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Employee Influence on Decisions:
An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

(Research or technical article) Reports that results of a study
concerned with the kinds of work place decisions that employees
wish to influence. Results stress that employees particularly
wish to influence decisions concerning their everyday work
procedures.

SUMMARY

Attitude data from a national sample of 2,300 working adults are reported. The data show that employees feel they should have more influence on decisions in a number of areas. This feeling is stronger for decisions affecting how their job is done, than for matters of corporate policy and personnel decisions. However, it is in the policy and personnel areas that they perceive the greatest discrepancy between the amount of influence they presently have and the amount of influence they feel they should have. Older, better educated, and higher-paid respondents felt they should have more influence on all decisions. The implications of these findings for the Quality of Work Life movement were considered. The data suggest a favorable future climate for certain types of employee influence/Quality of Work Life projects.

The last several decades have seen dramatic changes in the nature of the U.S. workplace and work force. Although reviewing these changes is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning some of the most important, because they bear directly on the issue of employee influence on workplace decisions (O'Toole, 1977; Kerr and Rosow, 1979). The work force has become better educated, more skilled, and less accepting of traditional forms of authority and control. The workplace has fewer traditional manufacturing jobs, is safer, and is subject to a wide range of new legislation. In addition, such things as health insurance, retirement pay, and sick leave, which were once seen as benefits, are now for many employees entitlements.

An important part of the changing nature of the workplace and the work force involves employee influence on decisions. During the 1970s, the quality of work life movement began (Davis and Cherns, 1975; Hackman and Suttle, 1977). It led to a significant number of experiments in employee participation and workplace democracy (see e.g., Goodman and Lawler, 1979; Walton, 1979). Nevertheless, it remains an open question just how far and in what direction the movement toward greater employee influence should and will go. In Europe it has already gone in a very different direction than it has in the United States. For example, in Germany, Norway, and Sweden, it has taken the form of worker representation on company boards of directors, and has become an important political issue. So far, with the exception of the Chrysler Corporation, union membership on boards has not been a major issue in the United States, nor has the political process focused seriously on the whole issue of worker influence. Nevertheless, the topic of work influence is an important one that has a long research history in the United States.

A great deal of the research on leadership has been concerned with such things as the effectiveness of democratic approaches to leadership and the effects of participation in decision making (see e.g. Locke and Schweiger, 1979; Vroom and Yetton, 1973). However, little research has focused on employee desires for participation and whether they vary as a function of the type of decision being considered. Many different types of decisions are made in organizations, and each one is a possible candidate for employee influence. However, just because employees influence one decision does not mean that they do, or feel they should, influence another decision. This is an important issue since, if attitudes vary, it may mean that certain types of decisions are the most appropriate areas in which to experiment with employee participation projects.

Only limited attention has been focused on the role that individual differences play in determining employees' preferences for and responses to participative decision making. These data suggest that, indeed, people do differ in their preferences for influence, although little systematic data are available on which groups of individuals want influence. Information of this type could be very helpful in pointing out which individuals are likely candidates for participation in Quality of Work Life projects. In addition, the issue of how different groups of workers feel is interesting because of the many assumptions which are made about who wants more influence (e.g., young people want to influence everything). It is also important because of the changing nature of the work force. The work force in the United States is increasingly found in service, managerial, and technical organizations, and it is increasingly

made up of higher-educated employees. Thus, what people with these characteristics believe is key because it can provide an early indicator of where the society is heading.

The study reported here was done in order to provide data on the two key questions that have been identified: How do employees presently feel about the amount of influence they have and should have in making a variety of workplace decisions? Do different groups of employees have different feelings about how much influence they should have?

Data Collection Procedure

The data were gathered as part of a 1977 survey of the readers of Psychology Today (Renwick and Lawler, 1977; 1978). A 77-item questionnaire was included in the magazine, and readers were asked to complete it and return it to the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan. A total of 23,008 questionnaires were received. Because of the large number of responses, a sample was drawn by taking every 10th survey received, in the order that they were received, for a total of 2,300 responses.

Nature of Sample

The sample is not representative of the overall U.S. work force (see Table 1). It contains more professionals and managers than does the U.S. work force, and it has a higher educational level. The sample is also younger and better paid than is the U.S. work force in general. Lower socioeconomic groups are, therefore, underrepresented in this sample. Thus, it is impossible to generalize the findings to the U.S. population as a whole. Despite these limitations, it is still an interesting sample since it emphasizes the kinds of people who are likely to be a major

component of the work force of the future: younger, higher-educated, skilled managerial and professional people. Thus, the sample is a large, diverse one that can provide some informative data on the relationships among many key variables, but generalizations of the findings are best limited to those groups that are most represented by the sample.

Table 1 About Here

Results and Discussion

For the purposes of this study, employees were asked about their feelings with regard to seven different decisions (see Table 2). For each one, they were asked how much influence they actually have and how much influence they felt they should have. They were asked to respond to each item on a seven-point scale running from "1-no say" to "7-a great deal of say."

Table 2 About Here

The respondents indicated that they already have a great deal of say about how they do their work as well as about scheduling their own work-related activities. Still, they said they should have more. The relatively high degree of influence these people reported probably reflects their high education and job levels, as do their relatively high aspiration levels. Nevertheless, it is clear that these employees feel that they should have a great deal of say about how they do their own work as well as about how their own work should be scheduled.

TABLE 1

Nature of the Sample and the
National Work Force

Groups	Sample	National Work Force
Occupation:		
Executive/manager/administrator	15.9%	10.7%
Professional/technical	43.4%	15.1%
Salesperson	4.3%	6.3%
Supervisor worker[a]	9.2%	13.1%
Clerical worker	13.7%	17.8%
Semiskilled or unskilled	5.7%	5.0%
Operators (of equipment, etc.)		15.2%
Service workers		13.7%
Farm workers		3.0%
Other	7.9%	
Education:		
Grade school or less	.3%	10.0%
Some high school	2.3%	13.7%
High school diploma or equivalent	9.6%	40.8%
Some college	25.5%	17.2%
College degree	20.1%	10.8%
Some graduate/professional school	14.8%	
Graduate/professional degree	27.5%	7.5%

TABLE 2

Responses to Influence Questions

Question[a]	Should Have		Actually Have		Mean Difference (Should-Actual)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
How to do own work	6.2	1.1	5.7	1.6	.5
Schedule own work	5.9	1.4	5.3	1.9	.6
Giving pay raises	3.8	2.2	2.1	1.9	1.7
Hiring people	3.7	2.3	2.6	2.2	1.1
Firing people	3.6	2.3	2.5	2.2	1.1
Promoting people	3.5	2.3	2.3	2.1	1.2
Making organization policy	4.5	1.9	2.9	2.1	1.6

[a]Response scale was 1=no say, 7=a great deal of say

The situation is quite different with respect to hiring, paying, promoting, and firing people. Here, the sample reported having relatively low influence and desiring only a moderate amount. However, a gap exists between how much say people actually have and how much they think they should have in these areas. Although they do not want a great deal of say in these decisions, it is clear that employees want more say than they actually have. A similar condition exists with respect to organization policy decisions. It is quite clear that employees feel they should have more influence than they presently have in making overall policy decisions (difference score = 1.6). It is also worth noting that the "should have" score for organizational policy decisions is higher than are the scores for hiring, firing, and promoting. One implication of this finding is that in the future there may be more interest in, and support for formal, employee input to policy decisions. This may take several forms, one of which is the European style of employee representation on boards of directors. Other mechanisms that may receive additional attention for increasing this type of influence are junior boards, board-appointed task forces, and labor-management councils. At this point, it is not clear what form this desired influence will take, but at the very least, it suggests that organizations should anticipate demands for wider employee involvement in policy decisions.

Taken together, the data on desired employee influence suggest that employees want a high level of influence in some areas, particularly those that affect their own day-to-day work life. However, only a small discrepancy exists here between what they actually have and what they feel they should have, since they perceive themselves as already having a great

deal. Although they feel they should have more say in personnel and organizational policy matters, they do not feel that they should have as much say here as they already have in decisions affecting their own work activities.

Who Wants Influence

Earlier it was suggested that employees holding certain types of jobs may differ widely in the degree of influence they feel they should have. Table 3 shows the average scores on the "should have" question for six types of jobs. As can be seen from the table, there is a strong relationship between type of job and feelings about say. Employees in managerial positions and, to a lesser extent, employees in professional jobs clearly feel that they should have more say in all decisions than do employees in sales, skilled, semi-skilled, and clerical jobs. This finding has important implications for what the future holds in the area of worker influence, since professional and managerial jobs are growing at a more rapid rate than are semiskilled and unskilled jobs. As this trend continues, we can expect increasing pressures for influence.

Tables 3 and 4 About Here

The difference scores for each of the occupational groups are shown in Table 4. Managerial employees, are the only ones that show relatively small gaps between the amount of influence they currently have and what they feel they should have. It is surprising that professional employees show such large gaps. With the exception of matters pertaining to their own work, they clearly feel that they should have more influence than they

TABLE 3

Average Responses to "Should Have" Questions For Six Occupational Groups

	Manager	Professional	Salesman	Farmer or Skilled Worker	Clerical	Unskilled
How To Do Own Work	6.6	6.4	6.2	6.0	5.8	5.5
Schedule Own Work	6.5	6.1	6.2	5.4	5.8	4.5
Giving Pay Raises	5.2	3.8	3.7	3.3	3.0	3.3
Hiring People	5.7	3.8	3.2	3.2	2.3	2.3
Firing People	5.7	3.6	3.0	3.2	2.1	2.4
Promoting People	6.2	4.7	4.1	4.5	3.8	3.8
Making Organization Policy	5.5	4.8	4.4	3.9	3.4	3.6

TABLE 4

Average Difference Scores (Should-Actual)
For Six Occupational Groups

	Manager	Professional	Salesman	Farmer or Skilled Worker	Clerical	Unskilled
How To Do Own Work	.2	.4	.5	.8	.8	.9
Schedule Own Work	.2	.6	.5	.9	.8	1.2
Giving Pay Raises	1.2	1.9	1.5	1.7	1.7	2.0
Hiring People	.7	1.3	1.0	1.3	.7	.9
Firing People	1.0	1.4	1.1	1.0	.8	1.0
Promoting People	.5	1.1	1.4	1.0	1.4	1.5
Making Organization Policy	1.2	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.4	1.7

actually do. Also somewhat surprising is the large gap all occupational

groups show on organization policy. This suggests that even employees who

feel they have relatively low levels of influence on policy decisions feel

they should have more influence in making policy decisions. The same

pattern exists for giving pay raises. Employees in all types of jobs feel

that they should have significantly more influence than they presently

have.

Table 5 About Here

Partial and product moment correlations between the "should have"

scores and four characteristics of the respondents--age, education,

income, and political attitudes are shown in Table 5. There does not

appear to be any obvious relationship between political attitudes and

feelings about workplace influence. This finding is a bit surprising,

since it is often suggested that beliefs favoring workplace influence are

associated with a liberal political philosophy. At least in terms of how

people feel about their own jobs, this does not appear to be true. It may,

of course, still be true with respect to legislation or other action with

respect to worker influence.

Age, education, and income all show significant relationships to

feelings about influence. The older, the better educated, and the higher-

paid employees are, the more influence they feel they should have in all

areas. The partial correlations reveal that the age relationship largely

disappears when income and education are held constant. The partials also

show that income is the best predictor with education second. The income

finding probably is due to its association with management level and can

TABLE 5

Correlations Between Individual Characteristics and Desired Influence

AREA OF DESIRED INFLUENCE	Age Corr.	Partial[1]	Education Corr.	Partial	Income Corr.	Partial	Political Corr.	Partial
How To Do Own Work	.18*	.05	.24*	.14*	.25*	.14*	-.01	-.03
Schedule Own Work	.16*	.04	.23*	.15%	.23*	.12*	.02	.00
Giving Pay Raises	.16*	.04	.12*	.02	.25*	.18*	.01	-.02
Hiring People	.22*	.05	.23*	.10*	.35*	.25*	.04	.00
Firing People	.22*	.05	.22*	.08*	.35*	.25*	.04	.00
Promoting People	.23*	.06*	.21*	.06*	.35*	.24*	.05	.01
Making Organization Policy	.14*	.01	.25*	.17*	.23*	.14*	.02	-.02

*P F .01 with N = 2,021.

[1]Partial correlations ahve been partialled on all three other column variables.

be interpreted as indicating that higher level employees feel they should have more influence. The finding with respect to education level is important. Since education level is rising in the population, it suggests that employees' feelings about influence in these decision-making areas are also likely to be on the rise.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the results of the study show that there are gaps between how much influence people have and how much they feel they should have. The biggest gap between what influence actually exists and what people feel should exist falls in the areas of influencing personnel-type decisions and company policy. In the area of actual job activities, employees feel that they should have a great deal of influence and, to an appreciable degree, feel that they already do. This latter finding suggests that for many managerial, professional, sales, and skilled employees, control over their own day-to-day work activities is an accepted practice.

Table 6 About Here

The future of influence with respect to personnel matters and company policy is not clear. At the present time, the data show there is not a general feeling that employees should have a high level of influence in either area. An interesting confirmation of this finding is provided by Table 6 which is taken from the 1977 Quality of Employment sample (Quinn and Staines, 1979). These data, which are from a random national sample of employed adults, are quite similar to those gathered in the present

TABLE 6

How Much Say Workers Should Have

1=No say, 4=Complete say

	N	Average
How Work Is Done	2254	2.4
Wages and Salaries Paid	2235	2.2
Days and Hours People Work	2245	2.0
Hiring or Layoffs	2224	1.8

study. The data show there is stronger support for influence in work decisions than in personnel decisions. Nevertheless, the data from the present study do show that employees feel they should have more influence on personnel and policy matters.

The finding of a desire for more influence on policy and personnel matters is particularly interesting in light of some of the experimentation that has been taking place in the United States (See, for example, Hackman and Suttle, 1977; Goodman and Lawler, 1979). In some of these projects, employees at all levels of organizations are being given increased influence on personnel decisions and on policy decisions. For example, in some plants' production, employees are setting each other's wages and deciding on promotions through a peer appraisal process (Lawler, 1981). In still other projects, joint union-management committees are dealing with important policy matters (Goodman, 1979). As these projects and others like them develop and receive publicity they may increase peoples' desires for influence. Indeed it may be that the present relatively high level of desire for influence may be partially due to the coverage which has already been given to quality of work life thinking and projects.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the situation with respect to employee influence on personnel and policy decisions is to say that a mixed picture exists. On the one hand, it is being tested in some organizations and the data show that people feel that they should have more of it. On the other hand, the tests are few in number and relatively new; in addition, the data suggest that people do not feel that they should have a great deal of influence on these decisions. Given the mixed

picture, it seems that widespread changes in this area are unlikely; nevertheless, more experimentation is likely and, indeed, the future may see increased demand for influence in these areas. The data suggest that support is strongest for influence in the pay area, so this may be an area for organizations to begin experimentation.

The data on who wants influence suggest that those types of employees who are an increasing part of the work force are the ones who want more influence. The implications of this seem obvious: work organizations are likely to increasingly find their employees demanding more influence in a number of areas. These same data also help to highlight which employees are particularly likely to respond favorably to the idea of participation: better educated employees, higher-paid employees, and professional and managerial employees.

Finally, it is important to mention some of the limitations of the present study. It is an attitude study, not a behavior study, and as such it is only suggestive of what types of influence people desire and of how they might respond to influence opportunities. The nature of the sample also present some problems. Although large, it is not a random sample and because of this the findings with respect to actual and desired influence must be considered suggestive not definite. The correspondence between them and the data from the Quality of Employment survey provides some reassurance but caution is still in order. More confidence can be placed in the data which show how individual differences are related to attitudes toward influence. There is less reason to expect that these should be different for a more representative national sample.

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