

Chapter 4

Social Media at Work: A New Form of Employee Voice?



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Abstract In the workplace of the twenty-first century, social media cuts two ways. Increasingly there is evidence of the ways in which employers use it as a recruitment tool and use it as part of the process of selecting employees. However, employees can use it to discuss issues at work out of the control of management. Specifically, increasingly savvy employers are building internal social media sites to connect with the immediacy and focus of employee voices on emerging workplace issues. The other major use of social media is where this breakdown in trust between employer and employee which often leads to employees to vent their anger through public social media channels which, in turn, can damage brand image and reputation.

Keywords Digital Platforms · Control · Real time · Trust · Global Reach

4.1 Introduction

If any company thinks that social media doesn't apply to them they are seriously mistaken. We're in a digital revolution, digital technology is fundamentally changing the way we do business (Mennie 2015: 4).

The above quote illustrates the changing nature and impact of social media from its beginnings as an electronic platform designed for friends to keep in touch to one of the most powerful communication tools both inside and outside the workplace. Social media is now being seen as an alternative, emerging form of 'voice' in the context of declining union density, particularly in Advanced Market Economies (AMEs)

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and especially among the younger generations. Examples of the impact of social media are already well documented. From the HMV case, where live tweets were emanating from inside the workplace as retrenchments were taking place (see below), disparaging comments about the workplace that have seen employees sacked and organisations going into damage control (Dowling 2015; Broughton et al. 2010), to employees voicing through social media to take a socially responsible stand against their employer (Miles and Mangold 2014). Both employers and the law have often had to take a reactive stance to the impact of this new medium as they attempt to develop appropriate policies and practices. Whilst much of the focus has been on the potential negative and destructive aspects of social media and accompanying prevention and protection measures against employees (Jacobsen and Howle-Tufts 2013; Richards 2008), less attention has been given to the harnessing of social media in a constructive manner. As Miles and Mangold (2014) point out, social media can be an untapped resource if developed properly and in conjunction with employees. Effective use of this resource can only begin where management understands how the resource can facilitate better understanding of issues at work and contribute to decision-making and ultimately competitive advantage of the organisation; meaning management getting messages that they may or may not want to receive (Miles and Mangold 2014).

This chapter explores the issues and opportunities social media provides in the development of employee voice, through its properties of immediacy and range of connections. These have the potential to flatten the organisational hierarchy of voice channels at work as it gives everyone the connected opportunity to have equal input and provides management with an immediate understanding of workplace issues and an opportunity to address them in 'real' time. For those who do not embrace it, it will remain an untapped resource. The chapter also highlights the key values and culture that need to be put in place for such a voice system to operate effectively. The discussion of voice also highlights the issue of silence as an ongoing workplace issue.

4.2 The New Paradigm of Social Media in the Workplace

What is Social Media? At first, this might seem a logical and straightforward question. However, the relative newness and rapid evolution of social media mean that it has come to mean different things to different people. Whilst most people will see social media through the spectrum of Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, it is in fact, best described as all digital platforms where people connect and share information. Thus, organisations' interactive websites (with customers and other stakeholders) can be seen as social media (Mennie 2015).

Considering, therefore, the ubiquitous nature of social media and its potential to influence the workplace, and calls for contemporary research on employee voice to push the boundaries, to deepen our knowledge and understanding of voice in the workplace (see Budd 2014), it is surprising the paucity of research on the use of social

media and its impact in the workplace and in particular on employee voice (see excellent example—Martin Parry and Flowers 2015). More generally, as Andreassen et al. (2014) note, presently there is not much known about factors influencing attitudes towards and the actual use of electronic communication during work time.

As Miles and Mangold (2014) and Budd (2014: 485) note, the changes in voice brought about by the rapid evolution in technologies has also provided employees with unprecedented power in and outside the workplace, and should prompt a re-evaluation of our approach to voice as traditional approaches fail to fully account for social media. Those studies that have been undertaken have shown a variety of findings on the impact of social media at work (Holland et al. 2016; Miles and Mangold 2014). This chapter looks to explore these issues and add to the body of literature from employee relations and human resource management perspective.

As social media emerges as a relatively new form of voice, it is most likely to be generated externally to the organisation, and initially, there is no guarantee that managers will see them, so in some ways electronic forms can provide voice but no ears. However, this context was arguably changed by the HMV case noted below which highlighted the need for organisations to monitor external communication about their organisation. In the HMV case—ironically, HMV stands for His Master’s Voice and the company has a history in communications—it was the live tweets from a termination process that framed an understanding of the impact of social media in and on the workplace as 70,000 followers received the following tweets (and may others) and then re-tweeted them as

We’re tweeting live from HR where we’re all being fired! Exciting!!

This was followed by details and descriptions of the ‘mass execution’ of loyal workers, gross mismanagement and unpaid illegal interns. As Holmes (2013) notes by the time HMV had regained control of the account and deleted the messages, the damage was done as the tweets went viral.

What the HMV case provides is an understanding as to how, as Miles and Mangold (2014) note, the power and potential impact of this new medium of social media voice can bring attention to issues of public interest into the public domain, especially if the employee(s) feels their voice is not being heard. Another high-profile example of this was a staff member who posted pictures of raw food stored outside his restaurant in the US next to a bin swarming with flies. This was posted after the staff got no responses from management or the local health authority over the issue. This example also highlights what Budd et al. (2010) described as the broader use of employee voice on moral, ethical or pragmatic grounds. Such cases provide food for thought for organisations, but also may have resulted in many organisations taking a backward step with social media as they come to fear rather than embrace it. We explore the impact of social media as a potential new form of voice, whilst looking at the positive and negative aspects of social media in the workplace.

4.3 Social Media at Work

Studies that have been carried out in relation to social media and the workplace have found mixed results. Garrett and Danziger (2008), in a study of over 1,000 employees surveyed across a variety of industries in the US, found no significant relationship between social media use and negative aspects of the work environment such as job satisfaction, job stress or perceived injustice. They found that it was higher skilled employees who were the greatest users of the internet for both work and nonwork activities. Lim et al. (2002) found the increasing use of the internet by Singaporean employees was related to increased job demands. A more recent study by Charoensukmongkol (2014) on Thai employees, found that high job demand and co-worker support were positively related to the use of social media. In particular, this study found that social media use did not negatively affect job outcomes and was a way to mitigate demanding jobs. In line with the findings of Garrett and Danziger (2008), these studies suggest that the use of the internet during working hours should not be seen as a negative aspect of the workplace but rather embraced as part of the electronic communication network that is the contemporary workplace (p. 953).

In contrast, a number of studies have focused on social media during working hours for personal use and found it impacting negatively. For example, Liberman et al. (2011) found that work-related factors such as job involvement and intrinsic involvement (which is an employee's perceived ability to make an important contribution to the work) were key job attitudes predicting counterproductive workplace behaviours such as 'cyber-loafing' for those employees with lower levels of job and intrinsic involvement. Cyber-loafing refers to the use of internet/social media for nonwork-related or personal activities during working hours (see Vitak et al. 2011). The culture (and climate) of the organisation in terms of attitudes to cyber-loafing were considered important factors on the incident, amount and acceptance of cyber-loafing. Andreassen et al. (2014) also support these findings and in their study of over 11,000 employees, using social media for work purposes during working hours, also found support from senior managers to Garrett and Danziger (2008) claim that a positive challenging work environment was a factor in reducing cyber-loafing. What was of particular interest was the use of social networking being more prevalent amongst younger workers. Whilst on its own this may not seem surprising; however, the fact that across AMEs younger workers are the least represented by traditional forms of employee voice such as trade unions which is a theme we shall return to later in this chapter.

As noted, cyber-loafing has been linked to a negative work environment characterised by perceived injustice, disengagement and stress (Richards 2008). Hence, the use of social media during working hours may be viewed as a way to alleviate and/or 'voice' personal disaffection (Garrett and Danziger 2008). By contrast, the work of Moqbel et al. (2013) points to the use of social media at work as having a positive effect on job satisfaction and performance, which is also supported by Charoensukmongkol's (2014) work. Malik et al. (2010) identify a positive effect of job satisfaction through enabling better work-life balance. Other research has shown

that the use of social media at work has a positive effect on morale (Bennett et al. 2010; Petal and Jasani 2010), productivity (Nucleus 2009; Shepherd 2011), retention, commitment, job performance (Ali-Hassan 2011) and job satisfaction (Kock et al. 2012). As Moqbel et al. (2013) conclude, the use of social media at work could have benefits to both the employee and the organisation. These findings support the idea that the use of social media is linked to anticipated subjective outcomes of the user, be they positive or negative (Garrett and Danziger 2008; Moqbel et al. 2013).

4.4 Employee Voice and Social Media

As noted, whilst the initial research of social media at work has focused on nonproductive and counterproductive behaviours (see Mastrangelo et al. 2006), more recent research has started to explore the key communication implications of social media as it becomes ubiquitous both inside and outside the workplace, in particular, the important aspects of voice at the workplace. As Martin et al. (2015) argue, management can use social media to encourage individuals to exercise direct voice because all employees are likely to have access at work to the technology.

With the weakening in traditional (union) voice in many AMEs through declining trade union membership, increased deregulation of the labour market and the rise of human resource management with its focus of direct communication in the workplace between management and employees, increased research around how management and the workforce communicate has emerged. This issue of performance has been the focus of the literature in HRM, where open channels of communication are perceived to create more efficient and effective decision-making and has been linked to research on high-performance work systems and employee engagement (Wilkinson and Fay 2011; Boxall and Purcell 2016), ultimately leading to increased competition in the organisation.

As we know, voice arrangements are practices that facilitate two-way dialogue between management and employees. From an employee perspective, voice describes how employees raise concerns, express and advance interests, solve problems and contribute and participate in workplace decision-making with management (Pyman et al. 2010; Martin et al. 2015), thus giving employees the opportunity to (potentially) influence managerial thinking and organisational decisions (Bryson et al. 2007; Dundon and Gollan 2007). From a management perspective, voice arrangements also provide management with the opportunity to discuss issues, provide feedback and gain insight into employees' concerns (Bryson 2004). Employee voice arrangements, therefore, play a central role in employee involvement, participation and managerial communication (Tzafrir et al. 2004). However, with the advent of social media as a form of voice and its reach beyond the traditional managerial structures and hierarchies, an extension of this definition is required. In this context, Miles and Mangold (2014: 403) have suggested that voice is

...an employee's attempt to use sanctioned or unsanctioned media or methods for the purpose of articulating organizational experiences or issues or influencing the organization, its members, or other stakeholders.

In a strategic HRM context, Budd et al. (2010) note that the HRM literature focuses on the importance of participation and voice to improve organisational effectiveness and these concepts are embedded in the notion of organisational citizenship and organisational democracy. Employee voice is seen as a key aspect of the workplace which includes and facilitates high-performance work systems, high-involvement and high-commitment management approaches (Bryson et al. 2007; Wood and Wall 2007), and has been linked with

- Both increased organisational performance and positive industrial relations climate (Boxall and Purcell 2016; Pyman et al. 2010; Dundon et al. 2004),
- Employee satisfaction, employee commitment and also increased organisational citizenship behaviours (Holland et al. 2011; Boxall et al. 2007; Wood and Wall 2007) and
- A positive supervisor–subordinate relationships, as voice builds awareness of issues from both the employee and employer perspective and can facilitate increased fairness in the employment relationship (Marchington 2007).

Significantly, it is the senior management who creates the conditions and structures that foster voice (Beugre 2010) and middle and supervisory management who maintain it, be it union, nonunion, direct, indirect or hybrid (Holland et al. 2011). As such, management shapes the conditions and structures that foster communication, and therefore employee engagement on workplace issues (Beugre 2010; Donaghey et al. 2011). However, social media communications are more complex and provide a potential paradigm shift, in that they can be set up without management involvement and/or control (Balnave et al. 2014). As such, social media has the potential to recast the nature of workplace communications and employee voice. Further aspects that set social media apart from traditional forms of workplace communication channels are its reach and immediacy. Working in 'real-time', information can be shared with anyone who is able to connect both inside and outside the organisation, with people responding and discussing issues as they emerge.

Given the dynamic reciprocal nature of the employment relationship, the responses and actions of management are continually evaluated and assessed by employees and their representatives (Holland et al. 2012, 2015; Costigan et al. 1998). Employees are, therefore, continually appraising multiple sources of information to inform their impression of the overall relationship with all levels of management (Dietz and Fortin 2007). Social media provides a new immediacy to this relationship and management can view this either in the context of negative or deviant behaviour or embrace this new form of communication and harness its immediacy on workplace issues and opinions. Social media is additionally an opportunity for greater communication in the workplace in view of the increasing evidence of the decline or stagnation of traditional voice forms (Budd 2014), decreasing response rates to organisational climate surveys and employee silence (Donaghey et al. 2011). These

factors pose a problem for conventional approaches to employee–employer communications and interactions in the workplace and the quality of information flowing within the employment relationship (Silverman et al. 2013; Broughton et al. 2010), particularly with the rise of technology-based forms of voice (Budd 2014).

Employee silence is where employees deliberately withhold opinions, ideas or information about work-related issues (Van Dyne et al. 2003). Employee silence may be associated with a variety of variables, including fear of retribution for being critical of management, lack of support or a belief that the employee view(s) will not be valued (Milliken et al. 2003; Pinder and Harlos 2001). Donaghey et al. (2011) also point to the role of management in building a culture of employee silence through agenda and institutional structures with deliberate or perceived threats. The deliberate managing out of employee communication or voice can have serious implications for management. Firstly, it can distort and undermine the quality of the information flows upon which management relies for quality decision-making and secondly, it can undermine the employment relationship (Milliken et al. 2003) and lead to increased employee conflict, resistance and turnover (Macdonald and Thompson 2015). Social media has the capacity to cut through this silence and can be a positive or negative experience for management depending on how they relate to and manage this new and dynamic aspect of the employment relationship (Edmonson 2003). A key factor in this is that it is very difficult for management, intolerant of critical feedback, to negate the reach and immediacy of the real-time nature of social media.

Much of the discussion around social media has focused on the negative aspects associated with controlling it (Jacobson and Howle-Tufts 2013), described as the ‘dark’ side (Holland and Bardoel 2016). Despite, generally, positive findings regarding the use of social media as a form of voice, Martin et al. (2015), did find issues associated with power, control and social voice being perceived to be used to suppress employee voice in the large organisation they studied. We would argue management needs to see the opportunities such a media provides to have an engaged and authentic dialogue with the workforce in real time—or the ‘smart’ side of managing social media voice (Holland and Bardoel 2016). This latter approach has already been adopted by major organisations such as HP, IBM, SAP Deloitte and Microsoft (Moqbel et al. 2013). As Martin et al. (2015) note, IBM claims that over 300,000 employees have used its internal social media system ‘Jams’ since 2001 with brainstorming and problem-solving key activities. Dell has also trained 10,000 employees to use social media to augment their jobs (Miles and Mangold 2014). These expressions of voice can provide key insights and strategic advantage to the organisation who take an organisation learning approach to social media (Holland et al. 2016) and, when provided with the proper context and support, can enhance strategic advantage for the organisation (Miles and Mangold 2014). What these examples convey to employees is managements’ perceived willingness to engage openly in real time and on issues important to the workforce and allow for critical discussion of issues with employees (Evans 2015). Undertaking this approach also addresses the immediate key emerging issues in the workplace and is supported by research based on the concept of the wisdom of crowds. The immediacy of aggregation of individual communications on workplace issue(s) could provide new forms of collaboration and

evolution of employer–employee communications when considered in the context of the ‘wisdom of crowds’. Mannes et al. (2014), researching in social psychology, point out that the power of groups has long been recognised, where individual judgements about facts are averaged resulting in the common opinion typically being more accurate than most individual estimates (see Surowiecki 2004). In the same context as the emergence of quality circles and high-performance work teams in the late twentieth century, the capturing of employee knowledge, experience and opinions in real time, through the twenty-first century phenomena of social media, has the potential to enhance management knowledge, responses and decision-making (Silverman et al. 2013) and increases employees’ sense of involvement. However, as Martin et al. (2015) in their in-depth case study show, this needs genuine management support, as this is seen as significant in the use and impact of social media as employee voice. In other words, greater access to voice needs the relevant contextual factors to be in place (Martin et al. 2010).

4.5 Social Media, Voice, Trust and Job Satisfaction

A key issue recurring in the research on social media use at work is the link to employee’s satisfaction with their working conditions. Within the HRM literature, researchers have advocated for employee communication or voice as a means to enhance organisational performance and competitiveness (e.g. Boxall et al. 2007; Wood and Wall 2007). However, as Marchington (2007) reflects

Voice is probably the area in HRM where tensions between the organisation and workers’ goals and between shareholders’ and stakeholders’ views are the most apparent, because it connects with the question of managerial prerogatives and social legitimacy (p 142).

From a social media perspective, this point is reinforced by Barry and Wilkinson (2015), who argue that in the context of voice, tension between the aspirations of an independent employee voice and the desire of management to control it as part of the HRM agenda needs to be negotiated. As Budd (2014) also notes the decline in trade unions as a counterbalance is a concern and social media may provide some form of control or a balance in the employment relationship as a complement or substitute for traditional voice channels. Unlike conventional employee voice, which is one way or two way and hierarchical (management to and from employees/unions), social media voice is inherently multidirectional (Silverman et al. 2013) and as Friedman (2005) argues, it has the capacity to flatten the organisation as it enables anyone to add their ‘voice’ and to target beyond management control. From a management perspective, social media channels have the potential to play a central role in facilitating and enhancing employee involvement, participation and managerial communication in real time, and therefore satisfaction with their job and work. Social media also has the capacity to facilitate organisational learning for both sides of the employment relationship (Martin et al. 2015), is linked to improved relational engagement

(Heikkila 2010) and is an antecedent to voice if it is perceived by employees that they have a degree of control over it (Martin et al. 2015).

In reality, the degree of influence or power attached to each communication or voice arrangement varies significantly (Cox et al. 2006), while social media may provide an immediacy that enriches the communication flow, it requires the target (e.g. management) to respond if such a communication or voice is to be effective (Boxall and Purcell 2016; Hoste et al. 2006; Wood and Wall 2007). Otherwise, it could be problematic and simply become a channel for frustrated employees to vent in response to dissatisfaction at work (Richards 2008).

4.5.1 The Role of Trust in Management

Budd (2014), and Marchington (2007) both indicate trust as a key factor in the development of an employment relationship in which social media can be effective, while trust has been researched extensively (Nichols et al. 2009; Innocenti et al. 2010), particularly, from an economic perspective (Tyler 2003) and psychological perspective (Rousseau et al. 1998). A key theme through these perspectives is that trust is the basis for quality relationships, cooperation and stability (Gould-Williams 2003) and enables and engages employees in some form of cooperation (Creed and Miles 1996). In focusing on trust through management support and employee voice arrangements we see Korczynski's (2000) definition of trust as the most useful, given its focus on an ongoing relationship and economic activity. Trust is, therefore, defined and contextualised as the confidence that one party to the exchange will not exploit the other's vulnerabilities. This definition is more reflective of the ongoing nature and a reliance upon exchange, within the employment relationship.

With respect to the explanations of the role played by trust, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) identified transformational leadership, perceived organisational support and interactional justice as key determinants in the development of trust. They argue that although trust in leadership will be related to behaviours and performance outcomes, it will be most strongly connected with attitudes.

Supervisors play a pivotal role in the development of employee perceptions of trust (Whitener et al. 1998). Indeed, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) and Zhang et al. (2008) identified trust in the direct leader as having the strongest effect of outcomes, with supervisory support for employees seen as a critical factor in the development of trust between supervisors and employees. These important findings were extended by the research of Martin et al. (2015) on the use of social media in the workplace which found that 'signals' from management and the level of trust were key issues. In fact, the lack of support of middle management was seen as a factor in the lack of impact of social media in parts of the organisation studied.

A key aspect in all this is the perception of psychological safety and the assessment of whether management (at all its levels) is considered ethical, open and supportive of genuine voice (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Detert and Treviño 2010) and perceived influence (Tangiralia and Ramanujam 2008). Drawing on social exchange

theory (SET) (Blau 1964), the argument is that employees consider such support as a gauge of the quality of the exchange relationship between employees and supervisors. Supervisor support involves expressions of concern for employee well-being, career development and signals to employees about the value of their work. In return, employees feel the need to expend effort and demonstrate trust in supervisors. Interesting research by Si et al. (2008) found that where managers perceived a breach in the ‘firms’ (being senior management) psychological contract, they too were far less likely to practice pro-social or informal voice of which social media can be seen as one form.

The development of the trust relationship between the employee and the supervisor in turn allows employees to make further emotional investments because they have developed the understanding, based on the social exchange experience, that such investments will be reciprocated. Consistent with Dirks and Ferrin’s (2002) argument of a mediation effect of trust on attitude and behaviours one such outcome may be more employee engagement and performance. As Alfes et al. (2013) argue employees who perceive the opportunity to effectively communicate with management, be they concerns or advice, are likely to be more positive and achieve higher levels of performance.

The second key exchange relationship for an employee at work, as identified by Masterson et al. (2000), is with the organisation. Unlike the relationship with the supervisor that is characterised by frequent and direct contact about daily work issues (Zhang et al. 2008), the relationship between the employee and the organisation, operationalised primarily through the relationship with senior management, is more distal and less interactive (Dirks and Ferrin 2002). From a social exchange perspective, compared to the development of trust with a supervisor with whom the employee has ongoing opportunities to gauge levels of support and to adjust their reciprocal responses, development of trust in senior management does not have the benefit of such regular interaction and it is here that the direct voice may add particular value. Martin and colleagues’ (2015) study found that whilst the support of senior management for social media voice was welcomed, there was a sense that it was seen in some quarters as a ‘box ticking exercise’ rather than a genuine attempt to develop voice. Alfes et al. (2013), using SET, explain that organisational HRM practices (such as voice) send implicit signals to employees about the extent to which they are valued and this influences levels of trust and employee engagement.

4.5.2 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an important attitudinal variable that describes the extent to which people like or dislike their work (Locke 1976; Saari and Judge 2004; Spector 1997). Research has shown that the organisational variables are more strongly related to job satisfaction than are personal attributes (Blegan 1993). In examining the relationship between social media use at work as an organisational variable and job satisfaction, research on the motivation to voice suggests that employees can utilise voice mecha-

nisms to express dissatisfaction (Morrison 2014; Mowbray et al. 2014). Martin et al. (2015) also found that levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction appeared to be factors in the use of social media. Hence, we with others (see Charoensukmongkol 2014 and Budd 2013) argue that in the context of the paucity of social media channels in the contemporary workplace to facilitate discussion, dissatisfied workers are more likely to use social media at work, although, as noted, the evidence is mixed (Lieberman et al. 2011; Holland et al 2016). Social media may be seen as a communication channel to discuss or vent about issues at a workplace that frustrates employees.

We also argue that this negative relationship between social media use and job satisfaction is likely to be influenced by age. In our own research (Holland et al. 2016), we found that younger employees (e.g. Generation ‘Y’ 1977–1996, see Mackay 1997) will be more likely to use social media at work in response to job dissatisfaction. Generation Y employees, who have been brought up in the age of the internet, are also less unionised in most AMEs, and are likely to be more motivated to view social media as a form of employee voice to express dissatisfaction at work. In contrast, older workers who are generally more unionised would be less likely to turn to social media regarding work dissatisfaction.

In our study, we found that the majority of respondents reported using social media or social networking sites, with nearly a third using the media during working hours. Younger people were more likely to report using social media at work for solely personal activities than their older counterparts. Just under half of all employees reported using social media for both work and personal activities. This also highlights the blurring of work and private boundaries in the use of social media (particularly at work). The distribution of reported social media use at work found that Generation Y employees were generally more likely to use social media at work than their older counterparts. What was significant in the findings was that the use of social media at work increased with lower job satisfaction. In comparing social media use between age groups, specifically Generation Y versus older workers, our research found Generation Y employees’ use of social media at work increased with lower job satisfaction but no statistically significant relationship was found between job satisfaction and the use of social media for older workers (Holland et al. 2016).

4.6 Social Media and the Workplace

The understanding and management of social media at work are not well developed. Most studies that have examined social media in a work context only looked at nonwork-related use of social media and the incidence of cyber-loafing (cf. Andreassen et al. 2014). With the decline in union voice, not least in the younger workforce, social media is increasingly seen by forward-thinking organisations as a key aspect of voice emerging in the twenty-first century workplace. As such, we would argue that it is an area of employee communication that HR managers should become increasingly aware of and familiar with social media to harness the potential in terms of its immediacy and impact. We suggest that social media has the potential

to challenge the hierarchy of existing forms of employee–employer communications. This implies that management must consider relinquishing aspects of this hierarchy that come with conventional voice channels, in order to gain the full benefits of this new form of voice; a point also supported by Martin et al. (2015) in their research. Management’s responding efficiently and effectively to this source of information in real time could lead to positive organisational outcomes. However, despite its increasing use, most organisations have not formally developed social media as a form of employee voice at work. Whilst more research into the relationship between job satisfaction and social media at work needs to be undertaken, the evidence from our research is that this voice medium appears to be a form of venting on workplace issues associated with dissatisfaction, limited to younger employees and may be described as ‘justice retaliation’ voice (Klass et al. 2008; Holland et al. 2016).

From a practitioner perspective, the findings of this chapter have several implications. The relatively low reported use of social media as a form of voice at work suggests that this media is an untapped voice channel. The challenge for management, then, is whether to embrace this new (real time) form of voice to harness the ability to increase knowledge and understanding of workplace issues. Alternatively, management can ignore these developments and allow social media to become a focus for negative issues in the workplace and about the organisation (Gerber and Jackson 2013; Nucleus 2009). Whilst it is acknowledged that setting up a formal system of employee voice around social media could be time consuming and requires resource allocation to manage, there appear to be clear benefits from the development of such a system as an increasing number of larger organisations undertaking such a process are demonstrating (Moqbel et al. 2013). Such an approach conveys to employees that the management is willing to engage openly in real time and on issues important to the workforce and allows for critical discussion of issues with employees (Evans 2015).

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the increasing impact of social media on and inside the workplace to make contributions to this emerging debate which can be linked to the chapters on employee silence, bullying and whistleblowing and e-unionism in this book. Whilst we see the use of social media during working hours as an untapped resource, it should be considered in the context of issues of poor response rates to climate surveys and employee silence. Social media may be developed to increase employee voice and engagement but this may not be the outcome, particularly if the contextual parameters are not developed and maintained. In the ‘e-workplace’, digital era leadership is required and management, therefore, needs to be open to these new experiences by demonstrating honesty in communications, transparency and the ability to have frank conversations (Silverman et al. 2013; Silverman and Newhouse 2010).

We believe social media is a resource that has the potential to flatten the organisational hierarchy of voice channels at work. Such a media gives everyone connected the opportunity to have equal input and provides the management an immediate understanding of workplace issues. The reach and immediacy of social media as a form of voice are likely to become key variables in the employment relationship in terms of the degree of genuine employee participation in organisational decisions. As such, management should look to embrace the potential of social media (smart side) in enhancing employee–employer communication rather than fear its ‘dark-side’ or as Miles and Mangold (2014: 410) note, if this new voice is ignored it can become a time bomb waiting to detonate.

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