

# Non-Union Employee Voice in Japanese SMEs: An Analysis from The Perspective of Integrative Employee Voice Theories

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**Abstract:** Over recent decades, the rates of unionized employees have declined globally, and the interests of nonunion employee voices increased. Resultantly, scholars have urged a broader and multidisciplinary approach for studying the employee voice. This paper approaches employee voice from an interdisciplinary perspective and analyzes the data in terms of integrative voice theories. It investigates whether there are new, nonunion forms, mechanisms, or institutions of employee voice in Japanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), arguing that employee-driven nonunion voice organizations and law-based Majority Representation System or Work Councils are the primary collective voice mechanisms in nonunion SMEs. The study also found that company size and economic situation are two important factors affecting the establishment of different types of voice mechanisms and systems in SMEs. Additionally, there are new forms of employee voice, such as action plans, workers' social groups, and even vacations. The paper argues that employee voice needs to be researched in every aspect of employment relationships. Based on these findings, labor law and government regulations play an important role in terms of employee voice, a situation likely to continue in the near future, especially in non-union SMEs.

**Keywords:** Employee voice, integrative theories, Japanese SMEs

アブストラクト:ここ数十年で、組合員の割合は世界的に低下し、非組合員労働者の発言の関心が高まった。その結果、学者は、従業員の発言を研究するための、より広く、学際的なアプローチを求めてきた。この論文は、学際的な観点から従業員の発言にアプローチし、統合的な発言理論の観点からデータを分析する。日本の中小企業において、新しい非組合員形態メカニズムまたは従業員の発言の制度があるかどうかを調査し、従業員主導の非組合員の発言組織と法律に基づく過半数代表制または労使協議会が、非組合員中小企業の主要な集団的な発言メカニズムであると主張する。この調査では、企業の規模と経済状況が、中小企業におけるさまざまな種類の発言メカニズムとシステムの構造に影響を与える2つの重要な要因であることがわかる。加えて、行動計画、労働者の社員会、さらには休暇など、新しい形の従業員の発言がある。この論文は、雇用関係のあらゆる側面で従業員の発言を調査する必要があることを主張する。

キーワード：従業員の発言、統合的な発言理論、日本の中小企業

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## 1. Introduction

Employee voice was approached narrowly when Hirschman (1970) first conceptualized “voice” to change an unpleasant situation rather than escape from it. Then, Freeman and Medoff (1984) implicated that conceptualization in Industrial Relations discipline for the collective voice which labor unions were the pillar of employee voice. However, as the studies and interest in employee voice increased, the concept of employee voice has enhanced over time. Besides, employee voice is not a new or modern phenomenon; it was there during the Roman Empire when a farmer consulted his slaves for changes in their work (Columella 1941, as cited in Budd 2014, 485) to nineteenth-century England.

As Morrison (2011, 399) states, there are many different ways to express one’s concerns and make suggestions, thus in recent decades, there have been a growing number of studies focused on a better understanding of employee voice. Researchers began to approach employee voice with broader perspectives in order to find new forms of employee voice.

Thus, under the fact of the decline in labor unions, this paper seeks whether there are new non-union forms, mechanisms, or institutions of employee voice in Japanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). In this respect, this paper will emphasize the non-union employee voice organizations (NUO) since they are crucial alternative voice mechanisms for workers in SMEs and because they are also a less studied area that the author argues deserves more attention. Thereupon, this paper will approach the results and analyze them in terms of integrative employee voice theories.

This paper aims primarily to contribute the literature to a better understanding of the employee voice, its new forms, and future directions. Thus this paper will approach the employee voice with inter-disciplinary views of voice since the author of this sentence also believes that employee voice is an essential element and objective of the employment relationship, and it should be approached as broad as possible to contribute the literature of employee voice and hopefully contribute to the better employment relationship. Since the organizational rate of labor unions has been declining steadily, there is a need to approach employee voice more broadly and multi-disciplinary to detect the alternative forms and, more importantly, the unheard voice of employees. Besides, an integrative approach can provide a foundation for deepening the understanding of employee voice; it eliminates the restrictions of a single theorization and provides flexibility to approach it from different angles. This paper also intends to contribute to the literature on non-union voice mechanisms and SMEs in Japanese employment relations.

NUOs are labor organizations organized by the workers, especially in the companies without a labor union which also function as a voice mechanism. A voice mechanism refers to a particular medium through which employees can express their voice in an employment relationship. Depending on the forms of the voice, a voice mechanism can be formal or informal and individual or collective. Formal mechanisms include work

councils, labor-management committees, suggestion schemes; informal mechanisms include e-mails or one-to-one meetings, etc. Individual employee voice involves contacts between management and employees without the involvement of labor unions or any other organizations. This is also a direct form of voice that employees directly involve with the management. Collective voice refers to expressing the employees' opinions, concerns through a collective organization such as labor unions or NUOs.

This paper will search for employee voice in Japanese SMEs because as the labor union organization rate has been declining worldwide, the organization rate is even lower in SMEs than in larger companies. According to The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2019 Basic Survey of Trade Unions on December 19th, the unionization rate fell to a record low of 16.7% but increased to 17.1% the following year.<sup>(1)</sup> This situation has many reasons, such as larger unions do not have any actions to cover non-regular workers. However, the main phenomenon is that the organization rate of labor unions has been declining steadily over time, and the majority of Japanese workers are not represented by a labor union.

The SMEs provide a convenient environment for emerging new forms and mechanisms of employee voice. Another important reason is that Japanese SMEs have been studied comparatively less than bigger companies.

This paper will continue with a literature review section that will express why the concept of employee voice has been approached differently between different disciplines. It is crucial to understand the background of different theorizations and conceptualizations of employee voice since it will be helpful to understand the works attempting to integrate these theories or approach multi-disciplinary to employee voice. After that, the recent attempts and studies that tried to integrate the theories and approached the employee voice more broadly from different perspectives will be briefly expressed. In the third section, the literature on the non-union labor organizations (NUO) in Japanese companies will be briefly described since this paper will also analyze the existing non-union voice mechanisms through different voice theories. And NUOs have been playing a crucial role for employee voice, especially in Japanese SMEs. In the next section, the data that has been collected from different studies will be stated and analyzed. Finally, the findings will be argued and discussed in terms of integrative voice theories in the conclusion section.

## 2. The Studies On Integrating Employee Voice Theories

In this section, the literature on integrating employee voice theories will be stated after the background of these differences is explained. Different disciplines approach the notion of employee voice with their own agenda, definitions, and conceptualizations. Even though the modern studies of voice mainly stem from Hirschman's concept of voice, there are differences between contemporary disciplines such as employment

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(1) The data has been achieved from the official internet site of MHLW. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/itiran/roudou/roushi/kiso/20/dl/01.pdf>

relations (ER), human resource management (HRM), and organizational behavior (OB). They have different definitions, conceptualizations, and understanding of employee voice. Furthermore, this situation creates limitations to our understanding of employee voice and how voice behavior might be related to employee voice mechanisms (Mowbray et al., 2019).

## 2.1. The Frames of Reference

The different theorizations and conceptualizations are mainly caused by which paradigm or framework a person approaches employment relations or employee voice. One of the primarily used frameworks to study industrial relations is the frames of reference that Fox (1966) first popularized.<sup>(2)</sup> This framework is then used to understand and facilitate further studies on the employment relationship and employee voice. Budd (2004) added the egoist model to this framework and makes four models. Besides, Budd and Bhave (2010) summarize the elements of the employment relationship - employees, employers, states, markets, and contracts- and argue that scholars have conceptualized these elements of the employment relationship in different ways which produce four different models: the egoist, the unitarist, the pluralist and the critical models.

In the egoist employment relationship model, the free market is an essential concept for conceptualizing employment relationships. Thanks to the competitive free market, the employment relationship is considered a mutually advantageous transaction between self-interested and equal employee and employer. Because this model considers both employees and employers as rational agents who pursue their self-interest, Budd named it "egoist" and states there is no other intention of the name. The egoist model does not consider unions as important organizations or mechanisms since the contracts are implemented implicitly between self-interested economic actors interacting in competitive labor markets in which conflicts can be resolved by the invisible hand of the market.

The unitarist model considers workers as psychological beings motivated by intrinsic rewards and aligns the employee and employer interest together, and considers employment relationship as long term partnership between employees and employers who have common interests. Since employees and employers are assumed to share common goals, power relations or gaps are not important in this model. And conflict is a suboptimal state that stems from poor human resource management practices, and it is not an inherent or permanent feature of the employment relationship. In a unitary employment relationship, labor unions are unnecessary because their presence means that there is a problem with the human resource practices to align employees' and employers' interests.

In contrast to the unitarist model, the pluralist model sees employees and employers having different and often competing interests; since the labor market is not perfectly competitive, the employment relationship

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(2) Fox (1966) first mentions two models "Unitary" and "Pluralistic" then he (1974) adds "radical" frame.

is viewed as unequal bargaining between employees and employers. In this model, the workers are considered more than a commodity; economic and psychological beings with moral worth and democratic rights. This theoretical perspective is rooted in an inherent conflict of interest between employers and employees interacting in imperfect labor markets. Thus, creating a balance between employee and employer competing interests is essential in labor relations as it is between efficiency, equity, and voice. This model explicitly considers interests of the employment relationship that are not limited to (but include) efficiency. Thus, the pluralist model is compatible with Budd's (2004) analysis of the objectives of the employment relationship and the need for balancing them rather than prioritizing efficiency over voice and equity. The Pluralist model considers unions as essential institutions to balance the competing interests of employees and employers.

The critical model considers workers similar to the pluralist model with the addition of class interests. This model sees the employment relationship as an unequal power relation between employee and employer, systemically embedded in the social and political system. Unlike the unitarist model, this model stresses the power relations and conflict between employees and employers. This model considers unions important in advocating for the working class and decreasing exploitation; however, they are not adequate to the structural inequalities embedded in the social, political, and economic systems.

## 2.2. The Conceptualizations of Employee Voice in ER, HRM, And OB

Employee voice studies are scattered between several disciplines such as Employment Relations (ER), Human Resource Management (HRM), Organizational behavior (OB). The nature, characteristics, and involvement of employee voice within these disciplines vary from each other, essentially depending on which frame of reference has been followed.

HRM is often framed as management of the employment relationship; the framework they use to conceptualize voice requires understanding the purpose, meaning, and the subsequent impact of employee participation. HRM also pays attention to the goals or motives that underlie management's voice strategies (Boxall and Purcell 2010). The argument is that management did not lose their appetite for employee voice because of the decline of unions; rather, they changed their focus to a direct form of voice because they believe this form will increase productivity without challenging managerial power. By new mechanisms such as empowerment or high-performance work systems, employees aim to increase employee involvement and motivation, and at the same time, increase the productivity of the organization. The direct form of voice is beneficial for both employees and employers that it is for both their interest that managers continue to expand direct forms of voice.

On the other hand, according to OB scholars, employee voice should be beneficial to the organization, which makes it a promotive, and discretionary behavior (Morrison 2011, 2014; Klaas et al. 2012). Morrison (2011) defines voices as "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-

related issues with the intent to improve organizational and unit functioning” (p. 375). Additionally, the OB scholars ignore formal voice systems such as unions. As a promotive behavior, voice is not only about mere criticism but to improve the organization by expression of constructive voice. Morrison (2011, 2014) also regards voice as an extra role, informal and discretionary communication with the aim of bringing improvement and change.

Since voice is generally seen as individual behavior, OB scholars are interested in the factors that reveal individual level voice or, on the contrary, the factors that prevent the voice, a situation conceptualized as employee silence. Employee silence is a concept that is mainly addressed among OB literature in order to define a situation that an employee consciously withholds information, idea, concern, or suggestion about a work or organization related issue, which may be potentially significant, from the managers or the person who has an authority to take action about concerning issue (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Morrison (2011) argues that it will be more appropriate to view voice and silence as opposites. The important point here is that the idea or whatever the employee does not speak up should be intentionally withheld; otherwise, it would not be considered silence. Additionally, withholding input is harmful to the organization.

According to HRM scholars who also have an interest and studied the concept of employee silence, silence is more than just an intentional choice that employees prefer to exercise; in fact, silence can be considered socially engineered to reinforce the power of managers or employers. Furthermore, it is also essential to focus on how management responds to the employee voice and how the management silences workers (Donaghey et al., 2019).

For ER, the voice is an outcome of the employment relationship between employees and employers and as a mix of individual and collective efforts to improve organization performance and assert employee interest that can conflict with employers (Kochan et al., 2019). Kaufman (2014) states that this relationship has both symmetrical (legal equality in exchange, ability of both sides to exit) and asymmetrical elements (the employer’s legal authority to boss the employee; the employer’s typical advantage in external and internal bargaining power) and that ER gives more interest to conflicting employee-employer interest, the power gap between them, ethics and democratic rights at work. One of the fundamental differences between ER and OB is that for ER, the aim of voice is to maintain and enhance control over the work process rather than improve the efficiency of the process (Barry et al., 2018).

### 2.3. The Multi-Disciplinary Studies to Integrate Employee Voice Theories

As Budd states, in order for employee voice to continue being a vibrant area of research and practice that engages with cutting edge theory as well as with workers and their organizations in everyday lives’ (Budd 2014, p. 485), many scholars urge researchers to keep seeking voices that remain unheard. Wilkinson et al. (2018) and Budd (2014) argue that the research for employee voice must be continued to hear the unheard voice and detect the new forms of employee voice, both individual and collective, in contemporary organizations. Wilkinson

et al. (2018) even argue that several levels of voices are missing in contemporary organizations. And they remain unheard because only focusing on individual choice (OB) or voice structures (ER) shrinks the notion of voice.

However, it is quite difficult to integrate different and sometimes contradictive approaches. Thus, many scholars' primary emphasize by integrating theories is to encourage researchers to approach the concept of employee voice multi-disciplinary and to make the concept of employee voice broader in order to hear the unheard and unattended voice (Dundon et al. 2004, Budd et al. 2010, Morrison 2011, Budd 2014, Kaufman 2014, Barry et al., 2018, Mowbray et al. 2019). In order to enhance the understanding of employee voice, a researcher must approach the employee voice from different perspectives, which requires a multi-disciplinary approach, not just sticking with a single theory to search and explain employee voice. If a researcher only accepts the OB conceptualization of employee voice, it will lead to the elimination of collective forms of employee voice. In this respect, integrating the employee voice theories can be understood as determining and explaining employee voice in all forms, with different objectives and mechanisms by utilizing different theorizations. Eventually, this approach will reach a broader conceptualization and theorization of employee voice.

Thus, scholars from various disciplines have their suggestions of approaching employee voice more broadly and integrating different theories. For example, Wilkinson et al. (2018) propose the voice be examined on societal (macro), organizational as well as departmental (meso), and individual (micro) levels. The macro and meso levels are addressed primarily by the ER/HRM literature, whereas the micro-level is the domain of OB. Wilkinson, Barry, and Morrison (2020) also suggest these frameworks of different levels of analysis, and they state that voice systems are for the first two levels, whereas voice behavior is for the third one. More importantly, they emphasize that these different levels of analysis should be accepted as complementary rather than contradictory. They also suggest that there might be differences in that IR/ER and OB look at different types of employees and voice messages; thus, future researchers should consider these boundaries to be broken down if necessary or maintain them. Another factor that facilitates the integration is voice and silence literature. They argue that especially the OB voice-silence literature has the potential to build a bridge to IR and HRM since the scholars from HRM and ER take the concept of employee silence seriously in their researches.

From this perspective, one way of integrating the employee voice theories is to enhance the limitations of a specific discipline and make it open for implications of other disciplines. As stated above, the scholars from HRM and ER should study employee silence which is mainly studied under OB discipline. And more importantly, to accept the different levels, for example, individual or collective, of voice as complementary rather than contradictory.

There are also practical advantages of multi-disciplinary approach; for example; Wilkinson et al. (2020) and Mowbray et al. (2015) argue that combining ER/HRM, IR and OB will provide further studies of employee voice from both systems and behavioral perspectives and provide a wide range model including both collective and individual levels of voice. This approach could also reduce the research time and assist researchers in

designing, implementing, and managing their voice systems. And eventually, a multi-disciplinary perspective can provide a common conceptualization of employee voice and a theory of employee voice that can apply to all disciplines. By integrating these disciplines, expectations occur that future studies will consider voice as a broader concept that might be motivated by pro-social, justice, dissatisfaction, or self-determination motives; it may take place formally as HRM and ER argue or informally as OB argues. It might be an extra role, discretionary behavior as in OB literature, or an in-role behavior as in HRM literature.

A multi-disciplinary and broader approach to employee voice can also provide a more comprehensive historical viewpoint. It will make it easier to determine the changes and evolution of employee voice over time. In this respect, Dundon et al. (2014) conducted a broader approach to employee voice in which they argue that even the term of employee voice presents a broader way to examine its purpose and practice and analyze both in union and non-union way and also both individually and collectively. They studied the depth and changing pattern of voice over time in their study. One of their findings is that some old mechanisms in 1992 transformed into more all-embracing upward problem-solving voice mechanisms. And some mechanisms significantly have lost their importance. For example, various mechanisms, such as suggestion schemes, attitude surveys, and project teams, no longer appeared or to be confined to trivial or less significant matters. Another important conclusion is about the collective form of voice and unions that the role of unions has changed significantly in terms of direct involvement.

They concluded that joint consultation collective bargaining existed alongside systems for non-unionized employee representation. And this kind of dual-channel is more welcomed now than a decade ago. Thus, the importance and weight of non-union voice channels have been increased, both union and non-union vehicles of voice have been utilized in the same organization.

Their work has several important points relevant to this paper; it is clearly stated that the non-union voice mechanisms have been utilized widely than before and require more attention. Similarly, Wilkinson et al. (2018) argue that there are still unheard voices in contemporary organizations in different forms and wait for attention. Similarly, Barry et al. (2018) state that "If there is to be some integration it needs to be based on an acceptance that any conceptualization of voice should incorporate the individual antecedents, relational attributes of actors and the broader institutional factors that are promotive or inhibitive of voice across multiple levels (e.g., transnational, national, intermediary, sectoral, organizational, work unit)." (p. 258).

Thus, integrating voice theories does not necessarily mean explaining a specific form or mechanism of employee voice with different theories. The main goal is to enhance the theories themselves and enhance researchers' mindset to utilize more theories to explain various forms or mechanisms of employee voice. This will eventually break the limitations of a particular theory and lead to a broader and integrated theory of employee voice.



### 3. Non-Union Voice Organizations (NUO) in Japan

Non-union voice organizations can also be referred to as non-union worker organizations or non-union labor organizations; however, this paper uses the NUO as the abbreviation of non-union voice organizations since the main topic of this paper is employee voice. NUOs are the non-union and employee-driven labor organizations that provide voice to workers. They are organized by the employees for various reasons and are also considered an alternative mechanism for employee voice, especially in SMEs.

Thus, this paper will also analyze the non-union employee voice mechanisms in terms of different voice theories. Since NUOs in Japan have been noticed and studied by scholars from various disciplines, such as industrial relations or scholars from Labor law, the literature on NUOs in Japanese SMEs will be summarized in this section. Furthermore, as Dundon et al. (2005) argue, the non-union voice needs to be researched for several reasons. First, it is neglected compared with union voice. Secondly, union voice is a minority phenomenon with the little immediate prospect of a return to union-centered forms of participation. Thus non-union voice is critical to both ordinary employees and public policy ideas for improving the representation gap (beyond unionization). Third, many sectors that dominate the economy do not have a tradition of union representation.

Non-union voice organizations are generally seen in SMEs in Japan. The first scholar to write about this issue is Koike Kazuo (1977, 1981). Koike (1981) studies seven small and medium-sized firms in middle Tokyo and finds NUOs in three of them. Both the managers and workers are members, and they discuss the wages and other working conditions such as productivity policies. Koike named them *jijitsujou rodo kumiai* (de facto labor unions). Koike named them de facto labor unions because they included section managers of the firms, which are equivalent to foremen of big companies. Secondly, these organizations also take costs money from their members and elect their members. Finally, and more importantly, they have been discussing labor issues. Because of these aspects of these NUOs, Koike called them de facto labor unions which seems quite an appropriate name since they were sharing many aspects with actual unions.

However, Nakamura (1988) disagrees with Koike about NUO being a de facto labor union. First of all, Koike assumes the unions and NUOs in small and medium firms do not have members outside the firm, but Nakamura argues that the unions often get help from regional or upper union federations as an organ; therefore, they are not the same. Secondly, Nakamura criticizes Koike for just focusing on their formation but not comparing their bargaining power and its result, so Nakamura compares dismissal rate in union firms and NUO firms and argues NUO has limits and is not the same with a union.

He further argues that NUO's negotiation power is weaker and disagrees with Koike that NUOs can hold the same function as unions. On the other hand, Tsuru (2002) criticizes Nakamura and argues that Nakamura's data covers only 5.4% of unions, so it is not a fair comparison. In addition, Tomita (1993) argues there are not enough studies and data to compare the negotiation power and labor situation of the firms with NUOs and the

firms with labor unions; more studies are needed. In all of these discussions, the NUOs effectivity and function depend on their types since they are in different scales and types. Tsuru (2002) also mentions two different types of system that mostly conducts collective communication inside the firm between labor and management; one of them is *kanrishokukai* (management committee) and arbitrary management committee, and he argues that they also discuss workers' problems.

The name of NUOs change depending on the firm, for example, *jogyoinkai*, *shainkai*, *shinbokukai*, *shain kurabu*, etc. However, scholars mainly classify them in terms of their function, basically comparing them with the union. As stated above, Koike first named them "club" or "*Jūgyōin shinboku-kai*," employee fellowship, and because of the reasons above, he also named them *de facto* union by company.

According to its function, one type of NUO is called *hatsugengata rodo soshiki* (Voice type labor organization). This type conducts activities to discuss working conditions such as wage revision, working hours, holidays, vacations, and welfare with the management side, also complaint activity for employees, activity to discuss production plans and management policies with the management side. Not only workers but also managers can become members of this type of organizations in some companies. The difference between other types of NUOs such as *shinbokugata* (Friendly type labor organization) or *shainkai* (Employee's association) is that they do not discuss labor conditions, problems with the management, it is mostly formed between workers only or workers and managers as informal meetings mainly aiming for workers' friendship (Sato 1994, Tsuru 2002, Taguchi and Umezaki, 2011).

One of the discussions on NUOs among Japanese scholars is the relationship between NUOs and unions; Tsuru (2002), Nitta (1992), and Nishitani (1989) are among the scholars with a positive view on NUO, especially the *hatsugengata* type, with its relation with unions. Tsuru says there is a connection between *hatsugengata* organizations and workers trying to make unions, even though in *hatsugengata* firms that the management is mostly against unionization. Nitta has a very different argument than many scholars that *hatsugengata* labor organizations will eventually lead to unionization. Morishima (1999) says that even though they are still inferior than unions, they make many contributions that we cannot ignore their importance. Taguchi and Umezaki (2011) stressed that further studies still needed to clarify how labor unions and NUOs are similar or different from each other.

On the other hand, scholars such as Nakamura (1995) and Hisamoto (1993) acknowledge that the *hatsugengata* type can replace labor unions. However, the *shinbokugata* type cannot do that function, and they strictly are against NUOs as they argue that they hinder the creation of unions in small and medium firms.

As seen above, there are some disagreements about NUOs regarding efficiency and its relations with labor unions among Japanese scholars. On the other hand, recent studies mainly deal with the efficiency of NUOs or employee voice in SMEs. Tsuru (2002) says NUOs do not decrease the job turnover, but unions and other organizations also do not do that kind of function. He says that especially *hatsugengata* has the characteristic of

substituting the unions; hatsugengata also increase the productivity as unions do. Oh Hak So (2011) argues that voice mechanisms in SMEs increase the efficiency of communication between workers and management, so it is beneficial for both of them.

The studies on NUOs in Japanese SMEs mainly deal with the relationship between the voice and efficiency of the firm by using empirical data. There is hardly any study that approaches the non-union voice mechanisms in Japanese SMEs in terms of theoretical framework. This paper intends to fill the gap in this area as well. In the next section, the data about non-union voice organizations and employee voice from different studies will be introduced in order to be analyzed and discussed in terms of integrative employee voice theories.

#### 4. The Data Analysis and Discussion

As many scholars above also mentioned, the studies on NUOs and SMEs in Japan are still very low, and the data about them are also unfortunately not plenty (Tomita 1993, Noda 2019). Since the data concerning the employee voice in SMEs is unfortunately not plenty, the most relevant four datasets have been chosen and used in this paper. Another reason for using multiple datasets is to provide sufficient input for analysis since this paper approach employee voice as a broader concept. Even though there is no consensus about which companies should be considered SMEs, this paper accepts companies with less than 300 workers as SMEs. Thus, the datasets were carefully selected to match the criteria and be consistent with each other.

The first data is from the study of 無組合企業の労使関係 “Mu kumiai kigyō ni okeru rōshi kankei” (Labor Relations in Non-union Companies) conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) in 1996 and compares non-union firms (NUF) to the firms with the union and aims to explain voice mechanisms, the process of labor condition determination, the workers’ participation of it and the management countermeasure and reaction of the NUF. Two different methods have been implemented in the study; one is sample-based the other is an interview-based method. The survey area of the sample research is within a scope of 30 kilometers from Tokyo Station, and the group consists of 25,362 privately-owned companies with 50 or more employees headquartered in the area. The survey target is 1,250 companies randomly selected from this point. The sample frame comprises private companies with more than 50 employees within 30 km of Tokyo created by COSMOS2 of Teikoku Databank. The survey method was based on the individual visit of the surveyors, and the survey period was from July 26th to August 31st, 1995. Valid responses were obtained from 516 companies from 1,250 companies, and the response rate was 41.3%.

Based on the sample-based survey method, by company size, the organizational ratio of non-union worker organizations is the highest, 66.4%, for the firms between 100-299 workers. And slightly lower for companies with 1,000 or more workers as 55.6%. In terms of industry, it is high in the transportation and communications industry with 93.5%, and low in the finance and insurance industry with 53.4%. Overall, the companies that

have experienced the formation of employee organizations with a size that is less than 50 workers is 47.8%. In the firms with less than 200 workers, it is 39.9% (p. 49-50).

The study classifies the employee organization of a non-union enterprise into two types, hatsugengata (voice type) type is 18.0% and shinbokugata type (friendly type) 82.0%. The classification of NUOs in this study is based on the answer to the question that if the NUOs are engaged in activities such as “discussing working conditions such as wage revisions, working hours/days/vacations, and benefits” or “discussing production plans and management policies.” The NUOs that conduct these activities are stated as hatsugengata, and the others that do not conduct the activities above are called shinbokugata (p. 49).

In terms of the topics that discussed when the working conditions and management matters are discussed between the company and the employee organization, there are five specific topics; welfare rate (73.0%), working hours/days off/vacation (66.3%), wage revision (46.3%), hourly wage (33.4%), and basic management policy (31.6%). By company size, the benefits and welfare are discussed by all companies of 1,000 or more (100.0%), and the hours of work are discussed in the firms between 50-99 workers at a high rate (42.9%).

The rate of implementation of labor-management consultations is related to the nature and presence of employee organizations, in the case of hatsugengata NUO (35.9%), a fellow employee organization (friendly type) (26.3%), and no employee organization (21.8%) which is gradually decreasing (p. 51).

Another important collective voice mechanism is *Roshi Kyogi Kikan* (Labor-Management council), which exists in 19% of firms with 50 to 99 workers and 12.8% of firms with 100 to 299 workers (p. 48, chart 5-3). According to the study, this system conducts discussions between labor and management regarding management, production, working conditions, and welfare benefits.

According to this study, there are also some individual voice mechanisms in SMEs; the most used way is *Jiko Shinsoku Seido* (Self-report system), which is common 50% in firms with 50 to 99 workers, and 46.7% in the firms with 100 to 299 workers. The second more common way is *Teian seido* (Proposing system) which is around 36.4% and 24.4% respectively in the firms with 50 to 99 and 100 to 299 workers (p. 44-45, chart 4-24).

The data indicates that NUOs can be considered employee-driven collective voice mechanism, besides the managers also become NUOs' members. In traditional collective voice mechanisms such as labor unions, the managers cannot be a member of the organization, however in the case of NUOs there are more cooperative tendency with the management. Therefore the non-union collective voice mechanisms have become more compatible with the HRM approach as well. The data on the labor-management council indicates that legal-based systems also work as voice mechanisms, especially for the collective level voice.

The second dataset is from the study that JILPT conducted in 2006: 中小企業における労使コミュニケーションと労働条件決定 “*Chūshōkigyō ni okeru rōshi komyunikēshon to rōdō jōken kettei*” (Labor-management communication and determination of working conditions in SMEs). This research aims to provide basic facts to the recent discussion about the ideal working condition decision system by clarifying the actual conditions of

labor-management communication and working condition decisions in SMEs. The method used in this study is a questionnaire survey conducted by mail to companies with less than 1,000 full-time employees. The survey period was from July 12, 2006, to September 11, 2006. The number of companies sending the data was 12,000, the number of valid responses was 2,440, and the collection rate was 20.3% (p. 1).

In terms of the NUOs, this study also classifies them according to their activities. Therefore, the employee organization that limits the activities to culture, recreation, and mutual aid activities such as condolence money and loans and employee grievance activities is called *shinbokugata* type. The NUOs that also carry out labor union-like activities such as discussing labor conditions with the management are called *hatsugengata* type (p. 77).

According to this study, employee organizations can be cited as one of the leading players in labor-management communication. The percentage of companies that answered "Yes" they have such employee organizations is 49.1%, which is about half of the companies. Looking at the activity contents of employee organizations, 83.0% of the respondents said that they were "fellowship activities such as recreation," followed by "mutual aid and mutual assistance activities such as condolences and loans" 61.2%, "wage revision, working hours and activities for discussing working conditions such as welfare benefits with the management side" were 22.8%, "Employee complaint processing activities" 16.0%, and "Activities for discussing production plans and management policies with the management side" 10.2%. The larger the company size, the higher the percentage of respondents who said, "Activities to discuss working conditions such as wage revision, working hours, and welfare with the management" (p. 26-27).

Regarding the organization rate of the NUOs, *hatsugengata* type exists in 8.8% of all firms, *shinbokugata* exists in 32.3% of all firms (p. 77). About one-fourth of the companies that do not have a union have *hatsugengata* type NUOs. In the firms with less than 30 workers, the rate is 8.7%, between 30-100 workers, the rate is 13.1%, firms more than 100 workers, it is 12.6% (p. 112).

The study examines the function of the employee voice mechanisms in SMEs. First, the employee voice mechanisms were divided into four types, based on the existence of labor unions and employee organizations and the characteristics of employee organizations. In other words, the employee union type (14.9%) in which a labor union is established. Second, the *shinbokugata* type (32.3%) that conducts fellowship activities such as recreation, mutual aid activities such as condolences and loans, and employee complaint activities. Third, the *hatsugengata* type (8.8%) that discusses wage revision, working hours/holidays/vacations, working conditions such as welfare, production plans, and management policies. And finally, the "unorganized type" (44.1%) with no union or employee organization.

On what occasions do the companies hear their employees' opinions when reviewing base wages? The answers are as follows:

24.7%: "meetings with managers"; 12.3%: "business meetings or HR interviews with employees"; 10.5%:

“meetings with the labor union”; 4.9%: “meetings with supervisors”; 4.1%: “meetings with the labor-management consultation body”; 3.9%: “meetings with the employee organization, such as employee social club or social gathering”; and 3.1%: “meetings with employees other than for business purposes.” (p. 18-19).

According to this study, the methods that the firms use to employees opinions when the work rules are reviewed is as follows: 41.4%: “the company prepared an employees’ written opinion based on employees’ views heard by the company from time to time”; 17.3%: “a written opinion was prepared by an employee who is regarded as the employee representative” (p. 169).

This study gives crucial data about the legal-based Majority Representation System. Article 36 of the Labor Standart Act provides a right to an employer not to follow the working hour regulation and rest-day regulation by ordering overtime work under the condition of concluding a labor-management agreement with a majority representative (majority union or an elected person) and after that submitting the agreement to the local labor inspection office.

According to this survey, when asked about the counterparty with whom the Article 36 agreement was concluded, 60.1% of companies replied that “it is the employee representative representing a majority of employees,” and 11.4% responded that “it is the labor union organized by a majority of employees.” And 22.4% of the companies do not have any Article 36 agreement (p. 23).

According to the first and the second datasets, the likelihood of having collective voice institutions with different forms, NUOs or worker’s associations, depends on company size and industry type. Blue-collar industry workers tend to establish collective voice mechanisms more than other industries. And most collective forms of voice mechanisms are seen at firms with 100 to 300 workers. The case study also confirms that employees have more chances to use direct or individual voice in smaller companies.

The legal-based Majority Representation System and Work-councils from the previous datasets confirm that legal-based systems are utilized for collective voice mechanisms. These findings indicate that labor law or government regulations will likely play a more significant role in employee voice. This situation is compatible with the ER since ER, especially pluralist ER discipline, is open for law and regulations to provide the collective or individual voice for the workers. Thus HRM and OB disciplines should also be open to legal-based systems as employee voice mechanisms.

The third dataset is from the study that is conducted in Osaka by Osaka Research Center for Industry and the Economy in 2016: 企業競争力強化のための社内コミュニケーション形成に関する調査 “Kigyō kyōsō-ryoku kyōka no tame no shanai komyunikēshon keisei ni kansuru chōsa” (Survey on internal communication formation to strengthen corporate competitiveness). The difference between this study is that it is not about NUOs but employee voice. The questionnaire conducted in the survey was conducted for private companies with 31 to 300 regular employees in Osaka Prefecture (valid shipments: 1,966), and the number of valid responses was 422, with a valid response rate of 21.5% (p. 1).

In the study, the current managers were presented these two opinions about employee participation in the management:

Opinion A: A company should manage the company with fully understanding its employees' intentions and desires.

Opinion of B: Management is carried out by the management, and there is no need to ask the intentions and requests of employees regarding management (p. 18).

The stance of the current managers was as follows: close to opinion a is 32.5%; if I had to answer, it is close to A is 45.4%; close to opinion B is 5.5%; if I had to answer, it is close to B is 16.6% (p. 19). And the managers who ask the workers' opinion and listen to their demands say the reasons are: first because it is necessary to increase their motivation with 76.2%; second, it is important because they can spot a problem and collect information in case the managers do not notice with 68.0%; third, for understanding the problems and react it before it gets bigger with 56.4%; fourth, to benefit the good ideas of the workers that the managers did not think about with 46.7% (p. 20).

Only 27.8% of the firms do not have individual meetings with their workers; the rest does (p. 43). The topics discussed during individual meetings are: Listening daily work concerns and problems with 82.2%; delivering future expectations with 67.1%; the decision of individual work goal with 57.2% and listening to the proposals that can improve the work with 48.6% (p. 46).

The study also confirms that in family firms, individual voice mechanisms are used more than collective voice systems. They also confirm that if workplace communication is better, the job turnover rate is lower. And in NUO firms, it is believed they have the same function as labor unions, and the turnover rate is lower by 3.3 points which is statistically significant (p. 61).

Based on the individual meeting rate, they conclude that collective voice systems have more effect of decreasing turnover rate than individual voice systems. The study also indicates that in NUO firms, the turnover is lower from 1.8 to 2 points than union firms; apparently, NUOs are doing a better job than unions in terms of job turnover.

This study shows that many managers give importance to the employees' ideas and demands, and they initiate meetings and friendly associations to improve workplace communication. Moreover, the unity in the workplaces that the managers care about employees' ideas and demands are better than the others.

This study suggests that, in order to reduce the turnover rate and improve productivity, it is not only necessary to give incentives so that as many employees as possible can give opinions and suggestions for productivity improvement and listen to their voices regarding business improvement. Instead, it is crucial to listen more to the voices regarding working conditions and personnel systems and resolve employee dissatisfaction. This report also argues that individual voice mechanisms and collective voice mechanisms are both needed to establish an atmosphere that will be a win-win situation for both the workers and the companies.

The third dataset is also compatible with the previous studies of Japanese scholars Koike (1981), Oh Hak So (2011), Tsuru (2002), Noda (2019), that the non-union collective voice structures increase the effectivity and in most of the managers are members of them as well. Furthermore, managers' most important reasons to ask workers' opinions is to improve productivity and increase workplace communication for better harmony. Thus, even though there is a voice structure as ER interests, HRM theories seem to explain these informal collective voice mechanisms in SMEs better. However, as the company and voice mechanism gets larger, the power relation and bargaining of working conditions increase and these informal voice structures can more easily get formal status such as labor-management consultation; this situation is more compatible with the ER theory.

Fourth data is a case study from the study conducted by JILPT in 2006: 中小企業における労使関係と労働条件決定 システムの実態 “Chūshōkigyō ni okeru rōshi kankei to rōdō jōken kettei shisutemu no jittai” (Actual conditions of labor relations and working condition determination system in SMEs).

This study used the method of hearing survey targeting companies with less than 300 employees. The purpose of this research is to understand what kind of differences are there between companies that have labor unions and those that do not. This paper will utilize the data only on one particular non-union company because it is the most relevant data for this paper's goals.

The study gives data about a company (company F) with no union with 24 workers working in Japan and 160 workers working worldwide outside Japan. The management of outside workers is assigned to their own supervisor wherever they work, so the study focuses on 24 workers working inside Japan. The study is based on an interview directly with the manager Mr. A. In this company, the manager himself goes to the workplace every day and has individual meetings with the employees when he receives workers' demands. This kind of individual meeting can frequently happen, but a collective one on average happens once in 2 or 3 years, and at that time, the main topic is the action plan that every worker submits once a year. So one of the mechanisms of communication in a workplace with no union is the action plan whose primary purpose is to increase the company's productivity (p. 50).

The other collective communication methods are monthly meetings, group meetings, workers' clubs, or workers' vacations. Mr. A, one of the founders and the current manager, says a collective voice mechanism (meaning a union) would be better than an individual mechanism because individual mechanisms are costlier, and sometimes there cannot be any response to demand (p. 51-52).

The case study indicates that there is no labor organization in company F because the workers can directly express their demands. The firm's economic condition is well, and the wages are high; this is why the workers do not need any labor organization. Moreover, the action plan determines the goals, and if the workers reach their goals, their wages also increase, which makes things clear at the workplace. Another reason is that the company does not consider the evaluation chart to determine their wages and the turnovers are mainly from the workers who think they did not reach the goal. So the workers feel safe in terms of job security and wages, so they may



not feel any need for voice organization (p. 55).

The data from the case study of 2006 shows that if the number of workers is lower and the company is doing good economically, the workers can easily express their voice directly and individually. As OB argues, the employee voice is promotive and discretionary, and the purpose of the voice is to be beneficial and increase the company's productivity.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the findings based on the data analysis and discussions. After that, the managerial implications and limitations of the study will be discussed.

### 5.1. Findings

This study determines various collective and individual forms and mechanisms of employee voice in Japanese SMEs. The employee-driven non-union voice organizations, both hatsugengata and shinbokugata types, and the legal-based Majority Representation System or Work councils are primary collective voice mechanisms in non-union SMEs. The likelihood of having collective voice institutions with different forms, NUOs or worker's associations, depends on company size and industry type. Blue-collar industry workers tend to establish collective voice mechanisms more than other industries. And most collective forms of voice mechanisms are seen at firms with 100 to 300 workers. The case study also confirms that employees have more chances to use direct or individual voice in smaller companies.

In terms of individual levels of the employee voice, two main methods have been determined more common; *Jiko Shinsoku Seido* (Self-report system), which is a system that allows each employee to declare their abilities, desired work, etc., and evaluate their own performance, and *Teian Seido* (Proposing system) which is a system in which employees propose ideas and improvement plans regarding work, etc.

Based on the data analysis, new forms of employee voice have been found as well, such as action plans and employee vacations. Even though they are not common, they seem to be utilized by the workers as a mechanism of the collective voice. The firms that individual voice systems are used prominently may have some forms of collective voice mechanisms as well, especially action plan, worker's clubs, and even vacations provide a platform for the collective voice.

In terms of theoretical findings, In most non-union firms, the workers tend to create a collective voice mechanism. Furthermore, more than 80% of the non-union collective forms include the managers or directors as their members as well. So it can be argued that these collective forms show a more unitarist view and are close to HRM theory. However, as a voice structure has been established, ER conceptualization of voice can also be compatible. Especially, as both the first and second dataset study confirm that the larger the company

size, the more discussion occurs about working conditions such as wage and welfare. It also confirms that having an organized collective voice mechanism, formal or informal, the communication inside the workplace, employee voice on working conditions, and the performance increases better than firms with no collective voice mechanism.

The case study dataset confirms the OB voice concept that employees use the voice for business matters, increasing company productivity, and this is why managers also support them. The voice is prevailing silence since the manager can have individual meetings about various topics with the employees daily. The voice system in company F is also compatible with HRM since the action plan is a similar kind of high-performance work system which includes both employee voice and enhances productivity. Moreover, the voice is direct rather than representative and has a unitarist character. However, the conductors of the study state that even though the managers are welcoming for employee ideas and demands, it still cannot create an environment for employees to raise a voice. So even in this kind of situation, employees can choose silence over voice; thus, collective voice mechanisms are suggested to break the silence.

This study also found that two critical factors, company size, and economic situation, are crucial to explaining the establishment of different types of voice mechanisms and systems in SMEs. OB and HRM theories with unitarist characteristics apply better to explain employee voice in a relatively smaller size and economically in good situation firms. In these companies, employees themselves avoid collective voice and use individual voice to increase the company's performance, and they are satisfied with the individual direct forms of voice. However, in a relatively bigger size of companies, ER theory is better to explain the voice system even though many of the voice structures in these companies are informal. The collective voice mechanisms in relatively bigger firms show more like pluralistic character and, to some degree, conduct collective bargaining about wages and welfare programs. However, smaller collective voice mechanisms mainly do not discuss benefits and welfare programs. Kaufman's (2015) argument that employment relationships inevitably contain conflicts of interest seems to demonstrate more visibly in the relatively bigger-sized companies.

## 5.2. Managerial Implications

As this paper emphasizes, the employee voice has always been there in employment relationships, even when it wasn't a topic of any academic studies. And it is a vibrant area, and it can be in many different forms and ways. The action plans, worker's social groups, and even the vacations can be a mechanism of employee voice. Because this kind of activities, to some extent, provide an environment where employees can express their opinions. Thus, employee voice should have been searched in every aspect of employment relationships. Even though it was not among the data and findings of this paper, the employees' drinking activities "*Nomikai*" may have a function for employees expressing their voice as well.

This paper argues that, compatible with Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) based on the data analysis,

the direct and individual voice systems also provide some degree of employee participation to the management with a unitarist characteristic without confrontation of power relations. The main difference is that they do not mainly include the topics of wages and welfares in their discussions. However, workers still have a voice in workplace decisions about future operations, daily tasks, new strategies. Thus, the objectives of employee voice should also be approached broadly. Employee voice should not necessarily include the confrontation with management or have power relations.

Based on the findings, labor-law and government regulations play an important role in terms of providing voice to workers. And this situation is likely to increase in the near future, especially in the non-union SMEs. Thus, employee voice disciplines such as OB and HRM should be open to studying and discussing the role of law and regulations for employee voice.

This paper approached the notion of employee voice from a broader perspective with a multi-disciplinary approach. And, the paper not only found new forms and mechanisms of employee voice; it also emphasizes the role of NUOs and legal-based systems in terms of future employee voice studies.

### 5.3. The Limitations of The Study

The primary limitation of the study was the insufficiency of the data. There are, unfortunately, not enough broad studies to provide sufficient data about the employee voice, especially in SMEs. Thus, the data must have been acquired carefully by analyzing the extensive surveys and studies conducted about similar topics. However, increasing interest and number of studies on the employee voice and Japanese SMEs will hopefully increase conducting extensive surveys on the employee voice in Japanese SMEs.

Secondly, the broader approach on employee voice has been urged by scholars relatively recently; thus, the attempts to integrate employee voice theories are very few. Thus, there is not an established methodology to approach the employee voice in a multi-disciplinary way. However, with new studies conducted, the multi-disciplinary approach to employee voice will be gradually well established.

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