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## Abstract

Employee voice has been an enduring theme within the employment relations literature. This article profiles the incidence of a range of direct and indirect employee voice mechanisms within multinational companies (MNCs) and, using an analytical framework, identifies a number of different approaches to employee voice. Drawing from a highly representative sample of MNCs in Ireland, we point to quite a significant level of engagement with all types of employee voice, both direct and indirect. Using the analytical framework, we find that the most common approach to employee voice was an indirect voice approach (i.e. the use of trade unions and/or non-union structures of collective employee representation). The regression analysis identifies factors such as country of origin, sector, the European Union Directive on Information and Consultation and date of establishment as having varying impacts on the approaches adopted by MNCs to employee voice.

## Keywords

direct voice, employment relations, employee voice, European Union Information and Consultation Directive, indirect voice, multinational companies

## Introduction

Whether and how workers have a say on matters concerning their work and working lives represents a key aspect of the study of employment relations (ER). A key body of

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literature in this regard focuses on the issue of employee voice (Benson, 2000; Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Bryson, 2004; Dundon et al., 2004; Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Gollan, 2003; Wilkinson et al., 2004). We define employee voice as any type of mechanism, structure or practice, which provides an employee with an opportunity to express an opinion or participate in decision-making within their organization. In addition, we distinguish between direct and indirect forms of employee voice. Here we refer to *direct voice* as encompassing any mechanisms that provide for direct employee involvement with management in decisions affecting their jobs and immediate work environment, including formally designated teams,<sup>1</sup> problem-solving groups, attitude surveys, suggestion schemes, appraisal systems and meetings between managers and workers. *Indirect voice*, on the other hand, involves the articulation of worker views and input via some form of collective employee representation such as trade unions or non-union structures of collective representation (e.g. via consultative committees or works councils). In this article, we examine the range of voice mechanisms (both direct and indirect) deployed in a representative sample of MNCs in Ireland, using data from the first large-scale survey of employment practice in MNCs in Ireland.

While initiatives to extend employee voice in organizational decision-making has its roots in early attempts to achieve worker control dating from the industrial revolution, more recent discourse can be traced in large part to Freeman and Medoff's (1984) seminal volume *What Do Unions Do?* (also see Hirschman, 1970). Here, the authors posit that providing employees with a voice in the workplace can lead to beneficial outcomes for both the organization and employees. For employees, it can act as a vehicle to air grievances and communicate with management, while for employers it has the potential to improve productivity, efficiency and communication. Though certainly not an issue on which there is a shared consensus, Freeman and Medoff (1984) further argue that trade unions represent the best vehicle for workers to express their voice and essentially equate voice with union presence (see Willman et al., 2006). This has certainly been the tradition in many developed countries where employee voice has traditionally been channelled through union recognition and representation (Pyman et al., 2006). A notable exception is the US, where employer resistance to unions as purveyors of voice is more intense resulting in firms adopting alternative approaches, such as 'welfare capitalism' (Jacoby, 1997). However, many of the countries where trade unions were particularly dominant have witnessed a progressive decline in trade union density (see Visser, 2006) with the effect that this key vehicle for the expression of employee voice is being significantly eroded. Concurrently, the growth in non-union ER has served to focus the attention of academics and practitioners on alternative forms of voice. Indeed, a key criticism of the extant literature is that it is excessively 'union centred rather than examining a much broader involvement rubric' (Dundon et al., 2005: 308); with the consequence that non-union voice is seriously neglected when compared with research on union voice. A plausible explanation for this is offered by Flood and Toner (1997) who argue that research on non-union firms more generally is difficult due to issues such as lack of access or availability of independent data from employees. A rebalance is thus long overdue (see Dundon and Gollan, 2007).

A particular paucity of knowledge exists regarding representative studies of patterns of employee voice in MNCs operating in a particular host environment (Marginson et al., 2007). A focus on MNCs is merited for two principal reasons. First is the scale of MNC

activity. The volume of global MNC activity is substantial, with an estimated 79,000 MNCs with 790,000 foreign affiliates (UNCTAD, 2008a). In 2007, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows continued to rise, standing at \$1833 billion, representing a new record, surpassing the previous peak in 2000 (UNCTAD, 2008a). While a slow down in the global economy is expected, owing in large part to the recent financial and credit crisis, the trend of increased globalization shows no sign of abating with some of the largest MNCs still planning to increase their international investment expenditures, albeit at a more moderate level (UNCTAD, 2008b). Further evidence of the scale of MNC activity is provided by the fact that the revenues in many large MNCs significantly exceed the economic worth of most nation-states. Of the world's largest 150 economic entities, 76 are corporations (51%) (Butler, 2007). Second, the study of ER in MNCs and variation in practice between MNCs in different host locations has a long academic pedigree (see Collings, 2008; Gennard and Steuer, 1971). However, this work has predominantly focused on the impact of ER systems on the location decisions of MNCs or on their approach to trade unions and collective bargaining (see Cooke, 2003; Ferner and Varul, 2000), rather than employee voice per se. Of particular interest is the extent to which inward investing MNCs act as change agents with regard to management practice in this domain, and more generally on the nature of the national business systems of host countries (see Ferner and Quintanilla, 2002).

This article addresses two particular research objectives. First, it seeks to profile the incidence of direct and indirect employee voice mechanisms and, from this, identify different approaches to employee voice adopted by MNCs in Ireland. Second, it seeks to explore variation in approaches to employee voice in MNCs by identifying explanatory factors. The next section outlines the context of the research. Following this, we present a model for the study of employee voice in MNCs after which the methodology employed is outlined. The findings are then reviewed before undertaking our discussion and conclusions.

## **The research context: Ireland**

Ireland represents a particularly apt locale for an investigation into employee voice in MNCs. First, it is one of the world's most MNC-dependent economies. Inward FDI stocks as a percentage of gross domestic product in Ireland was estimated at 73.6 percent in 2007, compared with a 27.9 percent world average (UNCTAD, 2008a). The US is by far the largest source of FDI. In 2006, the stock of US corporate investment in Ireland was larger than its combined investment in Brazil, Russia, India, and China (so-called BRIC countries) (Hamilton and Quinlan, 2008). The proportion of employment in foreign-owned companies, as a percentage of total international trade related employment in Ireland, is the highest in the world (UNCTAD, 2007). A more recent development in the Irish economy has been the surge in outward FDI (Forfás, 2007; UNCTAD, 2006, 2007, 2008a). For example, Ireland was ranked in 11th position in the outward FDI Performance Index in 2007 (UNCTAD, 2008a). Indeed over the last number of years outward FDI has more than rivalled inward FDI, with FDI outflows exceeding inflows in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

As one might expect, the weight of FDI in Ireland has meant that MNCs exert considerable influence on issues of public policy, including the domain of employee

voice. Over the past decade initiatives to introduce legislative provision dealing with trade union recognition, working hours and the establishment of works councils along continental European lines, have met trenchant opposition from either specific MNCs or – more commonly – from organizations representing the interests of MNCs such as the American Chamber of Commerce, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and IDA Ireland<sup>2</sup> (see Collings et al., 2008; Donaghy, 2004; Gunnigle et al., 2005). By and large, the MNC position has focused on limiting regulation in these areas of employment practice. A specific illustration is provided below in regard to the recent transposition of the European Union Directive on Information and Consultation (I&C).

A second reason for focusing on Ireland is the prevailing ER system. While a full review of the Irish ER system is clearly beyond the remit of this article, it is important to note some of its principal characteristics, particularly those related to employee voice. Traditionally the Irish ER system was voluntarist in nature (Von Prondzynski, 1998), a legacy of Ireland's historical ties and geographical proximity to Great Britain. This essentially meant minimum legal and state intervention in ER. However, the system has changed significantly over the years and is now best known for its reliance on national 'partnership' arrangements. This relates to an uninterrupted series of national agreements on pay and related ER issues between central trade union and employer confederations, and government since 1987. Consequently, unions are afforded a very high level of voice on pay but also on many other aspects of economic and social policy:

The participation of unions in a succession of 'social partnership' agreements, beginning in 1987, has set Ireland apart from Britain, the source of many of its labour market institutions. While it has been common to categorize Ireland along with Britain – and by extension other Anglo-American countries – as sharing one relatively homogeneous industrial relations system, any such easy labelling of the Irish case is now devoid of credible meaning. Among Anglo-American countries, the voice permitted to unions in macro-economic management and social policy making in Ireland is singular.

(Geary, 2007: 98)

At workplace level though, the Irish ER system has traditionally been characterized by the absence of statutory support for employee voice/industrial democracy (e.g. works councils) (Wallace and Gunnigle, 2007). Equally, initiatives to extend voluntary partnership arrangements to workplace level have been largely unsuccessful (Roche, 2007). Thus organizations are largely free to choose, or not as the case may be, the types of employee voice mechanisms they employ while, as Geary (2007: 98) notes, employee voice in Ireland has largely been seen as '... synonymous with union voice'. However, like ER systems worldwide, the Irish system has evolved (see Collings et al., 2008). This is manifest in two important respects. First, trade union density has fallen by almost half since its high water mark of 62 percent in 1980 to levels currently around 33 percent<sup>3</sup> (Central Statistics Office, 2008; Roche, 2008). Union avoidance has been particularly evident in the MNC sector, particularly among those that established new sites in Ireland since the turn of the 1980s (Geary and Roche, 2001; Gunnigle, 1995; Gunnigle et al., 2008; Roche, 2001; Turner et al., 2002). Consequently, we find that the primary vehicle for employee voice, namely trade unions, is under severe threat.

Second, while legislation on employee voice is quite thin on the ground, the recent transposition of the EU Directive on Information and Consultation (I&C) represents a potentially significant development. This Directive (2002/14/EC) was introduced into Irish law on a phased basis by the Employees (Provision of Information and Consultation) Act, 2006. It provides a legislative framework for the provision of I&C structures within organizations, thus providing employees with a legal right to be informed and consulted on a range of issues such as business and employment matters, representing a significant departure from the voluntarist tradition of the Irish ER system (Dundon et al., 2006). Here again we have an example of the MNC sector (especially American MNCs) flexing their muscle in a host country. In this instance, the argument focused on the dangers of circumscribing management authority and the potentially detrimental effect this could have on FDI into Ireland. The resultant implementation of the Directive was described as 'minimalist' with 'the "voice" of large US multinationals in Ireland, the American Chamber of Commerce, [leaving] its mark on [the Directive]' (*Industrial Relations News*, 2005: 2).

In summarizing the Irish case, we find that, on the one hand, the traditional vehicle for employee voice is in decline while on the other hand, we have the potential for the emergence of new and innovative voice mechanisms as a result of the I&C Directive. Thus, an investigation into the range and incidence of employee voice mechanisms is timely.

## Model to explore employee voice approaches in MNCS

As noted in the introduction, we address the topic of employee voice from the perspective that it is multi-faceted in nature. As a result we identify a range of voice mechanisms, which can be empirically studied in a statistical model. The template for our empirical analysis was developed by Tuselmann et al. (2003, 2006), wherein the authors examined broad ER approaches in German firms operating in the UK. Where the Tuselmann et al. (2003, 2006) model allowed the authors to focus on the broad issue of ER systems, we adapt their model to focus on employee voice approaches of MNCs. In the model, we first identify a range of direct and indirect voice mechanisms (see Table 4 for full list). We then use these voice mechanisms to determine direct and indirect dimensions of voice, using a series of criteria under which MNCs might meet particular thresholds. In determining whether a MNC possesses an indirect voice dimension, we use two different thresholds: trade union recognition and non-union structures of collective employee representation. The presence of any of these indirect mechanisms, at all of their sites, would imply that a MNC has met the threshold for possessing an indirect voice dimension. In developing the threshold for a direct voice dimension, we categorize direct voice mechanisms under three particular headings – participation, consultation, and information sharing – ranging from strong to weak.<sup>4</sup> Ranking the categories from strong to weak allows for the development of a scoring system, which works as follows: the presence of a direct voice mechanism under the participation heading attracts a score of 3; a direct voice mechanism under the consultation heading receives a score of 2; and a direct voice mechanism under the information sharing heading obtains a score of 1, giving a maximum score of 17 if all direct voice mechanisms are reported. MNCs scoring above the median were considered to have met the threshold, thus possessing a direct voice dimension. It is important to note that not possessing a particular direct or indirect dimension does not mean that these MNCs are devoid of any employee voice structures.

**Table 1** Approaches to employee voice

Indirect voice dimension (relatively high number of indirect voice channels)	Yes	<i>Indirect approach</i>	<i>Dualistic approach</i>
	No	<i>Minimalist approach</i>	<i>Direct approach</i>
		No	Yes
		Direct voice dimension (relatively high number of direct voice channels)	

Both direct and indirect voice dimensions are dichotomous variables, that is, yes or no, and as a consequence it is possible to distinguish four different types of approaches to employee voice, depending on the relative number of direct and indirect voice channels (see Table 1).

A minimalist approach refers to MNCs that possess *neither* a direct nor indirect dimension to employee voice. MNCs adopting this approach may have some voice structures, but these are not sufficient to meet the thresholds of an indirect and/or direct dimension. A direct approach refers to MNCs that possess *only* a direct dimension to employee voice. While MNCs adopting this approach may have some indirect voice structures, direct voice structures are the most reported. An indirect approach refers to MNCs that possess *only* an indirect dimension to employee voice. Opposite to the direct voice approach, MNCs adopting an indirect approach may have some direct voice structures, but indirect voice structures are the most reported. Finally, a dualistic approach refers to MNCs that possess *both* a direct and indirect dimension to employee voice. MNCs adopting this approach report a full range of both direct and indirect voice structures.

### *Influencing factors on MNCs approaches to employee voice*

There are a range of different factors that may influence voice practices in organizations and we tested their impact on approaches to employee voice in our sample of MNCs. Below we first outline the independent variables used in the models and the rationale for



so doing. We also provide a full list of the descriptions and coding schemes for both the dependent and explanatory variables in Table 2.

**Country of origin** The country in which an MNC originates is believed to influence the way labour is managed in its international subsidiaries (Ferner, 1997). For example, much research has shown that US-owned MNCs are less likely to engage with trade unions (De Vos, 1981; Geary and Roche, 2001; Gunnigle et al. 2005; Kochan et al., 1986; Lavelle, 2008) compared with their Irish and European counterparts. Due to the small MNC population in Ireland we categorize some countries into broad categories. In total, we identify the US, UK, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, rest of Europe and rest of world.<sup>5</sup> Given that the literature identifies specific country of origin effects with regard to trade union recognition levels, we would expect that US MNCs are much less likely to report an indirect or dualistic approach to employee voice compared with their European counterparts. Similarly, we would associate more direct types of voice structures like attitude surveys and suggestions schemes with US-owned MNCs (Geary and Roche, 2001).

**Sector** Marginson and Sisson (1994) argue that the nature of particular business sectors has even more effect on the ER practices of MNCs than home or host country effects. For example, it is widely accepted that trade union penetration trends are strongest in traditional manufacturing employment (Roche, 2008; Wallace, 2003). We identify five categories of sector, traditional manufacturing, high tech manufacturing, financial & business services, retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels and catering, and other. Addressing espoused concerns about the unrepresentative nature of much previous MNC literature (Alfaro and Charlton, 2006; Collinson and Rugman 2005), we capture MNCs operating in a broad range of sectors that heretofore have tended to be under explored in the literature (see McDonnell et al., 2007). Because union recognition levels tend to be much higher in the manufacturing sector we would expect that MNCs operating in the manufacturing sectors would adopt an indirect or dualistic approach to employee voice. Furthermore, we would expect that MNCs operating in the services sector are more likely to favour direct types of voice (Marginson et al., 2007).

**European Information and Consultation (I&C) Directive** The I&C Directive has the potential to shape employee voice mechanisms within organizations. The Directive allows for the introduction of both direct and indirect types of voice structures. We asked MNCs if they had introduced changes as a result of the I&C Directive, a simple binary variable. Whether the Directive has an effect on voice approaches within MNCs is difficult to hypothesize given that there is very little evidence of its impact to date. Marginson et al. (2007) in their investigation of employee voice within MNCs in the UK do suggest that the I&C Directive has been quite influential in prompting indirect consultative structures. Given that Directive represents a significant change to the Irish ER environment; we envisage that the Directive at the very least will impact on voice structures within MNCs though we are unclear on how it will do so.

**Date of establishment** A common variable used in the MNC literature in explaining variation is the date of establishment of the MNC. However, we argue that much ambiguity



exists around the use of this variable which has not been adequately addressed in the extant literature. Establishing a MNC's date of establishment can be quite complex as MNCs generally enter a particular host environment through a greenfield set-up or on a merger/acquisition basis. Identifying the date of establishment of a MNC that establishes on a greenfield basis is relatively straightforward, however, MNCs that establish their operations through a merger or acquisition is less so. For example, where MNCs establish on a merger/acquisition basis does the date of establishment refer to when the MNC first enters the particular host environment, that is, the date of the merger/acquisition? Or does the date of establishment refer to the date the merged/acquired operation was originally established? For the purposes of this article we adopt the following approach to date of establishment. Where a MNC has established on a greenfield basis we use the date the MNC entered Ireland. Where the MNC entered on a merger or acquisition basis we use the date the merged or acquired operations originally established in Ireland. We identify three date of establishment categories – 1981–2007; 1961–80 and pre-1960. As noted above the Irish ER environment has changed quite substantially, particularly the decline in trade union recognition. This decline away from the traditional voice mechanism suggests that newer MNCs are much less likely to adopt indirect voice structures.

**Employment size** The size of the MNC is also another commonly used explanatory variable in the MNC literature. Here we refer to employment size in the MNC's Irish operations. We identify two categories' of employment size, medium- and large-sized MNCs. Medium-sized MNCs refer to MNCs with 100–499 employees in Ireland while large MNCs refers to MNCs with 500 or more employees in Ireland. The literature would suggest that trade union recognition and indirect representative voice structures are more likely in large firms (Blanden et al., 2006; Marginson et al., 1993; Roche, 2001; Turner et al., 1994). Thus, we would expect that larger MNCs will favour more indirect types of voice structures.

## Methodology

This article draws upon data from a large-scale survey of MNCs operating in Ireland (see Lavelle et al., 2009).<sup>6</sup> Much of the previous research on MNCs in the Irish context was based on unrepresentative databases (see McDonnell et al., 2007) and thus our aim was to address this gap by carrying out the most representative investigation to date. Our unit of analysis is the MNC in Ireland with the respondent being the most senior HR manager with the capacity to answer for all of the Irish operations. In identifying MNCs operating in Ireland we distinguish between foreign and domestic-owned MNCs:

*Foreign-owned MNCs:* All wholly or majority foreign-owned organizations operating in Ireland, with 500 or more employees worldwide and 100 or more employed in their Irish operations.

*Irish-owned MNCs:* All wholly or majority Irish-owned organizations with 500 or more employees worldwide and at least 100 employed abroad.

Using many different sources we created the first representative database of MNCs operating in Ireland, recording 563 foreign and Irish-owned MNCs. We stratified this list of

**Table 2** Model summary exploring employee voice approaches

Variable	Description	Coding scheme
<i>Dependent variables</i>		
Minimalist approach	Adopting neither a direct or indirect approach	0 = no minimalist approach 1 = minimalist approach
Direct approach	Adopting a direct voice approach only	0 = no direct approach 1 = direct approach
Indirect approach	Adopting an indirect voice approach	0 = no indirect approach 1 = indirect approach
Dualistic approach	Adopting a direct and indirect voice approach	0 = no dualistic approach 1 = dualistic approach
<i>Independent variables</i>		
Country of origin	Country in which the MNC originates from	1 = US 2 = UK 3 = Ireland 4 = Germany 5 = Swiss 6 = Rest of Europe 7 = Rest of World
Sector:	The main sector in which the MNC operates	1 = Traditional manufacturing 2 = High tech manufacturing 3 = Financial & business services 4 = Retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels, catering 5 = Other
Impact of the Information and Consultation (I&C) Directive	If the EU Directive on I&C prompted any changes in arrangements for employee consultation	0 = No 1 = Yes
Date of establishment	The date of establishment of the MNCs first Irish operations	1 = 1981–2007 2 = 1961–1980 3 = Pre-1960
Employment size	Employment size in the Irish operations	1 = Medium-sized MNCs 2 = Large-sized MNCs

MNCs by country of ownership, sector and size, giving a total valid sample of 414 companies. A considerable amount of time was spent on achieving up-to-date contact details for each of the MNCs, a critical exercise in eliminating potential for non-response (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). The fieldwork stage took place between June 2006 and February 2007 and involved face-to-face interviews with the senior HR manager. A total of 260 interviews took place, resulting in a response rate of 63 percent, which is commendably high when compared with average response rates for organizational level surveys (circa 35 percent) (see Baruch and Holtom, 2008). We point to two particular factors that

**Table 3** Key characteristics of the sample

Sample characteristics	% (n)
<i>Country of origin</i>	
US	39% (101)
UK	14% (35)
Ireland	18% (47)
Germany	7% (19)
Switzerland	4% (10)
Rest of Europe	13% (34)
Rest of World	5% (14)
<i>Sector</i>	
Traditional manufacturing	15% (38)
High tech manufacturing	32% (82)
Financial & business services	30% (79)
Retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels and catering	15% (40)
Other	8% (21)
<i>Employment size – Ireland</i>	
Medium-sized MNCs	54% (141)
Large MNCs	46% (119)
<i>Date of establishment</i>	
Pre-1960	24% (60)
1961–80	34% (87)
1981–2007	42% (106)

contributed to the high response rate. First, face-to-face interviews are associated with higher response rates (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). Second, the researchers involved had developed a number of personal contacts within the MNC sector and these were used to gain access into these organizations. Indeed, Cycyota and Harrison (2006) note the importance of social networks in achieving high response rates. A critical element in the integrity of the data is its representativeness (Baruch and Holtom, 2008), and to this end the survey responses are broadly representative of the total population and as a result, re-weighting was not necessary. Table 3 outlines some of the key characteristics of the sample.

The data analysis is a combination of descriptive data, reporting the incidence of direct and indirect voice mechanisms and MNCs approaches to employee voice, and regression analysis. In order to explain the approaches to employee voice adopted by MNCs binary logistic regression analysis was used. This statistical technique is used to predict or explain a binary dependent variable from one or more independent variables. The rationale for choosing this technique was two-fold. First, binary logistical regression analysis is particularly useful when looking to predict the presence or absence of a particular characteristic (Tuselmann et al., 2006). Second, the statistical method used in similar research studies (Benson, 2000; Tuselmann et al., 2003, 2006) was binary logistical regression analysis and given the similarity in approach we feel that it is the most appropriate analytical technique. Each of the four different approaches to employee voice were treated as dependent variables and we accordingly run four separate regressions. For

each of the regressions the Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit Test, a robust test for overall fit of a logistic regression model, showed up non-significant, indicating the model adequately fits the data.<sup>7</sup> All of the independent variables used in the binary logistical regressions were tested for multicollinearity with no problems reported. Among the regression models the lowest tolerance level found was .925 and the largest variance inflation factor (VIF) result was 1.081. Finally, we explored the condition index that again proved to be of little concern, with the maximum condition index being 11.130. Furthermore, some qualitative quotes were gathered during the interviews and are used to embellish some of the findings where appropriate.

## Findings

### *Incidence of indirect and direct voice mechanisms*

Table 4 outlines the incidence of each of the direct and indirect voice mechanisms within MNCs operating in Ireland. Focusing on the incidence of indirect voice mechanisms, we see that four in 10 MNCs have trade union recognition in all of their sites. This is relatively high considering that the comparative figure in the parallel survey in the UK was 24 percent (Edwards et al., 2007). We find that non-union structures of collective employee representation are less prevalent than trade union recognition but nonetheless quite significant with 23 percent of all MNCs reporting such structures in all of their sites. Some interesting trends emerge among both of these indirect mechanisms. First, with regard to trade union recognition, we note that MNCs established pre-1980 are far more likely to engage with trade unions than those established post 1980 (79% versus 34%). Second, we find a high incidence of union avoidance among unionized MNCs, an issue now receiving some attention in the literature (Gunnigle et al., 2005, 2008; *Industrial Relations News*, 2004a; Lavelle, 2008). Exactly half of all unionized MNCs that established a new site in the previous five years did not recognize unions in all of their new sites. Concomitantly, almost six in 10 MNCs with non-union structures, reported that these were established within the previous three years. While our data only provide evidence on the incidence of voice structures and do not allow for the identification of trends, it is plausible to suggest that although union voice is apparently on the wane, non-union structures for representative voice are rising among MNCs.

Our attention now switches to the direct voice mechanisms reported. Team briefings are the most common direct voice mechanism as just over 98 percent of all MNCs reported their existence. Newsletters or emails and systematic use of the management chain to cascade information also score high with 94 and 85 percent respectively of all MNCs reported these mechanisms in their organization. The use of a company intranet was quite popular with almost eight in 10 MNCs reported its existence. Just over three-quarters of MNCs (76%) reported the use of meetings with the whole of the workforce, while 74 percent have problem-solving groups and 72 percent having a performance appraisal system. Attitude surveys are used in two-thirds of all MNCs, with suggestion schemes and formally designated teams in over half of the respondent firms, 55 and 54 percent respectively. It is apparent from our investigation into direct voice mechanisms that the preference among MNCs is for the 'information-sharing' variety rather than participative or consultative voice.

**Table 4** Incidence of indirect and direct voice mechanisms

	%
<i>Indirect voice practices</i>	
Trade union recognition in all sites	40.0
Non-union structures in all sites	22.8
<i>Direct voice practices</i>	
<i>Participation</i>	
Formally designated teams	54.2
Problem-solving groups	74.2
<i>Consultation</i>	
Meetings with the whole of the workforce	76.4
Attitude or opinion surveys	67.4
Suggestion schemes	54.5
<i>Information</i>	
Team briefing	98.1
Systematic use of mgmt chain	85.2
Newsletters or emails	93.8
Company intranet	78.4
Performance appraisal	72.4

### *MNC approaches to employee voice mechanisms*

Using our model detailed above we identify a number of different approaches to employee voice adopted by MNCs. As can be seen from Table 5, the most common approach to employee voice in MNCs is an indirect voice approach (32% of all MNCs). Just over a quarter of all MNCs adopt a dualistic approach, possessing both direct and indirect voice dimensions. Just under a quarter adopt a direct voice approach, while just 18.6 percent of MNCs adopt the minimalist approach, that is, possessing neither a direct nor indirect dimension. We now investigate factors that might explain these patterns of employee voice.

### *Explaining MNC approaches to employee voice mechanisms*

We use binary logistic regression to test for explanatory factors to account for MNC approaches (see Table 6 for regression results). We first look at the minimalist approach to employee voice. The most significant explanatory variable is the impact of the I&C Directive. It appears that where MNCs have introduced changes as a result of the I&C

**Table 5** Approaches to employee voice

	%
Minimalist approach	18.6
Indirect approach	31.8
Direct approach	24.0
Dualistic approach	25.6

Directive, they are less likely to adopt a minimalist approach. Sectoral differences are also observed. MNCs operating in the financial and business services, and retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels and catering sectors are four and five times respectively more likely to adopt a minimalist approach to employee voice than MNCs operating in the traditional manufacturing sector. Neither country of origin, employment size or date of establishment were significant factors.

There are a number of significant factors in explaining why a MNC may adopt an indirect voice approach. As expected country of origin is a strong indicator with MNCs from the UK, Ireland, Germany and rest of Europe more likely to adopt an indirect approach to employee voice than MNCs from the US. Again sectoral differences are observed with MNCs operating in the financial and business services sector predictably less likely to adopt an indirect approach to employee voice than MNCs operating in traditional manufacturing. Unexpectedly the date of establishment did not have an effect on MNCs adopting an indirect voice approach, nor did employment size and the I&C Directive.

Third, we look at the direct voice approach. The country of origin effect is significant, if only for one category, MNCs from the UK are significantly less likely to adopt a direct approach to employee voice than MNCs from the US. Sectoral effects are also observed. MNCs operating in the financial and business services and retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels and catering sector are more likely to adopt a direct approach to employee voice than MNCs in traditional manufacturing. Finally MNCs established pre-1960 are less likely to adopt a direct voice approach to employee voice than MNCs established between 1981 and 2007. Both the impact of the I&C Directive and employment size did not have a significant effect in explaining a direct voice approach.

Fourth, we look at the dualistic voice approach. The most significant indicator is sector where MNCs operating in the retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels and catering sector are significantly less likely to adopt a dualistic approach to employee voice than MNCs operating in traditional manufacturing. As expected the I&C Directive has a significant impact on MNCs adopting a dualistic approach to employee voice with MNCs that have introduced changes to I&C twice as likely to adopt a dualistic approach to employee voice than MNCs that have not introduced changes. Neither country of origin, date of establishment or employment size has a significant impact on a dualistic approach to employee voice.

## Discussion and conclusions

Having reviewed the findings it is now pertinent to return to the research objectives of the article: to profile the incidence of direct and indirect employee voice mechanisms and approaches to employee voice and to further explore these approaches by examining factors that may explain variation. Given the criticism that much of the employee voice literature focuses on the trade union channel of voice, this article extends the investigation to include a more comprehensive analysis of voice mechanisms. Indeed, the above findings provide the first representative picture of voice mechanisms within MNCs operating in Ireland. Much of the recent employee voice literature has debated the incidence of different voice mechanisms, including union, non-union, collective, and individual type voice mechanisms and which particular voice structures are the most popular. For example, Bryson

Table 6 Logistical regression results for approaches to employee voice

Independent variables <sup>a</sup>	Minimalist approach		Indirect approach		Direct approach		Dualistic approach	
	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)
<i>Country of origin</i>								
US								
UK	.363	-1.103 (.741)	4.829***	1.575*** (.544)	.269**	-1.312** (.653)	1.246	.220 (.544)
Ireland	1.092	.088 (.579)	3.211**	1.167** (.543)	.426	-.853 (.595)	.647	-.436 (.570)
Germany	1.168	.155 (.665)	3.107**	1.134* (.589)	.416	-.878 (.701)	.761	-.273 (.642)
Swiss	.294	-1.225 (1.134)	1.089	.086 (.876)	1.096	.091 (.765)	2.029	.708 (.726)
Rest of Europe	1.085	.081 (.588)	2.914*	1.069* (.503)	.724	-.322 (.538)	.503	-.687 (.533)
Rest of World	.305	-1.187 (1.115)	1.873	.628 (.687)	1.056	.055 (.641)	.976	-.024 (.687)
<i>Sector</i>								
<i>Traditional manufacturing</i>								
High tech manufacturing	2.331	.846 (.758)	1.027	.027 (.483)	1.898	.641 (.703)	.581	-.543 (.499)
Financial & business services	4.181**	1.431** (.725)	.271***	-1.307*** (.500)	3.135*	1.143* (.686)	.723	-.324 (.476)
Retail, wholesale, distribution, hotels, catering	5.112**	1.632** (.773)	.697	-.361 (.531)	5.231**	1.655** (.743)	.054***	-2.923*** (1.097)
Other	4.183	1.431 (.873)	.900	-.106 (.642)	.803	-.219 (1.221)	.514	-.666 (.770)
<i>MNC size</i>								
Medium-sized MNCs	1.834	.606 (.397)	.734	-.309 (.344)	1.423	.353 (.344)	.674	-.395 (.343)
Large-sized MNCs								
<i>Changes as result of I&amp;C Directive</i>								
No								
Yes	.363**	-1.013** (.410)	.921	-.083 (.339)	1.024	.024 (.335)	2.224**	.799** (.335)

(Continued)



**Table 6** (Continued)

Independent variables <sup>a</sup>	Minimalist approach		Indirect approach		Direct approach		Dualistic approach	
	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (SE)
Date of establishment								
1981-2007								
1961-1980	1.248	.222 (.429)	1.526	.422 (.374)	.631	-.460 (.372)	.981	-.019 (.373)
Pre-1960	.859	-.152 (.524)	1.685	.522 (.418)	.437*	-.828* (.498)	1.318	.276 (.438)
Hosmer and Lemeshow Test	.800		.645		.659		.750	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.130		0.192		0.156		0.156	
-2LLR	206.128		262.014		241.568		253.543	

N = 241 (reduced due to missing data in some variables); Levels of significance: \* = 10% level, \*\* = 5% level, \*\*\* = 1% level.

<sup>a</sup>All independent variables are categorical variables.

The reference categories are in italics.

(2004) using Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) data pointed towards a steep decline in union only voice, a less marked decline in dual-channel voice (union and non-union channels), and a steep increase in voice arrangements that do not involve representative voice (either with or without unions). He further noted that the rise in non-union voice is a result of a shift towards more direct forms of voice, such as regular meetings, briefing groups and problem-solving groups (Bryson, 2004). In contrast, Brewster et al. (2007) found limited evidence of a shift from collective to individual voice in their study of practice in Britain, Germany and Sweden. We find that the average incidence of so-called 'weaker voice mechanisms' (e.g. briefing groups and newsletters) are much higher than the 'stronger voice mechanisms' (e.g. trade union recognition). This resonates with the case-based investigations of Dundon et al. (2006) who identified a growing preference for more communication and information-type channels of voice, rather than consultative-type mechanisms. Nevertheless, it appears that there is quite a significant level of engagement with all types of employee voice mechanisms, both direct and indirect, among MNCs.

However, simply reporting the incidence of voice mechanisms provides only a part of the story and so we sought to extend the analysis of voice mechanisms by exploring approaches to employee voice. We identified four different approaches, providing interesting insights into how MNCs approach the issue of employee voice. The most common approach was for MNCs to only employ an indirect voice dimension (i.e. the presence of trade union recognition and/or non-union structures of collective employee representation). Two reasons are significant in explaining this. First, the relatively high level of trade union recognition means that these MNCs adopted an indirect approach to employee voice. While we acknowledge that trade union penetration has declined in both newer and longer established unionized MNCs, this has not been sharp enough to render union-only voice insignificant. Second, the incidence of non-union structures of collective employee representation, particularly in non-union MNCs, is considerable. One common explanation for their phenomenon is that it may represent an attempt by companies to thwart advances of trade unions attempting to gain recognition or to marginalize their role within the organization (Watling and Snook, 2003). Indeed, this type of approach or strategy is well documented in the case of the indigenous MNC, Ryanair (*Industrial Relations News*, 2004b). A staunchly anti-union company, Ryanair recently challenged a ruling of the Irish Labour Court in a dispute over union recognition where it successfully argued that its non-union body was an acceptable forum for employees to voice their grievances (*Industrial Relations News*, 2007a). Another plausible explanation identified from our data was the potential impact of the recently transposed I&C Directive. Although the I&C Directive allows for both direct and indirect types of voice mechanisms, Dundon et al. (2006) projected that the explicit reference to 'employee representatives' in the Directive suggested a preference for representative forms of employee voice. In a simple cross tabulation analysis we find a significant relationship between the establishment of these non-union structures and MNCs introducing changes as a result of the I&C Directive, supporting Dundon et al.'s (2006) contention. Indeed, Marginson et al. (2007) also noted a significant rise in non-union structures of representation among MNCs operating in the UK, citing the I&C Directive as an influential factor.

This move towards more non-union representative structures could be an important development within the Irish ER system, particularly with declining levels of trade union density/recognition and the potential for MNCs to act as innovators in a particular host context (Gennard and Steuer, 1971). The power and significance of MNCs and their impact on the ER system has been noted above and one could reasonably argue that they are the vanguard in establishing these non-union structures. Dundon and Gollan (2007) posit that non-union voice approaches are likely to become further engrained in organizations, strengthened by management looking to present these as valid and influential alternatives to union voice. Here the Ryanair case is significant whereby this non-union MNC 'legitimized' its non-union structure of employee representation through the courts.

While the indirect approach to employee voice is the most common, the other approaches are worthy of mention. In contrast to Bryson's (2004) study, we find that the second most popular approach to employee voice is the dualistic approach, MNCs that possess both direct and indirect voice dimensions. One possible explanation is that MNCs see benefits in having both direct and indirect structures in place or as Wilkinson et al. (2004) suggest, managers, unions and employees are much more comfortable with a mix of direct and indirect voice mechanisms. A direct voice approach is also popular. Despite the role and legitimacy of trade unions in the Irish context (Gunnigle et al., 2001), there is still much support for approaches that do not have any type of representative structures. Finally, almost one in five MNCs adopt a minimalist approach to employee voice. Caution should be exercised when drawing conclusions from this. As noted earlier, MNCs adopting a minimalist approach are not necessarily without employee voice structures; rather they do not meet the thresholds that determine whether they possess either a direct or indirect voice dimension. However, it does provide some indication that within a number of MNCs employee voice mechanisms are not as prominent as in others.

Marginson et al. (2007) note the importance of intra-model variation in explaining employee representation and voice channels in MNCs operating in the UK and this is also borne out in our findings. Among the independent variables used in our model (country of origin, sector, employment size, the I&C Directive and date of establishment) all had varying impacts on the approaches adopted by MNCs to employee voice, with the exception of employment size. Some of the influencing factors were expected. For example, country of origin effects are most pronounced in the indirect voice approach (trade union recognition and/or non-union representative structures only) where UK, Irish, German and Rest of Europe MNCs are more favourably disposed towards collective employee representative structures than their US counterparts..

Some other explanatory factors are more novel. For example, the influence of sector on each of the four approaches to employee voice is noticeable and quite strong. More specifically, we point to MNCs operating in the services sector. MNCs in these sectors are much more likely to adopt a minimalist or direct approach to employee voice and less likely to adopt an indirect or dualistic approach. Therefore, such MNCs tend to provide either very few voice structures or, where they do; these tend to be of the direct voice variety. The prospect of a minimalist voice approach characterizing service sector MNCs represents a potentially worrying concern given that that much of the world's business activity is being increasingly concentrated in services (UNCTAD, 2008a). Within Ireland, the majority of MNCs now operate in the service sector and it is the area of most

growth with regard to new FDI into Ireland – for example, FDI into the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in 2004 was €4.4 billion, compared to €1.5 billion for non-IFSC FDI (Forfás, 2006; Gunnigle et al., 2007). This finding is consistent with that of Marginson et al. (2007) where sector was a quite an influential factor in explaining voice structures.

The relationship between employee voice approaches and the I&C Directive is noteworthy. As noted earlier, the Directive allows for direct, indirect and dualistic types of voice. To date much ambiguity has characterized the debate on how the Directive would be implemented at an organizational level (see Dundon et al., 2006; Storey, 2005). A review of the impact of the Directive on national ER systems by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) concluded that the Directive has had very little impact on national ER systems to date (EFILWC, 2008). Within Ireland, some early reports pointed to the low numbers of cases where employers and employees had established new I&C arrangements (*Industrial Relations News*, 2007b). In contrast, Gunnigle et al. (2007) note quite a number of MNCs reporting the introduction of I&C arrangements. Our findings find an association between MNCs that have introduced changes in arrangements as a result of the I&C Directive with the dualistic approach to employee voice, that is MNCs that possess both a direct and indirect dimension to employee voice. Specifically, MNCs that have introduced new voice structures are much more likely to adopt a dualistic approach to employee voice than MNCs that have not introduced any new arrangements. While it is not possible to precisely identify from our data whether MNCs are introducing new direct, indirect or a whole plethora of direct and indirect voice structures, they nonetheless suggest that the Directive has positively impacted on the number and types of voice structures within MNCs in Ireland. We did gather some qualitative quotes around this issue that suggest a preference for more indirect representative type structures.

We have looked at the Information and Consultation Act and feel we are considerably beyond it already. However, we have set up an employee forum to be in the spirit of the legislation.

(US-owned, Manufacturing MNC)

Due to the new EU Directive [Information and Consultation Directive] we established a staff forum which consists of employee representatives meeting once a week to discuss issues related to major changes.

(US-owned Services MNC)

While we cannot claim these quotes are representative of all the MNCs that have introduced changes as a result of the Directive, they nonetheless fit with Dundon et al. (2006) and also Marginson et al.'s (2007) contention of the Directive promoting more indirect, representative type voice structures. In summary, given that MNCs were so influential in the crafting of the legislation transposing the I&C Directive, our findings indicate that they have engaged with its implementation in practice.

In summary our findings point towards a relatively high level of engagement with employee voice mechanisms, both direct and indirect varieties, within MNCs. One of the

most notable trends to emerge was that of the emergence of non-union structures of employee representation as a channel of employee voice, particularly in non-union MNCs. While an in-depth review of the quality of voice mechanisms is beyond the remit of this article, it does provide a representative snapshot of the range of voice mechanisms on offer within MNCs. Furthermore, we identified a particular model that allows for the characterization of employee voice approaches within MNCs and also a range of explanatory factors. This article provides a useful template for the examination of employee voice within MNCs across different national contexts, investigating if these explanatory factors hold up or whether there are other institutional effects that impact on voice approaches.

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### Notes

- 1 Some debate exists over formally designated teams (FDTs) as a form of employee voice with some arguing that it is the ultimate in direct participation (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2000) with others disputing their influence as a voice structure (see Hyman and Mason, 1995). Despite this debate, the use of FDTs as a measure of direct participation is widespread, particularly in the Workplace Employment Relations Surveys (see Cully et al., 1999; Forde et al., 2006; Kersey et al, 2005; Roche and Geary, 2000). We include FDT as a voice mechanism due to the way it is defined – ‘formally designated teams in which employees have responsibility for organising their work and carrying out a set of tasks’. This definition, we argue, recognizes FDTs as potentially a strong voice mechanism. Indeed DeVaro (2006: 231) notes that the precise wording of formally designated teams ‘. . . should direct the respondent’s attention to situations of true joint production and should reduce the respondent’s likelihood of reporting the use of team production simply on the basis of a cooperative or friendly atmosphere of “team spirit” at the workplace’.
- 2 IDA Ireland is the country’s leading organization for the promotion of inward foreign direct investment.
- 3 There are two primary sources of data on trade union density in Ireland. The first is the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment and is based on returns from unions themselves. The second draws on Quarterly National Household Surveys (conducted since the early 1990s). The latter indicate consistently lower levels of union density than the former. For more detail, see Roche (2008).
- 4 Participative mechanisms are defined as those ‘. . . that give workers some degree of influence over organisational and workplace decisions’ (Williams and Adam-Smith, 2006: 42). These include formally designated teams and problem-solving groups. Consultative mechanisms are defined as ‘. . . [arrangements which involve] management discussing production and other issues with representatives of the workforce, seeking comments and suggestions . . .’ (Blyton and Turnbull, 1998: 224). These include meetings with the whole of the workforce, attitude surveys and suggestion schemes. Finally information sharing mechanisms are defined as those which are ‘. . . used by management for communicating with employees on issues affecting the organisation and employee interests at work’ (Farnham, 2000: 187). These include team briefing

- groups, systematic use of the management chain to cascade information, newsletters or emails, company intranet and performance appraisal systems.
- 5 The number of MNCs in the 'rest of the world' category is small, but more importantly they are quite a disparate group in terms of country of ownership, encompassing firms from southern and central Asia, the Americas (excluding the US) and the Antipodes. As a result we feel it is best not to address this ownership category in the findings.
  - 6 This research is part of an international research project, INTREPID (Investigation of Transnationals' Employment Practices: an International Database) on the study of employment practices in MNCs involving research teams in 10 countries (Argentina, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Singapore, and UK).
  - 7 We also tested the model in a multinomial logit model. Both the Pearson and deviance goodness of fit tests proved to be non-significant indicating that the model adequately fits the data.

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