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Article — Published Version

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Human Resource Management Journal

Provided in Cooperation with:

John Wiley & Sons

Suggested Citation: Bernauer, Vanessa Sandra; Kornau, Angela (2022) : E-voice in the digitalised workplace. Insights from an alternative organisation, Human Resource Management Journal, ISSN 1748-8583, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 34, Iss. 2, pp. 369-385, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12460>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/290352>

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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

E-voice in the digitalised workplace. Insights from an alternative organisation

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Funding information

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Abstract

Digitalisation permeates all aspects of organizational life, especially the ways we communicate with each other. Drawing on a case study of an alternative organisation—the German collective Premium, which is almost entirely digitally organised—we seek to explore contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the expression of electronic voice (e-voice). Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with different members of the collective, we identified various contextual facilitators and barriers to e-voice expression: Collective belief in the value of diverse voices, cautious online and complementary face-to-face communication facilitate e-voice, while less formalised structures, power and knowledge asymmetries, and information overload hinder it. These findings demonstrate that despite an alternative organisation's firm intention and self-reflective efforts to create an inclusive and participatory digital space, tensions arise. Further, our study contributes to employee voice theorising by outlining contextual factors that are specifically relevant to e-voice practices.

KEYWORDS

alternative organisation, collective, digitalisation, e-voice, electronic voice, employee voice

Abbreviations: e-voice, electronic voice; HR, human resource.

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Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Being able to voice concerns and ideas has a positive impact on employees and the success of the company.
- Digital tools such as social media are important channels through which employee voice is expressed.
- The conditions under which electronic voice (e-voice) is facilitated or hindered are unclear.

What this paper adds?

- Identification of facilitators and barriers to e-voice.
- Collective belief in the value of diverse voices, cautious-online, and complementary face-to-face communication facilitate e-voice.
- Less formalised structures, power and knowledge asymmetries, and information overload hinder e-voice.
- Empirical insights from a unique case study.

The implications for practitioners:

- Train your employees to be cautious, self-reflective, and deliberate in their online communications.
- In highly digitalised work environments, implement practices that ensure opportunities for complementary face-to-face communication and building personal relationships.
- Assign roles and responsibilities to strengthen accountability and ensure that electronic voices are heard, and appropriate ideas are effectively put into practice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation is pervasive and is triggering fundamental changes in the way we work, communicate, and collaborate in organisations. For example, social media platforms that allow people to connect and share information are increasingly replacing or complementing face-to-face communication (Holland et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015; Mennie, 2015) and teamwork is often organised virtually (Kremer & Janneck, 2013). The literature on employee voice shows that allowing employees to voice concerns, make suggestions and participate in decision-making has a positive impact not only on employee well-being and sense of inclusion (Bell et al., 2011), but also on organizational effectiveness (Nechanska et al., 2020) and success (Townsend et al., 2020). Therefore, it is critical for practitioners and scholars to better understand the conditions under which voices are expressed electronically through digital tools such as social media, chat rooms, or blogs. However, our knowledge of electronic voice (e-voice for short), is currently limited and researchers are calling for more studies to improve our understanding of the phenomenon (Balnave et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2020). In addition, more studies of voice in different organizational settings are needed to better contextualise the phenomenon (Gilman et al., 2015). The goal of this paper is to address these deficits and explore facilitators and barriers to e-voice in the specific organizational context of an alternative organisation.

To investigate this question, we adopt an exploratory approach and use a single, in-depth case study design of a collective called Premium. Premium is a German beverage company formally owned by its founder, who democratically shares decision-making with a network of freelancers, all of whom together build the collective and collaboratively define its values and goals (Knoch, 2019). Alternative organisations, such as the Premium collective, are interesting fields of inquiry because they stand for principles such as democracy, participation, solidarity, and equality (Cheney, 2014; Parker et al., 2014; Reedy & Learmonth, 2009). The combination of these principles—assuming they are rigorously implemented—is intended to create an organizational space in which individuals are autonomous, free to express their opinions, and participate in decision-making (Maeckelbergh, 2014). In addition, Rothschild (2016) particularly emphasises the relevance of the Internet for those alternatives to bureaucratic forms of organisation,

which she refers to as 'Democracy 2.0', as for example, 'all relevant information and relationships be shared with the group at hand' (p. 10). Therefore, alternative organisations, with their emphasis on participation and electronic communication, provide a particularly rich research context in which to study e-voice.

Theoretically, our research efforts draw on the literature on employee voice with a particular focus on deciphering the organizational contextual factors that contribute to voice expression. We aim to contribute to the literature on employee voice by explaining the specific conditions under which e-voice occurs—presenting opportunities, but also drawbacks in a highly participatory and digitalised environment.

2 | EMPLOYEE VOICE IN CONTEXT

Employee voice 'describes how employees concerns, express, and advance interests, solve problems, and contribute to and participate in workplace decision-making' (Pyman et al., 2006, p. 543). Scholars conceptualise various voice schemes such as depth (the extent of employee influence), the scope of issues addressed, the level at which decisions are made, and the form, such as direct or indirect voice (Nechanska et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2014). In this study, we focus on direct voice, that is, mechanisms that enable individual involvement and participation, rather than indirect voice, that is, collective employee representation through union and non-union structures, such as advisory committees or works councils (Marchington, 2008).

There is a large body of literature that addresses the contextual factors that influence direct voice and identifies ways in which a more or less conducive environment for employee voice can be created—including voices that challenge the status quo and therewith make an important contribution to organizational success (Klaas et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2015; Morrison, 2011). These contextual factors can be broadly divided into structural and cultural aspects (cf. Morrison, 2011).

Structural aspects refer to the type of organisation, hierarchy, and power. Less hierarchical structures such as teams without formal authority over each other (Ohana & Stinglhamber, 2019) and small or self-managed groups (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Ramchandani & Singh, 2020) facilitate voice. In addition, Wood and Fenton-O'Creevy (2005) emphasise the importance of employees having access to relevant information, the opportunity for consultation, and shared decision-making in order to raise their voices. In contrast, in organisations with highly centralised decision-making processes, upward feedback is often unwelcome and therefore leads to employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Similarly, in organisations where there is a strong imbalance of power between employees and management and where there are no structures in place to enable voice to be exercised, or where voices are not heard or are ignored, the expression of voice is discouraged (Wilkinson et al., 2018).

Cultural aspects relate to workplace values and the nature of relationships. For instance, open and supportive work relationships are important (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020), especially with supervisors (Kwon et al., 2016; Milliken et al., 2003), not least because they help to create a collective belief in the safety and efficacy of speaking up (Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, in cultures with high levels of organizational trust, voicing problems and related needs is encouraged (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020), whereas in anonymous organizational settings and low levels of confidentiality, voicing one's opinion is discouraged (Almeida et al., 2020). This may also be related to cultural values such as power distance, as employees with high power distance values are more likely not to voice their concerns (Kwon et al., 2016).

2.1 | E-voice in the digital age

Digitalisation of workplaces has changed how people interact and communicate with each other (Holland et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015; Mennie, 2015) and therefore, need to be considered when examining employee voice. New forms and channels of employee voice emerge through electronic tools such as social media, which Madsen (2017) defines

as a 'user-friendly and visible web-based communication arena inside an organisation in which co-workers and managers can communicate, interact, connect, and make sense of their work and organizational life' (p. 3). E-voice describes how employees raise issues, contribute solutions, and participate in decision-making through such electronic communication tools, which include not only social media, but also other channels such as chat rooms, email, or online surveys (cf. Greer, 2002). To date, however, research on e-voice is still in its infancy; in particular more critical perspectives that not only highlight the benefits of new technologies, but also scrutinise the downsides, are rare (Balnave et al., 2014).

Indeed, previous studies show that digital tools can improve employee engagement in decision-making processes and open up the potential for more e-voices, for example, through lower costs of reproducing and disseminating information (DiMaggio et al., 2001), easier and immediate access, and sometimes anonymous participation (Balnave et al., 2014; Holland et al., 2019; Klaas et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2015). Furthermore, the use of social media invites people to act out one's 'desire to share about one-self' (Kairam et al., 2012, p. 1070). Employees can showcase their knowledge, experiences, and emotions to gain appreciation, a sense of belonging, and visibility. However, digital tools clearly have drawbacks and individuals' ability to use these technologies varies. Societies face a digital divide determined by people's access to technology, the extent and quality of their use, and their technical abilities (DiMaggio et al., 2001, 2004; Warschauer, 2003). This can lead to social injustice, unequal distribution of power, privacy, and security concerns (Afzalan & Muller, 2018).

2.2 | Voice in the context of alternative organisations

The notion 'alternative organisation' is often used as an umbrella term covering various kinds of organisations, such as collectives, worker or consumer co-operatives, community initiatives, or social movements. Despite varying purposes, these organisations are united in their goal to organise 'capitalism in a more humane way, with greater attention to social, economic, and environmental sustainability of organizations[, not fitting] in the traditional corporate, for-profit model' (Barin Cruz et al., 2017, p. 322f., see also Webb & Chenney, 2014). To further define the alternative organisation, Cheney (2014) elaborated five principles (see also Reedy & Learmonth, 2009): (1) autonomy, (2) equality/equity, (3) participation and democracy, (4) solidarity and connection, and (5) responsibility for implementing policies and practices consistent with these values. In addition, Parker et al. (2014) emphasise the need to take responsibility for the future and minimise negative impacts on the external environment.

In their effort to implement and bring these principles to life, alternative organisations aim to create a space where all individuals are seen as equals, are free to express their opinions, and are given the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Hence, the concept of voice is inextricably linked to the values underlying alternative organisations. However, instead of the concept of employee voice, the literature on alternative organisations seems to more often use other but related concepts, such as participation, engagement, involvement, and empowerment (Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). For instance, Ramchandani and Singh (2020) provide a conceptual framework for employee-centred organisations, in which they highlight the drivers and consequences of employee engagement, empowerment, and enablement. Furthermore, in their study of a consumer co-operative, Barros and Michaud (2020) 'highlight how social media can offer a new space for debates, dissensus, and critical deconstruction' (p. 578); members not physically present were enabled to e-voice their opinions through the use of blogs and social platforms. In contrast, Agarwal et al. (2014), in their study on grassroots organising in the digital age, also point to the downsides of using social media, noting that users tend to communicate face-to-face, experiencing bonds of trust, rather than using the tools available.

In any case, researchers have argued that alternative organisations cannot be idealised per se (see also Cheney, 2014). In the absence of formal hierarchies in alternative organisations, certain individuals may informally set themselves apart depending on their capacity, resources, and incentives (Ansell & Gash, 2007), thus promoting,

or at least not preventing, power imbalances. Similarly, in Long's (1981) study of employee participation in ownership and decision-making, little desires for worker participation and influence were found at any level of decision-making.

3 | METHODS

We deemed a single-case study design appropriate because it allowed us to examine the phenomenon under study holistically and in-depth in its real-world context using multiple data sources (Piekkari & Welch, 2017). We adopted an interpretive, social constructivist perspective, that is, we searched for the meanings that study participants attach to their subjective social reality (Arino et al., 2016) and explored the facilitators and barriers to e-voice as perceived by Premium's members in the specific organizational context of a collective. Premium was chosen as a case for two reasons: First, the means of communication are almost entirely digital and therefore provide a rich environment for the study of electronic voice. Second, the organizational forms here are more participatory than in conventional organisations, which raises the question of whether this also implies more promising organizational conditions for the expression of e-voice.

3.1 | The case: Premium collective

Hirschman (1970) distinguishes between customers' voice and exit, by referring to voicing concerns or exiting by not buying or consuming the product. Interestingly, this mirrors what happened to the founder of Premium in 1999: He was disappointed because the taste of his favourite coke was changed, and he did not have the opportunity to have a say and voice his dissatisfaction. His reaction was not only exit by no longer consuming the product, but also by starting a new beverage brand. He founded the collective Premium in 2001 in Germany. Formally, he owns the brand and bears the business risk, but he equally collaborates with freelancers, who all work together to build the collective and define its values and goals. Members of the collective want to manage things differently and better than typical business organisations. In particular, Premium aims to demonstrate that moral and business motives do not contradict each other but can be integrated by focussing equally on the triad of ecological, economic, and social principles (Knoch, 2019). Since late 2004, the collective has been self-sustaining but does not seek to maximise profits. For instance, due to ecological reasons their products are only distributed in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. At the same time, they are transparent about their organising model to allow organisations in other countries to imitate it.

Furthermore, Premium's members—including the founder—envision a collective where all stakeholders have an equal say, whether they are in sales, accounting, marketing, retailing, bottling, or simply consuming the product. In 2019, this included 1700 business partners and about 10,000 consumers (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019; Knoch, 2019). All stakeholders are treated fairly, this involves, for example, a decent equal pay for working members (including the founder), an adequate payment for orders, or avoiding unnecessary costs for customers (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019; Knoch, 2019).

The collective is managed by all interested members. The core management group is the so-called organising team, which consists of about 9–12 people, including the founder. They do tasks like accounting, sales, marketing, public relations, communication, and managing (regional) areas. About 30–50 members work as speakers meaning they are responsible for the customer service in a particular city or geographic area. The first contacts in the collective for these speakers are the regional managers, who are responsible for a broader region. Another group takes on supra-regional work tasks such as IT, communication, presentations, workshops, and (special) projects. Finally, 'production, logistics, and retail are done by independent professionals as regular contractors (with the right to participate in decision-making on an equal footing)' (Premium, 2022, February 2).

Premium lacks formal HR structures, that is, they do not have systematic information about their members, nor recruitment, or performance appraisal processes. They work without fixed positions and free choices of place, time, and scope of work without providing offices (Knoch, 2019). Because of this decentralisation, Premium is a thoroughly digitalised workplace, meaning that most communication and decision-making takes place online via the 'Board'. This is an internal digital communication channel in the form of a forum with currently about 150 members, to which access is granted after an individual request by email (Knoch, 2019).

The most striking characteristic of Premium is its non-hierarchical 'consensus democracy', that is, all members can participate equally in the decision-making process in the Board by joining a discussion, suggesting a resolution proposal, and agreeing to it or voicing a veto (Premium, 2021, July 4). Hence, Premium can be characterised as an alternative organisation in the sense that its value statements are consistent with the principles described in the literature, such as autonomy, participation, solidarity, and responsibility for the social and natural environment around them. Participants not only strive to implement and live these values within this organisation but are also on a mission to further 'spread a fair, ecological, and socially sustainable business model of high-quality' (Premium, 2021, July 4).

For its particular form of organisation, Premium is receiving attention from the scientific community. As part of their mission to spread their business model, Premium's members willingly share insights into their organizational life and regularly participate in studies, for example, on conflict management (Husemann et al., 2015), sustainability and growth critique (Pohler, 2019), or market entry strategies (Ladstaetter-Fussenegger & Luedicke, 2013). A prominent example that is particularly relevant to this study, is an investigation by Luedicke et al. (2017) who examine 'the practices and outcomes of radically open strategising' (p. 2). They show how Premium's members cope with arising challenges such as information asymmetries and overload, and power asymmetries by bypassing the open principles. The authors identify a 'selective use of [less] open [and partially contradictory] strategising opportunities' (p. 2), such as authoritative decision-making, in which 'one person decides on an issue' (p. 40), rather than following the consensus principle.

3.2 | Data collection

Data sources include a survey and interviews. To understand Premium's organizational context, we first emailed an online questionnaire to members. The main objective was to get an overview of demographic characteristics, type of involvement, work responsibilities, and influence on decision-making. Within a month, 36% (54) of the members voluntarily participated in the survey. Since Premium does not systematically collect such information, this was a necessary first step in obtaining an overview of the case, developing our interview guide, and selecting interview participants.

In a second step, we conducted 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with different members of the collective, taking care of a balanced gender participation. In Table 1, we indicate the main role of each interviewee in the organisation and specify a code that we use as a reference for interviewee quotes in the findings section. Some interviewees were recruited through a post in the online forum, others through emails, or a snowballing process. The interviews lasted on average about 80 min and were conducted by telephone in German. Each interview partner was assured of data protection and confidentiality.

The interview guide was used flexibly, it included sections on the personal background of the interviewees, on (digital) forms of communication, human resource practices, for example, recruitment, development, work organisation, leadership, and decision-making, as well as on practices and perceptions around inclusion (partly inspired by Danowitz et al., 2012).

TABLE 1 Overview of interview participants main role(s)

Interviewee code	Interviewee's main role(s)
I01	Organising team member
I02	Organising team member
I03	Organising team member
I04	Organising team member
I05	Organising team member
I06	Organising team member
I07	Speaker
I08	Speaker, supra-regional tasks
I09	Organising team member
I10	Speaker, reseller
I11	Speaker
I12	Regional manager, speaker
I13	Supra-regional tasks, former organising team member
I14	Consumer, former speaker
I15	Consumer, former supra-regional tasks
I16	Management of supra-regional tasks
I17	Management of supra-regional tasks
I18	Consumer
I19	Consumer
I20	Consumer

3.3 | Data analysis

To facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth analysis while providing a rigorous, structured, and transparent account of our data, we use the so-called Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), which is rooted in the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo software for coding. First, we began the analysis with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the goal of closely following the interviewees' wording to appropriately capture their subjective perceptions and descriptions of situations in which they were (un)able to express their voice, resulting in 270 first-order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Second, inspired by theoretical concepts, for example, shared beliefs about voice (cf. Morrison, 2011; Morrison et al., 2011), open and supportive work relations (Milliken et al., 2003; Ramchandani & Singh, 2020), or information overload (cf. Luedicke et al., 2017), we discovered similarities between the codes through axial coding and grouped them into six more abstract second-order themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, we categorised the second-order themes into two aggregate dimensions that distinguish between contextual facilitators and barriers to e-voice (see Figure 1).

4 | FINDINGS

In this section, we present and explain the identified second-order themes along our aggregate dimensions: (1) contextual facilitators and (2) contextual barriers to e-voice.

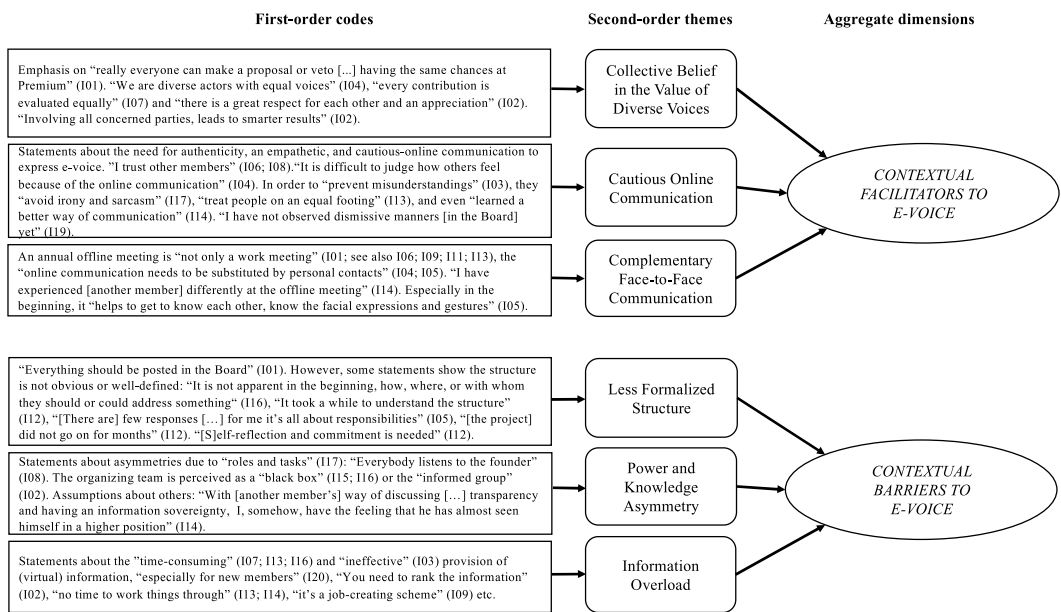


FIGURE 1 Data structure

4.1 | Contextual facilitators to e-voice

4.1.1 | Collective belief in the value of diverse voices

Premium members value voices of all concerned parties as a 'competitive advantage' (I02). 'Swarm knowledge' (I06) or 'collective intelligence' (I06) is seen as crucial for decision-making. In that sense, Premium counts on the support of all its different members to find the best solution:

I think that individuals gain power through consensus democracy. [...] The most important thing – and what people need to learn – is to apply it generously. However, saying I trust you or I see things differently is not in itself a bad thing. If it's important to you, do it. This generosity is underestimated; it's not about imposing your individual opinion, [...] but rather about finding [collectively] the best, most intelligent, or most thoughtful solution. But also, openness, allowing everyone to voice their opinion is not only okay, it's good. [...] And finally the responsibility [...] if I know something important, I have to participate (I04).

Furthermore, critical voices are heard and considered fruitful, even if this is sometimes disappointing for the individual who made a proposal in the first place, as the following quote shows:

I made a suggestion, [someone voiced] a veto [...] I was kind of demotivated to go on. I did not pursue it further, but I realized that it was plausible and that further steps were needed before certain ideas could actually become a resolution proposal [...] We actually discuss why there is a veto in the first place, what does not fit there and what perspective is brought in, and to what extent it is justified (I12).

Moreover, members are very accepting and tolerant of people's differences, diverse perspectives, and possible conflicts. One interviewee points out:

You can be a tiring or annoying person, have a different opinion, be sick, do a bad job, make mistakes or all at the same time. You can criticise the founder, have a controversy with him, but all this is not a problem (I02).

It appears that the collective shares the belief that the voices of different members are valuable and based on tolerance and trust. The virtual decision-making culture is perceived as something special that offers many opportunities to raise one's voice.

4.1.2 | Cautious online communication

Since most of the communication at Premium takes place online, members are very mindful when it comes to their use of language. One respondent admitted to being impressed by the 'quality of the discussions' (I08). Another said one can 'learn a lot about communication' (I14). Communication is perceived as 'very mindful, respectful, thoughtful, approachable, engaging, [and] inclusive' (I04). To avoid misunderstandings through virtual and written communication, participants are empathetic and careful:

I try to avoid irony and sarcasm because I know it's very difficult to convey and take back online. I try to write very neutrally (I17).

Voicing needs and acknowledging them is seen as less problematic in Premium (I01) because it is handled proactively, for example, (virtual) meetings always start with a sensitivity-round to express members' feelings and needs (I02m; I03).

How are the people? What's going on privately that they want to talk about? How is their health? How is everyone doing? [...] We want to acknowledge that when people open up (I02).

Indeed, this is also related to Premium's understanding of leadership, namely, to provide direction and create a safe space, as one of the organising team members points out:

What I have to do is to create a big safe space where everybody who is somehow involved with us feels safe to move and develop freely. And so can speak their honest mind. (I02).

These quotes support the perception of most interviewees that the climate is indeed rather peaceful (I01) and conducive to e-voice.

4.1.3 | Complementary face-to-face communication

While virtual communication is the norm, it became clear throughout the interview process that face-to-face communication is sparse but an important complement. Premium organizes an annual 'offline meeting' for all members that is 'not just a work meeting' (I01), 'it has a bit of a happening character' (I17) where they get to know each other (I09; I11). 'Meeting in person at some point helps to understand [each other's online communication] better. That's why offline meetings are important' (I11).

Some members of the collective may prefer to work mostly alone (I02; I11), while others see a 'deficit in not having social contacts [...] to build a collegial relationship' (I08). This quote illustrates the importance of additional face-to-face contacts:

Maybe I am too sensitive, but if I did not know a person and only communicated with them by mail, especially at the beginning, [...] I would not have felt understood. [...] How people react to different topics, I think I can only judge if I know the people and so I think it only works well if I have the opportunity to get to know the people beforehand (I05).

Furthermore, it seems to be helpful to have personal contacts to address certain issues such as individual interests or needs (I10). However, some participants also prefer to share new ideas with their peer group before voicing them in the collective:

I would do that first with the orga[nizing] team to check it out and then if they say, yeah, that's interesting, ask in the Board or get more opinions or something, I will do that. But the first impulse, I think I would always discuss it first with the people I already know (I05).

It becomes evident that many members of Premium need complementary face-to-face communication to facilitate e-voice.

4.2 | Contextual barriers to e-voice

4.2.1 | Less formalised structure

The collective is aware that because of its virtual and decentralised structure that is little formalised, its members risk working in solitude (I06). Since Premium has neither an office nor regular working hours, it is sometimes difficult to reach someone quickly (I02) because as one interviewee states: 'I work from home or wherever I want' (I01). The collective lacks binding structures, sometimes resulting in non-decisions (I16), unfinished tasks (I12) or longer project durations (I16). Waiting for online responses, answers or feedback is demotivating and hindering, as one respondent describes as follows:

No, it's not quite that simple at Premium. I have raised [an issue] first, suggested [a solution] and offered to do that. But then things kept fizzling out, for one reason or another. There were concerns. And that was pretty exhausting, just the fact that I first brought [my project] up almost four years ago [...] and I finally completed it in June. So, it had a project duration of over three and a half years (I16).

Another interviewee underlines, '[There] are only a few responses [...] for me it's about responsibility [...] I feel like only five to ten people kind of participate in the forum' (I05). Premium's principles of autonomy and absence of hierarchy allow members to speak up or remain silent in discussions whenever they want, that is, there are no formal mechanisms obliging people to contribute and use the information in the Board for their work tasks and related decisions. Therefore, less formalised structures shift much of the responsibility to the individual and limit e-voices addressed to the collective, as problems are usually solved single-handedly.

4.2.2 | Power and knowledge asymmetry

Premium members value equality among themselves. However, most interviewees point to informal hierarchies that arise from the way Premium is organised. First, according to one interviewee, a 'big problem is the perceived separation between the organising team and the rest of the collective' (I03). Their work is sometimes perceived as 'non-transparent and anti-collective [...] if shared at all' (I14).

Secondly, information, consultation and collective decision-making are supposed to take place virtually, where they are visible and accessible to all members. Therefore, 'everything in the Board is supposed to be made public' (I06). However, this is not done consistently, leading to a 'knowledge hierarchy' (I13; I11), as the following quote shows: 'The collective partly does not know what decisions are made at the top and therefore cannot say: "We want to have a say in this decision"' (I15).

Third, the founder is the central figure of the collective, 'he holds the strings' (I16) and can unintentionally silence other participants. One interviewee explains his role:

Even if he does not want to, he plays a central role. And he's the one who is seen a lot [inside and] outside the collective, and he has this alpha role because of his charisma and his demeanour. And so, a lot of people look to him and say, okay, I'll do it, if he thinks it's good, I think it's good. I can imagine [...] some people feel like they are being overshadowed (I07).

According to some interviewees, the founder's voice has more power than others, not based on formal power structures, but as informal power that has grown over time, as the following quote shows:

His voice is often of great importance, because he is the founder and the one who really bases his whole life on it. [...] He's particularly affected by everything, of course, and so if he were to say, 'I definitely do not want it one way or the other,' that would shorten the discussions (I17).

These quotes suggest that despite the principle of equal dignity, there are power and knowledge asymmetries within the collective, that unintentionally give more weight to the e-voices of some members and silence others.

4.2.3 | Information overload

New members with 'previous damage from other organisations' (I02) need some time to get used to this non-hierarchical, participatory decision-making style. Some interviewees address related disadvantages of autonomy: 'If everyone can do what they want, it is often time-consuming to make appointments' (I01). One interviewee is aware of the costs that can be associated with democratic decision-making, and expressed concerns about efficiency in achieving business goals:

But sometimes [...] lay people express their opinions [on certain subjects], which I, as an expert [in this field], find impossible. [And the coordination loops] are a hindrance. [...] It costs me twice as much time, twice as much energy, and that's effectively money. [...] Consensus decisions cost a bunch of money and a bunch of time [...] but still it worked for 18 years (I03).

Moreover, interviewees stress that it is very time-consuming to read all the Board discussions (I14), and therefore members report some fatigue in expressing their voices electronically because they lack the time to deal with the details of each discussion and/or explain their own views (I13; I17).

Similarly, others feel the urge to prioritise their work tasks and therefore do not have time to engage in time-consuming Board discussions, as the following quote shows:

I rarely consulted the Board. I found it difficult because I had a lot of tasks. I felt that I never get my work done and that I lack the time to discuss things in the Board (I13).

Hence, information overload and time-consuming participation processes in the digital sphere may reduce Premium members' readiness for e-voice.

5 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined contextual factors that facilitate or hinder e-voice in the specific context of a highly digitalised alternative organisation. Echoing others (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Cheney, 2014), we show that well-meant practices in alternative organisations not always turn out as intended. While various aspects such as collective belief in the value of diverse voices or the very careful and thoughtful online communication style of members of the collective do indeed facilitate the expression of e-voice, barriers such as less formalised procedures or power and knowledge asymmetries coexist and can limit people's ability and willingness to voice their concerns via digital tools. How these tensions coexist is illustrated in Figure 2. In what follows, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our study, as well as its limitations and future research opportunities.

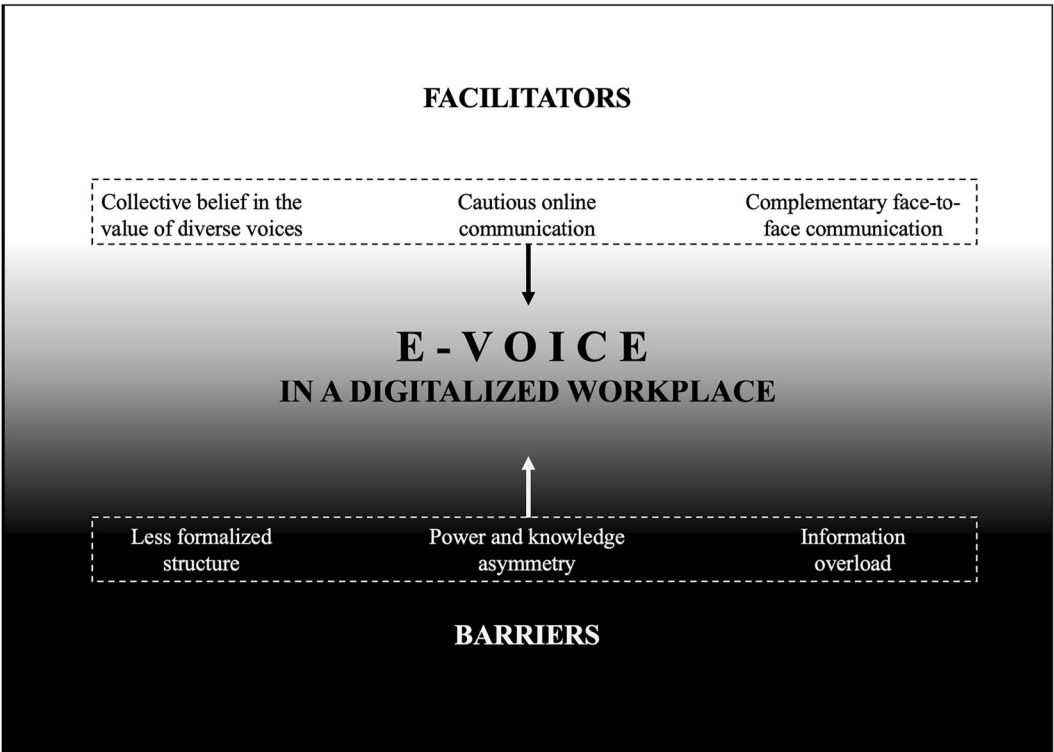


FIGURE 2 Contextual facilitators and barriers to e-voice in a digitalised workplace

5.1 | Theoretical implications

The findings of the study show that some of the contextual factors identified in the broader literature on employee voice are also relevant in a digital context, while some require expansion and/or specification. For example, researchers have highlighted that shared beliefs about voice are important, for example, about the safety of voice and its effectiveness (Morrison, 2011). Following and extending this line of thought (cf. Morrison et al., 2011), our findings show that the collective belief in the value of diverse voices is indeed an important prerequisite for the expression of e-voice. The Premium Board is the main electronic communication channel through which members have the opportunity to participate in discussions and make suggestions, and our results suggest that an authentic appreciation of different voices, including critical voices, is key to encouraging participation.

Moreover, we show the crucial role of cautious online communication for e-voice. While the voice literature broadly suggests that fostering an open and supportive working relationship is an important factor in establishing voice (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020), we show in this study how this translates to the digital sphere. Premium members demonstrate a high degree of critical self-reflection about their own actions and are aware that virtual communication, in part with people they may not know personally, requires particularly sensitive and compassionate online interaction. At the same time, our findings extend previous research on alternative organisations that emphasise the importance of face-to-face communication (cf. Agarwal et al., 2014) by showing that additional personal contact and relationship building beyond the digital space are crucial to triggering the expression of e-voice. This is also consistent with previous studies in the employee voice literature that suggest that low levels of confidentiality discourage voice (Almeida et al., 2020), but contrasts with the emerging e-voice literature that points to the opportunities for more open, yet provocative, expression of voice in an anonymous online environment (Martin et al., 2015).

Regarding the barriers to e-voice identified in this study, we found that, for example, less formalised structures that shift a lot of responsibility to individuals and do not hold people accountable can limit the motivation to engage in discussions via digital tools. This lack of accountability and standardized procedures can also lead to ignored or unread e-voices in the Board, resulting in frustrating, slow, and time-consuming coordination processes. This echoes the findings of Wilkinson et al. (2018), who highlight that voices sometimes go unheard, not because of deliberate suppression of voices, but because of 'institutional noise' (p. 714). Our findings suggest that such institutional noise can arise from a lack of formalisation, but also from information overload, that is, an unmanageable amount of information produced during the digital Board decision-making process. Previous research on e-voice suggests that actual participation in decision-making is enhanced by digital platforms, as they allow easier, immediate access to information and low costs (Balnave et al., 2014; Holland et al., 2019; Klaas et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2015), but our study points out the drawbacks of this phenomenon.

Our findings on e-voice barriers are also consistent with the literature on alternative organisations, which shows that informal hierarchies based on power and knowledge asymmetries persist even in alternative organisations and that certain actors, such as the founder, may informally demarcate themselves depending on their capacities and resources (Ansell & Gash, 2007). However, in the case of Premium, Luedicke et al. (2017) suggest that members actually accept the central role of the founder due to his 'self-sacrificing' (p. 23) behaviour and his (informal) power that has grown over time. Nevertheless, the other side of the coin is a lack of legitimacy for the voices of less powerful members (cf. Wilkinson et al., 2018), which limits their opportunities to be heard.

Finally, looking beyond the boundaries of the collective, the risk of reproducing inequalities in the digital sphere is high given the different resources people are endowed with (e.g., digital skills, equipment, support) and the background they are socialised in (e.g., migration background, gender, age) (DiMaggio et al., 2001, 2004). This has important implications for digitalised workplaces as the case of Premium highlights that many people may not be equipped with the necessary resources to access and work within such organisations.

5.2 | Practical implications

Our study has several implications for HR managers and decision makers who want to foster an inclusive culture that allows employees to voice their concerns and ideas through digital tools. First, Premium's case demonstrates the importance of communicating carefully and thoughtfully, especially in an online environment where, for example, it would be advisable not use sarcasm because it can be easily misunderstood. Such a sensitive communication culture is rather typical of alternative organisations (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2007; Parker et al., 2014) and could inspire other organisations to train their employees in self-reflective and constructive online communication. Second, we are currently witnessing the digitalisation of work being spurred at an unprecedented pace due to the Covid 19 pandemic, which is driving many workers around the world to work from home (DeSilver, 2020). Organisations need to respond to these changes and harness their potential, but also recognise and counteract the associated disadvantages. Our study suggests that digital communication alone is deficient, as people need additional face-to-face contact with their colleagues to build bonds of trust, discuss ideas and feel confident to contribute their thoughts in the digital sphere. Therefore, HR managers could organise social events or mentoring programs to ensure relationship building within and outside the digital space. Finally, organisations facing a lot of institutional noise, like the collective considered here, could counteract this by assigning roles and responsibilities more explicitly to improve accountability and ensure that e-voices are heard, and ideas are effectively put into practice.

5.2.1 | Limitations and future research

The uniqueness of our case study offers interesting insights into e-voice in alternative organisations but may raise questions about generalisability as Cheney (2014) highlights that some forms of alternative organisations are more context or domain specific. The landscape of alternative organisations is diverse and may include cooperatives in general or worker-owned, social movements, and other forms with various manifestations of the five principles described in the literature (Cheney, 2014; Reedy & Learmonth, 2009). However, we argue for the transferability of our findings to structurally equivalent contexts (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This may apply not only to alternative organisations, but also to more innovative firms that rely on participatory decision-making architectures and digital technologies. Investigating how different organizational characteristics or values affect the scope and depth of e-voice behaviour could be a fruitful future line of research, especially with a focus on currently under-researched e-voice mechanisms.

Furthermore, many of the previous studies on e-voice emphasise the benefits of digitalisation (Balnavé et al., 2014), but more critical studies are needed to understand the associated drawbacks. The contextual factors identified in this study could be used as a starting point for larger survey studies to test, extend and refine. Another potential avenue for future research could involve the voices of marginalised groups (e.g., gender, race, or sexuality) that are often 'ignored, suppressed, or missing' (Syed, 2014). Digital tools may reinforce or mitigate such marginalisation; for example, dismissive tendencies in anonymous virtual communication may be avoided if gender is obfuscated.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study addresses contextual facilitators and barriers to e-voice in the digitalised workplace of a German collective. We show that a collective belief in the value of diverse voices is particularly important in the digital sphere, that awareness and self-reflection are necessary for careful online communication, and that complementary face-to-face communication facilitates the expression of e-voice. At the same time, we propose that e-voices are inhibited by institutional noise that arises from less formalised work structures and information overload as well as by (unintentional) informal hierarchies based on power and knowledge asymmetries. Overall, this study contributes to employee voice

theory and practice by providing a better understanding of the conditions under which e-voicing occurs, but also highlights the tensions that arise when well-intentioned participatory decision-making structures are implemented in a digital sphere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We sincerely thank Louise Kalz for her research assistance and the study participants from Premium who enriched our research journey by sharing their experiences and stories with us. We are also grateful for the detailed and constructive feedback from the two anonymous reviewers and one of the editors. The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to anonymity reasons but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and with permission of Premium.

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How to cite this article: Bernauer, V. S., & Kornau, A. (2024). E-voice in the digitalised workplace. Insights from an alternative organisation. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 34(2), 369–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12460>