workers to their organisations on the one hand and the restrictive direct employer control on the other hand. Spreitzer *et al.* (2017) in their review showed that workers in triangular employment experience a high level of flexibility in work time and location. For example, temporary agency workers experience a high level of volatility in their work location due to movements between clients by the agency (Mitlatcher, 2007). Similarly,

online co-employment platform workers may have a limited interface with their platforms, and their work highly remote, serving clients as demanded.

Due to technological changes, workers can either work physically, virtually or hybrid of both. While physical work enjoins workers' physical presence in the employer's premises and proximity to co-workers, virtual work spans discontinuities such as location, time, and lack of physical proximity to colleagues (Conner, 2003). Workers in triangular employment relationships have their fair share of physical and virtual work. For instance, while most temporary workers work physically, some co-employment platform workers perform their work virtually. In their categorisation of platform work, Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) illustrated that crowd platform (e.g., mturk.com) workers engage in virtual work, transportation (e.g., uber.com), and delivery/home task (e.g., taskrabbit.com) platform workers require physical presence.

Scholars (e.g., Short *et al.*, 1976) theorising on social presence posited that presence has a higher role in communication between parties. The availability of workers and the domiciling of work in their employers' premises shows presence and may likely influence the usage of direct voice mechanisms. Rybnikova (2016) found that shift work and changing workplace impact voice of temporary agency workers, possibly depriving them of voice channels in client firms. Atkinson and Hall (2011) also found that flexible working arrangement discourage discretionary behaviour (e.g., voice) among workers. Hence, the firm changing frequency and availability of workers and working patterns may likely influence voice forms available to workers in triangular employment.

Previous studies (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019) have argued that both physical and virtual work have implications for workers and their firms. For instance, workers' physical presence

allows workers interactions and relationships with managers, colleagues, and supervisors. Managers can give feedback on performance, thereby encouraging communication and interaction. Rybnikova (2016) found that increased interaction and interpersonal relationships between temporary agency workers with a prolonged physical presence in the client organisation and standard employees in the client firm enable voice opportunities for agency workers. It was argued further that increasing interaction and familiarity between temporary agency workers and supervisors in client firms allows temporary agency workers to attain a power status that allows them to influence decision-making.

Conversely, virtual working leaves supervisors to assess workers' performance by relying on output-related metrics and other monitoring techniques (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019). Virtual workers, due to physical, social, and professional isolation (Mitlatcher, 2007), have been reported to identify less with their organisations, and to communicate less with their managers and colleagues working physically in the office (Collins *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, platform workers also often work in isolation from others (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). In most cases, the workers find it challenging to communicate with platforms. There is a lack of direct communication, which stifles their voice, reduces their bargaining power, and makes them unable to influence decisions (Chesley, 2014). Hence, the isolation and lack of communication arising from the virtual nature of their work may impede voice behaviour of workers in triangular employment relationships, especially where there are no formal mechanisms to voice, limiting their ability to influence decisions.

*Proposition 2a: The more workers in triangular employment are physically present at work, the more likely it will be for their voice form to be direct, and their voice influence to be strong. Conversely, the more the virtual presence of workers in triangular employment*

*relationships, the more likely it will be for their voice form to be neither direct nor indirect, and their voice influence weak.*

***Duration of assignment.*** A significant feature of triangular employment is the flexibility in the duration of workers' assignment to user firms (Håkansson *et al.*, 2020), occasioning work time and geographical instability (Antoni and Jahn, 2009). The assignment duration between platform workers and clients can be finite or infinite (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019; Stanford). Platform workers, especially the highly skilled, have relative stability of clients over time but more often move from one assignment to the other (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Similarly, while some user firms use temporary agency workers for a short period, others make use of them for several months or years.

Scholars (e.g., Antoni and Jahn, 2009) argued that temporary agency workers' duration of assignment is determined by the need of the client firms, workers desire, and legal regulations concerning maximum period of engagement. Previous research further showed that the duration of temporary agency workers' assignment has far-reaching implications for work conditions and health outcomes, and for the availability and sustenance of standard work (Antoni and Jahn, 2009). In the same vein, the duration of assignment of workers in triangular employment may likely impact their voice form. For instance, Rybnikova (2016) found that temporary agency workers on a short duration of assignment do not have the opportunity to participate in direct voice mechanisms provided by the user firm and are only expected to execute assigned tasks without discussion or queries.

*Proposition 2b: The longer the duration of assignment of workers in triangular employment with the client(s)/client firms is, the more likely it will be for their voice form to be direct.*

***Autonomy and control.*** Triangular employment is precarious (ILO, 2016), and one of the dimensions of determining work precariousness is the degree of control over labour processes (Strauss and Fudge, 2014). Work status, work control and working conditions are parameters to determine the degree of autonomy and control of workers (Pichault and McKeown, 2019). This degree is connected to the presence/absence of trade unions and professional associations and control over working conditions (Cranford *et al.*, 2003).

Workers in triangular employment have been reported to have limited control and autonomy over their labour processes (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017). One of the features that sets platform workers apart from independent contractors is the platform companies' increasing degree of control through covert HRM activities (Healy *et al.*, 2017; Meijerink *et al.*, 2020). The platform controls the worker-client relationship, determines working terms and conditions, allocates work, reserves the right to terminate the working relationship, enforces disciplinary actions, and restricts workers from working externally (Duggan *et al.*, 2020; Healy *et al.*, 2017).

Temporary agency workers also have a lower degree of control over their work processes. The temporary agency and the client firm determines the wages, working conditions and pace of work. Previous studies (Håkansson *et al.*, 2020) have found temporary agency workers to have less control over their work processes leading to insecurity and isolation in the workplace and occasioning their lack of opportunity for workplace representation and collective voice in the client organisation. Workers in triangular employment have low power status and are highly deprived of social power leading to voice deprivation (Rybnikova, 2016). They experience low influence over their work conditions often due to supervisors' authoritative leadership behaviour, limiting their opportunities to



participate in decisions (Rybnikova, 2016). Ruiner *et al.* (2020) also found that when supervisors have a higher degree of influence in determining assignments and shifts, the higher the possibility of restricting workers' voice.

*Proposition 2c: The less likely workers in triangular employment have a degree of autonomy and control over their work status, content, and conditions, the less likely their voice form will be either direct or indirect. Also, the less likely their voice influence will be strong.*

### **Firm level forces**

***Institutional complexity.*** Temporary agencies and online co-employment labour platforms have been reported to face competing institutional logics – market and corporation logics (Meijerink, *et al.*, 2020). These competing logics occasioned institutional complexity where agencies and platforms struggle between acting as profit-oriented labour market intermediaries with little or no concern for workers relationship with clients/client organisations (market logic), or overtly/covertly institutionalising HRM activities for coordination and control of workers (corporation logic) (Frenken *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink *et al.*, 2020). Both logics are appealing to agencies and online co-employment labour platforms as they consciously integrate these competing logics for profit, improved shareholder value and organised coordination of workers through HRM activities (Frenken *et al.*, 2020). This institutional complexity necessitates whether workers in triangular employment will be classified by platforms/agencies as de facto employees (corporation logic) or freelancers (market logic) (Frenken *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink *et al.*, 2020). This is likely to have implications for the voicing opportunity extended to workers.

Temporary agencies either identify as intermediates in the employment contract between the worker and user client or as a significant party to the employment relationship (Purcell *et al.*, 2004). For instance, agencies/platforms sometimes act as subcontractors engaged by the user firm to source workers without taking employer-like responsibilities and view workers as independent of its operations (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020; Healy *et al.*, 2017). Although voluntary voice structures may be provided, this view exonerates the agencies/platforms from compulsory institutionalisation of voice mechanisms (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). Platforms eschew providing voice mechanisms when they identify as neutral market connectors with a distanced and technocratic relationship with workers (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). However, when agencies/platforms follow corporation logic by classifying workers as employees and interested in their commitment and motivation, they tend to provide community engagement and offer voice structures to address tasks concerns and clients' needs (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Hence, it is argued that in situations where agencies/platforms tilt more towards corporation logic, they are likely to offer workers in triangular employment direct voice structure as against when they favour market logic classifying workers as freelancers.

*Proposition 3a: The more the agencies/platforms favour corporation logic, the more likely voice form offered to workers in triangular employment will be direct.*

**Cost and control:** Given that agencies/platforms practice cost-based HRM, where workers are viewed as cost and not as resource (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019), it can be inferred that temporary work agencies and digital platforms will assess the cost of installing voice structures against its potential benefits. The neo-liberal economic model, upon which triangular work arrangement is premised, is purely transactional, which makes providing

workers' voice a marginal concern. Although previous studies (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2004) affirmed the organisational benefits of installing voice mechanisms, firms with a sizeable number of precarious workers are unreceptive towards enabling workers voice as it may be an avenue to influence management decisions and demand better working terms and conditions. For instance, it is expensive for digital platforms to install voice mechanisms due to costs of staffing, IT infrastructure and maintenance (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). Also, due to workers heterogeneity and geographical dispersal, voice channels enabled by platforms may become increasingly complex, occasioning additional costs. Similarly, temporary agencies are primarily small/medium enterprises with limited capital and client base (Davidov, 2014; Rybnikova, 2016) and will do a cost-benefit assessment of installing voice mechanisms to cater for their dispersed workers. Enabling voice may cost agencies loss of clients as reports from workers about client firms may be unfavourable, and agencies have little or no power to change worksite conditions (Ellen *et al.*, 2012). Hence, when voice structures are not installed for workers by agencies/platforms due to cost, workers become isolated with clients/client firms and are likely to have weak influence over working terms and conditions.

*Proposition 3b: The more it costs agencies/platforms to install voice structures compared to envisaged benefits, the more likely it will be for voice form of workers in triangular employment to be neither direct nor indirect, and the more likely their voice influence will be weak.*

Voice allows workers in triangular employment to mitigate their vulnerability and precariousness in a disadvantaged employment arrangement. To reduce agitation, agencies/platforms may eschew providing workers voice opportunity or poised to control it. Agencies/platforms' assessment of the extent of influence they have over workers' voice

direction may likely influence not only voice forms but also agenda. Ellen *et al.* (2012) found that agencies aggressively discourage or challenge workers' injury reports and that the agencies primarily control low-skilled workers' voice to shape its direction (Ellen *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, digital platforms retain control by enabling only direct voice forms as indirect forms may spur collectiveness and strong criticisms (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). They enable communication of complaints through semi-standardised and non-standardised direct channels and only encourage the discussion of task-related issues (shared) (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020).

*Proposition 3c: The more agencies and platforms control the direction of voice of workers in triangular employment, the more likely it will be for workers' voice form to be direct, and their voice agenda to be shared.*

**Governance structure conflicts.** Extant literature (Kaufman, 2015; Morrison, 2011; Prouska and Kapsali, 2021) has identified governance structure as an antecedent of voice. Temporary agencies and digital platform governance systems involve managing the contractual relationships among the parties (agency/platform, workers, and clients/user firms). They define membership, allocate and evaluate tasks, set wages/commission, install feedback mechanisms, compliance surveillance, and formulate policies guiding stakeholders' engagement (Kirchner and Schubler, 2019).

HR governance is commonly structured in a decentralised mode (Prouska and Kapsali, 2021) with HRM functional responsibilities shared between the parties (Davidov, 2014; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). The agency/platform and user firms' HRM policy formulation, which connects with the parties' influence, have implications for voice of workers in triangular employment. For example, while agencies and platforms aim at cost

minimisation, clients/user firms' target improved worker effectiveness and efficiency. The agency/platform shareholders and managers aim to meet the HR needs of client firms profitably with minimal cost, user-firm managers desire optimal productivity from workers (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). As the parties struggle to achieve their aims, the workers with little or no bargaining power are used as part of the contract negotiating conditions. Hence, each party (i.e., agencies/platforms and user firms) are contending for maximizing their interests, putting workers in a situation where voice is highly essential.

Although voice mechanisms are available to some workers in triangular employment, these channels are usually weak and offer little or no influence (Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020; Rybnikova, 2016; Håkansson *et al.*, 2020). For example, temporary agencies and platforms prioritise the interests and concerns of clients/user-firms over that of workers. The agencies/platforms also usually have little or no power to enforce workers' concerns with the client/user-firms except by breaching or ending contracts (Ellen *et al.*, 2012). Hence, agencies/platforms show little or no concern about workers work conditions due to clients/user firms needs and are, therefore, less likely to provide workers with strong channels and systems for airing their grievances and complaints and a chance at influencing management decisions.

*Proposition 3d: The stronger the clients/user firms' influence on agencies/platforms operations, the less likely it will be for voice form of workers in triangular employment to be either direct or indirect, and the more likely their voice influence will be weak.*

For performance management governance, the decentralisation of HR processes in the triangular structure of agency and platform work leaves the supervisor/manager in the user-firm's site in control of standards setting and performance evaluation. This role has

implications for voice of workers in triangular employment, as managers could motivate or inhibit workers voice before setting performance standards and following performance evaluation. For instance, Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) found that temporary agency employees have difficulty to voice even when unfairly blamed by supervisors. Studies (Ellen *et al.*, 2012) show that clients/user-firm managers often neglect workers' input in setting performance standards. This is in line with the argument that non-traditional workers are highly regarded as outsiders and offered little to no individual or collective voice, and their voice suppressed when it challenges clients/user firms' authorities (Bosmans *et al.*, 2015; Gegenhuber *et al.*, 2020). Hence, workers in triangular employment will less likely use internal direct formal voice forms and possibly remain silent when indirect voice mechanisms are not available. Additionally, voice influence of workers in triangular employment will likely be weak when clients/user firms' managers discourage voice because they are less interested in workers' input.

*Proposition 3e: The more rigid the performance management governance mechanism of the clients/user-firms, the less likely it will be for voice form of workers in triangular employment to be direct, and the more likely their voice influence is weak.*

### **Individual level forces**

***Perceived relative equity.*** Drawing on the frame of reference theory (Marsh, 1986), individuals' perception of relative equity is a function of the subjective evaluation of their situation compared to others. This perception of relative equity impacts workers' attitude and behaviour (Tansky *et al.*, 1997). Our relative equity comparison of workers in triangular

employment will be with standard workers working in the same firm. We argue that workers in triangular employment are likely to evaluate the relative equity of their work conditions with standard workers, and this may impact their voice. This is line with arguments and findings from extant literature (e.g., Buttner *et al.*, 2017; Tansky *et al.*, 1997; Zhang and Tsang, 2012) that employees with differing work or employment status compare their pay and other working conditions, and this have a significant effect on workers outcomes. For instance, factors such as similar supervisor treatment and relationship, same working hours, eating in the same canteen, and fewer differential experiences may likely give workers a perception of relative equity with standard workers.

Bosmans *et al.* (2015) argued that temporary agency workers experience stigmatisation and exclusion due to discriminatory practices which may even include standard workers being involved in contract extension decisions for workers in triangular employment (Bosmans *et al.*, 2015). In such instances, workers in triangular employment find it challenging to raise voice over stigmatisation and perceived injustice. Hence, it can be argued that the necessity of equity judgements will determine triangular workers' voice such that workers with a positive relative equity perception will use voice like standard workers. To support this claim, Gegenhuber *et al.* (2020) posited that platform workers, availed with permanent voice structures like the standard workers, have richer opportunities to speak up. Similarly, Rybnikova (2016) found that when temporary agency workers regard themselves as disempowered and disregarded by managers, they attached negative identity ascription, indicating higher perceived relative inequity levels, and were more likely to be silent or their voice to have less influence.

*Proposition 4a: The more workers in triangular employment have a negative relative equity perception of themselves in comparison with standard workers, the more likely it will be for their voice influence to be weak.*

**Voice skill.** Scholars (Morrison, 2011) have argued that workers refuse to speak up to evade harming or damaging others' social reputation, as voice can stir interpersonal conflict and have a negative reflection on others (Milliken *et al.*, 2003). Voice can be risky, and workers may find it difficult to air their opinions and complaints, especially on contested issues where power asymmetry is present (Morrison, 2014). Hence, to use voice appropriately, workers may need to possess skills and competencies to speak up without harming or leaving an indelible negative reflection on others as this can provide a buffer against interpersonal conflict. Therefore, voice skill is conceptualised as the ability to air one's opinion, ideas, and suggestions effectively or effectively complain and express grievances without making others feel threatened or inflicting damage on their social capital. Thus, it is argued that irrespective of the context, issues and individuals involved, voice skilled individuals will be able to interpret, understand and use context-appropriate voice behaviour. They will be more likely to speak up to supervisors about varieties of issues without harming others' social capital.

Workers, both in temporary agency work and the online co-employment platform work, are unlikely to have a familial relationship with the supervisors in the agency/platform/client organisations due to their contract nature. The contract can evoke isolation, stigmatisation, and an outsider's identity (Purcell *et al.*, 2011). Although, triangular work has been argued to encourage silence and waning interest in workplace issues due to the backlash that may follow voicing (Rybnikova, 2016), we argue that triangular workers with high voice skill can swim the murky waters of grievance expression without consequential



harm. Hence, high voice-skilled workers are likely to express grievances or suggestions without causing interpersonal conflict between them and their supervisors. Therefore, it is proposed that voice skilled of workers in triangular employment will be more likely to effectively use direct voice behaviour and speak about any agenda (shared or contested).

*Proposition 4b: The more voice-skilled a worker in triangular employment is, the more likely it will be for her/his voice agenda to be either shared or contested and for her/his voice influence to be strong.*

**Self-identity.** Self-identity, conceptualised as internally attributed meanings, expectations and societal image individuals associate with their roles (Thoits and Virshup, 1997), has been acknowledged to influence behaviour (Sparks and Guthrie, 1998). Individual's identification of self as perceived by their subjective consciousness largely influence how they relate with themselves and others (Lee Y., Lee J. and Lee Z., 2006). This self-identification is a catalyst for attitudes, norms, preferences, and behaviour (Sparks and Guthrie, 1998). For instance, self-identity has been found to significantly influence individual voting patterns (Granberg and Holmberg, 1990) and product usage intention (Sparks, Shepherd and Frewer, 1995). Previous scholars (e.g., Ashford and Barton, 2007; Morrison, 2014) have also argued that workers' sense of self and the need to act in a manner congruent with the self-identification may motivate voice behaviour. Specifically, Morrison (2014) argued that workers' sense of self and the need to act in a manner congruent with the self-identification may motivate voice behaviour.

Extant literature has demonstrated that workers in triangular employment relationships can either self-identify as a freelancer or employees. Healy *et al.* (2017) argued that platform workers who self-identify as employees, engage in direct voice with platforms,

complemented with a social media voice. In addition, these workers are evidenced to engage in both physical and digital protests and demonstrations to voice discontents with their employment terms (Healy *et al.*, 2017). Although with a low influence on platforms' management decisions and actions, there is evidence of Uber drivers organising themselves collectively to express their grievances (Greenhouse, 2016; Paul, 2021). Similarly, Rybnikova (2016) also reported a lower level of influence for workers in triangular employment due to fear of speaking up, low power status, and supervisors' disregard.

Conversely, due to their employment patterns' blurred nature, it is not surprising to find some workers in triangular employment relationships, especially in platform work, who self-identify as freelancers (Healy *et al.*, 2017; Meijerink *et al.*, 2020). Studies (e.g., Bologna, 2018) have highlighted the role autonomy and freedom play in the influence freelancers and independent workers have on their workplaces. These workers have been reported to have strong attachment to their work (Umney and Krestos, 2015) and are capable of mobilising resistance against any form of precarity (Standing, 2011). Standing (2011) argued that freelancers, due to their high professional level of competence, get organised easily and resist the neoliberal and exploitative tendencies of employers and their agencies. Similarly, Murgia, and Pulignano (2021), in their study, found that independent professionals working as freelancers can manage the risk of being self-employed and are able to collectively organise and cooperate for better terms of engagement. Corroborating these findings, studies investigating freelancers' voice (e.g., Saundry *et al.*, 2007) found freelancers to use indirect voice – network voice (Prouska and Kapsali, 2021). Through networks, freelancers share their grievances with their colleagues and establish a shared identity based on common experience (Saundry *et al.*, 2007). Also, Ruiner *et al.* (2020) found that independent

consultants have a higher degree of influence on management decisions. It can therefore be argued that when these workers self-identify as freelancers, there is the likelihood that they will engage in indirect voice and have a high level of influence on management decisions.

*Proposition 4c: The more workers in triangular employment self-identify as freelancers, the more likely it will be for their voice form to be indirect and for their voice influence to be strong.*

**Transition opportunity.** Previous scholars (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017) stated that one of the motives why individuals choose triangular work is the opportunity for a transition into standard work either with the agency/platform or client organisation. Both the temporary agencies/platforms and client organisations can offer workers standard job opportunities and ameliorate underemployment incidence (Healy *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the transition expectation has been reported to influence these workers' behaviour (Broschak *et al.*, 2008). Hence, it is argued that a transition opportunity for workers in triangular employment is likely to influence their voice.

Rybnikova (2016) found temporary agency workers to engage in opportunistic silence due to the expectation of standard work. These workers may deliberately refuse to use direct or indirect voice or distort and confuse their opinions due to the selfish motive of gaining standard employment (Knoll and Van Dick, 2013). Broshack *et al.* (2008) also found that temporary agency workers whose reason was to get standard employment have a higher level of supervisor-worker relationship satisfaction and are less likely to evince voice behaviour, but when exhibited, such voices will likely be targeted at shared issues. Such workers are less likely to voice contested issues that might label them as troublemakers (Milliken *et al.*, 2003).

*Proposition 4d: The more workers in triangular employment relationship see an opportunity for a transition into standard employment either with the agency/platform or client organisation, the more likely it will be for their voice form to be neither direct nor indirect; where they engage in some voice, the more likely it will be for their voice agenda to be shared.*

## **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE**

In this paper, we focus on the peculiar attributes of workers in triangular employment relationships, unfolding how these attributes contribute to the voice of these workers. A recent review on non-traditional/non-standard workers voice (Oyetunde *et al.*, 2022) indicate the need to further understand the voice enablers and inhibitors of the different strands of non-traditional workers. Although, scholars have developed models to explain the determining enablers and inhibitors of workers voice, the peculiarity of employment context and how they determine workers voice remains largely underdeveloped in extant voice literature. The main contribution of our study is the identification of new voice determinants that are major contractual issues for workers in triangular employment relationships. For example, the ambiguity in the legal employer of these workers offer novel insights and implications for their speaking up on issues that affect them at work. Also, as identified in our model, and following the arguments of Wilkinson *et al.* (2021), we uncover these determinants through the social, economic, and technological factors of mediated work. For instance, social issues such as presence, and perceived relative equity between standard workers and workers in triangular employment offers a unique contribution to voice determinants literature. Further, an extended contribution of our study relates to the

identification of the personal dispositions of workers such as self-identity and voice skill. Concerning the former, we argued for how personal identity in employment contract in the absence of a clear identity shape voice. Worker self-identity as a determinant in voice research is novel given that other strands of workers have not been reported to struggle in self-identity. Concerning the latter, like other constructs (e.g., political skill), we discuss how workers in triangular employment may utilise voice skill to remove the negative consequence of speaking about their concerns and grievances (Rybnikova, 2016). Our second contribution is in discussing how the identified determinants may influence the three dimensions of voice – form, agenda, and influence. Besides Prouska and Kapsali (2021), and Mowbray *et al.* (2015) models, previous efforts at modelling workers voice determinants have only identified voice as an outcome of the determinants without theorising the impact of the determining factors on the voice dimensions.

Our study provides some practical implications for both temporary agencies and platforms, and clients/user-firms managers. We have shown that employment context related factors such as enabling work autonomy and control, and granting longer assignment duration can enhance voice of workers in triangular employment relationships. Therefore, for both agencies/platforms and client organisations benefit from the workers extra-role behaviours such as voice, there should be inclusion of HR policies and practices that enable managers to grant workers not only a good level of work control, but the opportunity to enjoy stability with clients/user-firms (Mao and DeAndrea, 2019). To enjoy workers voice benefits, organisations can also help workers in triangular employment with clarity on their self-identity. Contracts provided to these workers should clearly stipulate whether they are employees or independent workers. Such clarity will remove ambiguities relating to self-

identity. We have also proposed that workers with high voice skill can navigate the murky waters of speaking in the workplace as non-standard workers. Platforms/client organisations providing workers with training in usage of voice without harming the social capital of others can provide workers with willingness to voice and improve their voice efficacy (Duan *et al.*, 2014). We also illustrate that workers in triangular employment perception of their relative equity with standard workers could influence the voice dimensions. Hence, platforms and client organisations removing all forms discrimination between workers irrespective of employment status will likely increase the motivation to voice as workers do not thrive or display citizenship behaviour in workplaces with discriminatory practices (Dhanani *et al.*, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

We present a conceptual framework depicting determinants of voice of workers in triangular employment relationships. The framework extends previous voice models with predominant elements situated in non-traditional employment context. Theoretically, we contribute to the current debates on voice trajectories by arguing that peculiar social, technological, and economic factors (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2021) rooted in mediated employment arrangements are key to understanding voice of workers in triangular employment. Specifically, it extends both Oyetunde *et al.* (2022) and Prouska and Kapsali's (2021) efforts by highlighting the forces that influence voice of workers in triangular employment. Hence, we highlight the following future research directions.

First, an empirical test of the model can examine if the proposed factors influence voice of workers in triangular employment. Further development of the model can incorporate the identified determinants influence on external network voice (Prouska and

Kapsali, 2021). Second, our study identified the legal definition of the employer and legal protection/regulation as external forces that determines voice of workers in triangular employment. Although other external factors (e.g., national culture, presence of trade union, labour market conditions) may also act as factors determining voice of workers in triangular employment, we could not find a linkage based on our review of the triangular employment literature. Future research can consider such factors. Third, future studies could also conceptualise/investigate the interrelationships between the identified forces in explaining workers' voice. For example, the degree of autonomy and control triangular workers have over their work may intervene in how the degree of availability and presence at work could influence their usage of voice mechanism and influence. In another view, workers' self-identification as employees or freelancers may influence autonomy and control, and both intervening in how perceived relative equity will impact voice. Fourth, future research could also incorporate clients/user-firms related factors. New studies could specifically target clients/user firms' perception of voice mechanisms available to workers in triangular employment and how HRM policies, ER climate and management ideology in user firms impact voice of workers in triangular employment relationships. Lastly, future research can also investigate unionised workers in triangular employment relationships and how the different levels of unionisation influence the determinants that this current research uncovered.

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**Table 1.** Commonalities and differences between online co-employment labour platforms and temporary agencies.

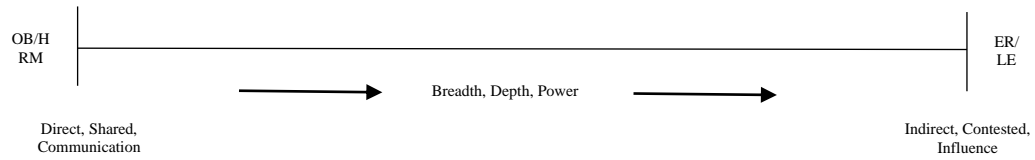
<b>Factors</b>	<b>Online Co-Employment Platforms</b>	<b>Temporary Agencies</b>
Matchmaking structure/platform	Online	Human/Physical
Matching process	Marketplace/platform match of client and worker	Employee of temporary agencies match worker and client
Flexibility of matchmaking	Hyperflexible	Flexible
Speed of matchmaking	Instant/on-demand	On-demand
Worker status	Employee to platform	Employee to temporary agency
Worker pay	Platform-determined	Agency-determined
Replacement	Platform's responsibility	Temporary agency's responsibility
Worker discipline	Platform	Temporary agency
Worker recruitment and selection	Platform's responsibility	Temporary agency's responsibility
Worker performance rating	Client's responsibility	Client's responsibility

Source: Adapted from Meijerink and Arets (2020), Howcroft and Bergvall-Kareborn (2019) and Halliday (2021)

**Table 2.** Employee voice models

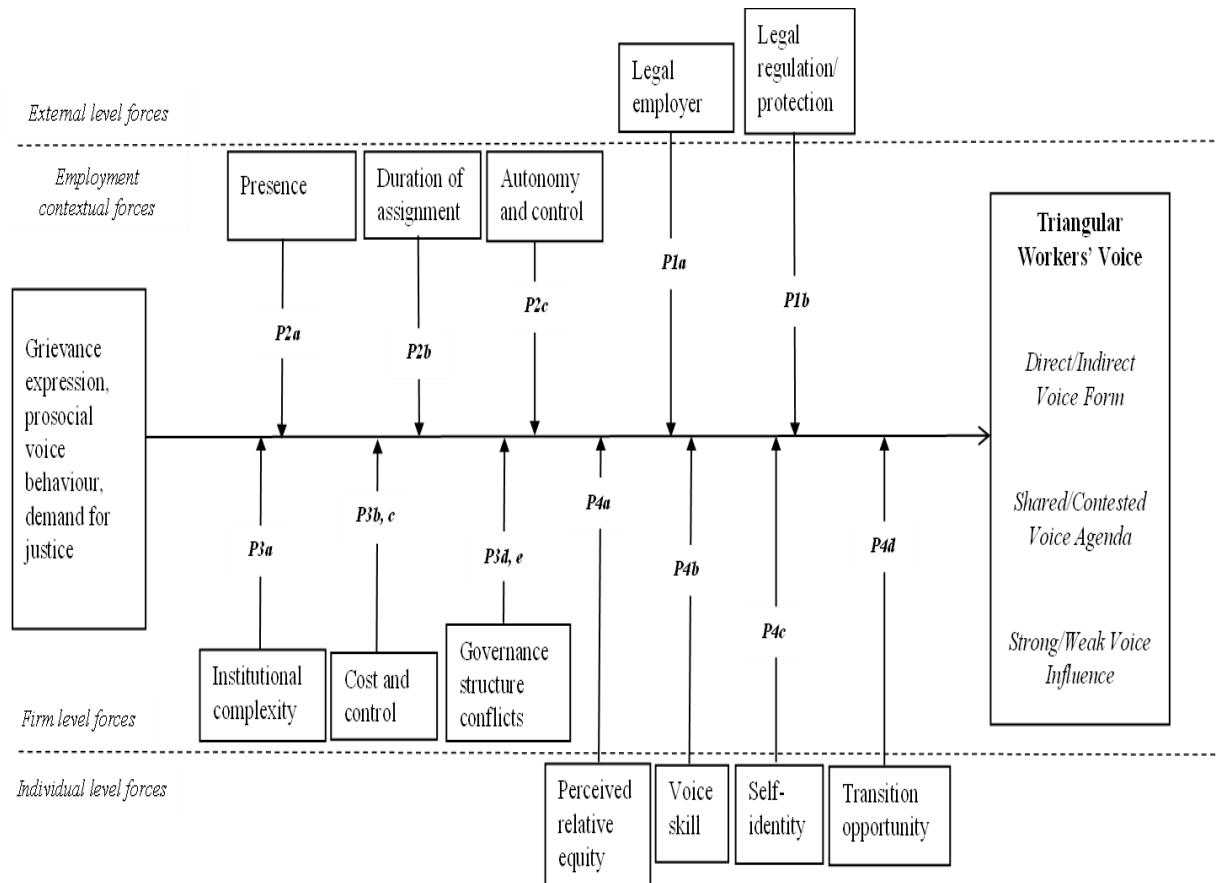
Author(s)	Perspective	Voice conceptualization	Determinants	Outcomes
Morrison 2011	OB	Discretionary communication, prosocial, extra-role behaviour, ideas, suggestions and opinion, organisational functioning.	Motive, organisational contextual factors, individual factors, perceived costs versus safety, perceived efficacy versus futility.	Voice (message, tactics, and target)
Klaas et al 2012	OB/Integrative	Discretionary communication, prosocial, grievance procedure, whistleblowing	Trait-like characteristics, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty, risk and safety of voice, voice legitimacy, voice utility, aversive conditions, culture.	Voice
Morrison 2014	OB	Informal, discretionary communication, ideas, suggestions, concerns, and opinion, change and improvement.	Latent voice opportunity, prosocial motivation, expected utility calculus, non-calculative automatic processes.	Voice or silence
Mowbray et al 2015	Integrative	Formal mechanisms and informal mechanisms	Motive, content, mechanisms, and target.	Voice form/channel
Kaufman 2015	Integrative	Say, formal mechanisms, structures, influence, decision making	External environment, organisational configuration, governance structure, employment relationship, decision making and voice choice, internal contingencies, ER climate, voice system, voice demand and supply.	Voice (form, agenda, and influence)
Nechanska et al. (2020)	Integrative	Informal channels, formal structures and mechanisms, influence, structured antagonism, grievance procedure.	OB/HR – voice efficacy, psychological safety, managerial and co-worker behaviour and beliefs, norms, emotions, image and branding, individual traits. IR – labour and product markets, management styles and beliefs, contractual terms, TU density and bargaining, role of the state and institutions, voice efficacy, voice depth and scope. LP – markets and capitalization, nature of work, labour indeterminacy, identity/subjectivity, gender, voice depth and scope, manager and co-worker behaviour/beliefs, skills, role of the state and institutions.	Voice or silence
Prouska & Kapsali (2021)	Integrative	Project worker voice, say, informal and formal means, organisational state of affairs influence, managers and owners' interests.	Network (project workers network position, ties, and tie strength), governance conflicts (stakeholder influence, devolution of management processes, knowledge governance mechanisms),	Voice (form, agenda, and influence)

			employment relationship (resourcing, competency, performance evaluation), ER climate (employment climate, team climate, environment climate)	
Oyetunde et al. (2021)	Integrative	Non-traditional workers' voice, say, formal and informal mechanisms, participation and involvement, influence.	<p>Individual level: work status, job insecurity, unionism orientation, interpersonal risks, expertise, freedom, autonomy and exit, power status and fear, conflict with customers/clients, perceived employment certainty, replaceability</p> <p>Firm level: size and workers composition, management ideology/control, structural and social factors, cost</p> <p>External level: industry attributes, institutional context, national legislations, professional network.</p> <p>Intervening factors: preferred work status, political savvy, organisational culture, self-efficacy, social connection, social media interaction, gender.</p>	Voice (form, agenda, and influence)



Source: Adopted from Kaufman (2014)

**Figure 1.** Employee voice dimensions.



**Figure 2.** A model of triangular worker voice determinants.