

**INVITED REVIEW**

# Never 'one-size-fits-all': Mick Marchington's unique voice on voice, from micro-level informality to macro-level turbulence

John W. Budd<sup>1</sup>  | Stewart Johnstone<sup>2</sup>  | J. Ryan Lamare<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Center for Human Resources and Labor Studies, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Work, Employment & Organisation, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

<sup>3</sup>School of Labor and Employment Relations, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA

**Correspondence**

John W. Budd, Center for Human Resources and Labor Studies, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.  
Email: [jbudd@umn.edu](mailto:jbudd@umn.edu)

**Abstract**

Mick Marchington's contributions to employee voice, participation, and involvement are broad and deep. This scholarship is consistently distinguished by a rejection of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches in favour of complex, multi-layered understandings. We reflect on some of Marchington's key contributions to employee voice, participation, and involvement, with an emphasis on the importance of internal actors who are conditioned by diverse internal and external influences. We also illustrate the lasting importance of this approach by applying it to the COVID-19 health crisis currently unfolding.

**KEYWORDS**

employee involvement, employee participation, employee voice, Mick Marchington, waves theory

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

Mick Marchington's four decades of scholarship on employee voice, participation, and involvement has left a lasting imprint on the field that is rarely rivalled. Throughout Marchington's voice research, there is a consistent rejection of prior universalistic theorising in favour of much more nuanced, contingent understandings that reject a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and instead require a deep appreciation for the specific context of any particular workplace. Moreover, this context needs to be seen in a rich, multi-level way that ranges from individual attitudes to macro-level turbulence.

**Abbreviations:** CEO, chief executive officer; CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; EIP, employee involvement and participation; GFC, global financial crisis; HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management; LME, liberal market economies; UK, United Kingdom; WERS98, 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey; WERS, Workplace Employment Relations Survey.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2022 The Authors. Human Resource Management Journal published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Together with other industrial relations pluralists—including Keith Sisson, John Storey and John Purcell—Marchington helped shape the development of HRM since its emergence in the 1980s, not least as editors of this journal at various times. Reflecting the pluralist industrial relations tradition, the approach was one which rejected solely-unitarist or prescriptive approaches to human resource management (HRM), in favour of a pluralistic perspective which puts the employment relationship centre stage and recognises the common and divergent interests of employees and organisations.

Applying this perspective specifically to employee voice, Marchington always saw space for the continued role unions might play in representative voice structures, but also had an enormous impact by displaying an open-mindedness to other forms of workplace voice, including nonunion and direct structures, and judging them on their own merits. By exploring the various forms voice can take—including embedded and informal forms of employee involvement and participation that go beyond a focus on formal indicators—his work laid the foundation for today's widely-accepted views of voice as multidimensional. But while accepting that nonunion and direct voice might have some value for workers and organisations, Marchington's scholarship remained rooted in pluralist thought, which gave legitimacy to employer goals without shying away from the importance of workers' goals and fair voice systems.

Marchington's embrace of a contingent approach grounded in a deep understanding of rich contextual influences, combined with his recognition that voice mechanisms are pressured by turbulent times, provide an excellent model for scholars to understand how workers, organisations, and their diverse systems of voice confront new challenges such as a global pandemic. And, at a personal level, as former students, colleagues, and contemporaries of his, Marchington's perspective has deeply influenced our own thinking on voice. Here, we will reflect on Marchington's contingencies perspective and examine its application to the COVID-19 health crisis currently unfolding.

## 2 | MANAGERIAL-DRIVEN VOICE STRUCTURES

For most of the twentieth century in Britain, most industrial relations scholars saw employee voice as synonymous with trade unions and collective bargaining. However after 1979, the election of the Conservative Thatcher government marked an end to the earlier 'social democratic consensus' and promoted a deregulatory neoliberal agenda. State support for union representation was removed and legislation enacted to constrict union activity. At the same time, structural changes in the economy, globalisation, the intensification of competitive pressures, as well as a new management mantra of HRM, all presented serious challenges to union activity. Trade unions, previously the default mechanism for employee voice in many British organisations, have declined on almost every measure of power and influence ever since (Johnstone & Dobbins, 2021).

However, while union decline has significantly altered the employee voice landscape in Britain, with union representation now very much a minority activity in the private sector, it does not necessarily mean workers have completely lost their voice. In the 1980s, many employers began introducing their own in-house participation measures, though these were viewed with suspicion by most industrial relations specialists who believed that at best they could be only a poor substitute for independent voice, and at worst a mechanism to avoid unions and reinforce managerial control (Bacon & Storey, 1993; Beaumont, 1991). Marchington, however, remained open-minded and took the opportunity to conduct an empirical investigation, rather than dismissing the new practices tout court. He led two influential studies, which empirically assessed developments from across the British economy. These studies would have a lasting influence on both Marchington's own perspectives on voice, and also that of his colleagues and students. The first, entitled *New Developments in Employee Involvement*, was funded by the Employment Department, and comprised a team including John Goodman, Adrian Wilkinson and Peter Ackers (Marchington et al., 1992). Fieldwork was conducted during the period 1989–1991, following a decade of Thatcherite reform, and the project provided a snapshot of changing participation practices across the UK economy, drawing upon 25 detailed case studies. A later study conducted for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development during Tony Blair's New

Labour government, entitled Management Choice and Employee Voice, was conducted in 2001, and comprised 18 case studies including revisiting seven from the earlier study (Marchington et al., 2001).

The projects made several important contributions. First, the studies confirmed that, in contrast to union voice, which is representative in nature and aims to advance worker interests and share power, management-initiated voice mechanisms were normally direct and primarily introduced by employers to enhance employee contribution and organisational performance. Though the specific rationale varied, typical reasons included improving communication, being a good employer, following best practice, and improving employee commitment and satisfaction. For this reason, the research made an important conceptual distinction between the emerging employer-sponsored employee involvement and participation (EIP) schemes, and traditional union representation and collective bargaining.

Second, the studies offered a way to deconstruct the different dimensions of EIP, including the *degree* of involvement through an 'escalator of participation' progressing from information provision to joint employee control, the *level* at which participation takes place, and the *range* of subject matter dealt with by the scheme. Third, the projects classified the different *forms* of EIP initiatives uncovered, including downward communication, such as company newspapers aimed at informing and educating employees, and upward problem solving concerned with capturing employee ideas and suggestions through quality circles and suggestion schemes. Most of the case organisations also offered some form of financial involvement, either in the form of profit sharing, employee share ownership, or group incentive schemes linked to the performance of the unit.

Finally, the majority of the case organisations retained some form of representative voice, usually but not always including trade union recognition and collective bargaining. Together, downward problem solving, upward communications, financial involvement, and representation—but not collective bargaining—were believed to comprise the key tenets of the emerging, so-called, employee involvement mix.

One significant contribution of both studies, and indeed a hallmark of Marchington's scholarship, is a focus on improving understanding and theorising of managerial behaviour and strategy around HR decisions generally and employee voice specifically. His methodological approach in both the above projects favoured rich, in-depth case studies at the company level which allowed insight into the messy realities of organisational life and politics of decision making. This sensitivity to local contextual contingencies and interest in issues of process, implementation and policy, likely explains the nuanced analyses and rejection of simple explanations of cause and effect that would comprise much of Marchington's perspective that would develop over time, as well as the perspectives of those who followed him.

For example, Marchington rejected labour process accounts, such as Harvie Ramsay's 'cycles of control' thesis (Ramsay, 1977), which viewed participation largely as a matter of managerial control, with management offering employees some influence when they perceive their own power to be under threat. Yet as Marchington was able to demonstrate from his many empirical EIP cases, the various managerial initiatives since the 1980s had been introduced at a time of diminished labour power when Ramsay's thesis would have anticipated the opposite. Marchington was wary of deterministic, 'one-size-fits-all' perspectives, and viewed power dynamics as just one potential explanation of why management can wax and wane over time. An alternative 'waves' thesis was therefore proposed, which suggested that in addition to labour power, other local contingencies are highly relevant, including product markets, isomorphic forces and management philosophy, which can all help explain the trajectory of EIP over time, as well as the diversity and unevenness of organisational practices (Marchington et al., 1992, 1993).

Though acknowledging the influence of external context, Marchington was also influenced by notions of strategic choice (Kochan et al., 1986) in explaining why, as he had discovered, similar organisations facing similar pressures can sometimes take quite different paths. His studies stressed a degree of management choice, with senior leaders often setting the tone regarding workplace EIP, while HR managers would usually be responsible for designing the precise employee involvement mix. Marchington also observed the role of management champions in creating and sustaining enthusiasm for voice initiatives, and the importance of day-to-day implementation by line managers. Related concerns regarding the complex interaction between internal and external factors as well as the role of local

actors in shaping the trajectory of organisational EIP over time has also subsequently been developed by authors including Johnstone and Wilkinson (2016, 2018).

Marchington was therefore wary of unitarist assumptions that management is a unified entity with an explicit or rational plan, and his studies revealed how managers from different functions or levels in the hierarchy can have quite different views and that managerial decision making is often contested. Moreover, while managers might draw upon their previous experience or personal beliefs in deciding the best approach to take, his studies also revealed how policies and practices might sometimes be devised for more individually-oriented instrumental reasons, such as impression management and personal career advancement.

As such, he also questioned radical assumptions that employers and managers are primarily concerned within maximising control over labour. For Marchington, managerial interest in voice practices ebbs and flows not just because of changing power dynamics (Ramsay, 1977) but also internal managerial relations and especially the shifting priorities and turnover of senior and middle management. Line managers were also believed to be crucial to the successful implementation of practices, and it was argued that practices often falter as a result of a lack of commitment or training of line managers, as well as competing priorities and insecurity about their own role (Marchington et al., 1992, 1993).

### 3 | INFORMAL AND EMBEDDED VOICE

Though much of his work focussed on the role of formal voice processes—union and non-union—Marchington was aware of the limitations of studying formal voice. Consequently, the importance of informal interactions was always acknowledged, especially in smaller and newer organisations with fewer formal voice mechanisms (Marchington et al., 1992, 2001). As his studies also revealed, the practices espoused by organisations or the labels used can offer little insight into their operation, significance, or impact. This was confirmed in his numerous organisational case studies which revealed that irrespective of the formal EIP practices espoused, they may be incorrectly labelled, seldom used, or not implemented as intended. In smaller organisations there might be fewer formal practices, and where they exist they might be implemented in a more informal way. This makes it difficult to ascertain which practice is best and casts doubt on a simple view that more practices are automatically superior.

This interest in informality was developed in more detail later in his career, notably in a study with his former doctoral student Jane Suter on informal voice in a non-union hospitality setting (Marchington & Suter, 2013). Though the importance of supervisor/employee interactions has long attracted attention in organisational behaviour—and is central to debates about, for example, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and organisational citizenship behaviours—this theme has attracted only limited attention in the industrial relations literature. Marchington and Suter (2013) confirmed the mutual benefits of positive day-to-day interactions and exchanges, their role in allowing the exchange of ideas and different points of view, and the opportunity to resolve concrete and immediate issues at the point of service or production. The ability to raise issues informally may be preferred by certain groups or in relation to specific issues. Nevertheless, the potential limitations were also acknowledged, including the possibly limited impact on underlying power dynamics and the reliance on management commitment and goodwill. As a result, the utility of informal voice could be easily disrupted due to managerial turnover. It might also be difficult to resolve more controversial and contested issues through informal means. Reliance on informal interactions and decision making could also lead to issues of inconsistent messaging and application, as well as perceptions of unfair or unfavourable treatment. A lack of a formal audit trail could also be problematic from a legal perspective (Marchington & Suter, 2013). Given these limitations, Marchington viewed informal voice as potentially highly complementary to formal mechanisms, but retained a strong commitment to formal mechanisms, and especially to independent union representation which he saw as central to fair and sustainable voice at work. Mirroring his perspective on formal voice, for Marchington there was no one best way when it came to informal voice, and he believed that a combination of different mechanisms and channels was likely preferable (Marchington & Dundon, 2017).

Recognizing that voice can be informal as well as formal, and also that actual practices are more important than labels, nicely come together in Marchington and colleagues' creation of the construct of the institutional embeddedness of involvement and participation (Cox et al., 2006, 2009). Drawing on Granovetter's (1985) theorising on the social influences on economic behaviour because economic activity is embedded within complex social structures, and adapting Van Emmerik and Sanders' (2004) application within the HR context, Marchington argues that EIP should be conceptualised and measured by how embedded EIP practices are within the organisation. To advance this thinking, two key constructs are created: the breadth of EIP (capturing the number of different practices used in a workplace) and the depth of EIP (capturing the quality and frequency of EIP practices). An organisation that infrequently uses a single form of EIP is one in which EIP is not strongly embedded, compared to an organisation that frequently uses multiple forms. Importantly, the degree of institutional embeddedness of EIP as conceptualised through these two dimensions provides a rich way to consider the realities of EIP in an organisation, and a better way to measure it.

Marchington implements this innovative measure of EIP in the UK Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) using both the 1998 (Cox et al., 2006) and 2004 (Cox et al., 2009) waves. Moreover, these authors argue that for this to be a meaningful approach to studying EIP, variation in the breadth and depth of EIP needs to affect employee perceptions. This proposition is largely supported in the WERS98 and WERS 2004 (Cox et al., 2006, 2009)—but not uniformly—which further reinforces the Marchington approach of allowing for diverse influences and outcomes rather than searching for over-simplified generalities. It also demonstrates how—though perhaps best known for comparative organisation level case studies—Marchington was also pragmatic in his methodological approach.

#### 4 | THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT

In keeping with his rejection of narrow, 'one-size-fits-all' explanations for workplace issues, Marchington's work consistently recognised and legitimised the role of context and external environmental influences on work-related behaviours and outcomes. This is true throughout his work on the importance of managers and the need to account for formal and informal voice structures with varying levels of institutional embeddedness within organisations. Recognition of the role of external context is also highlighted explicitly in Marchington's work on the relationship between economic crisis and EIP schemes. For example, Marchington and former doctoral student Anastasia Kynighou examined a particular crisis—the global financial crisis (GFC) of the late-2000s—to see whether and how EIP relationships were affected as a result of the upheaval (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012).

This contribution is particularly insightful as an extension of Marchington's pluralistic viewpoints. Rather than insisting that EIP would be completely marginalised as a result of the GFC (as might be argued from a perspective focussed entirely on power dynamics between workers and managers), or that EIP would persist unhampered in any way by crisis (as might be argued from a purely unitarist HR perspective), Marchington gives thoughtful and fair consideration to several competing perspectives on the matter. And again in typical Marchington fashion, although the GFC might be considered a unique and narrow event, he draws upon generalised crisis response typologies in his reasoning regarding the likely effects of the global economic shock on EIP. In short, he considers three possible theories (cycles/waves; business models; and internal HR architecture) to explain expected organisational EIP responses to crises. He finds that during a crisis like the GFC, EIP arrangements are more likely to conform to the purported 'waves' thesis rather than the more radical 'cycles' thesis espoused by Ramsay (1977) and others.

Yet rather than being satisfied with a single explanation for the effects of a crisis on EIP, he also gives strong consideration to variation in firms' business models, finding that cost-reducing organisations are likely to reduce or eliminate EIP during a crisis, while differentiators should sometimes (though not always) maintain EIP for competitive advantage. Finally, again demonstrating his rejection of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to research, Marchington looks within (rather than across) firms to examine how intra-organisational dynamics might shape EIP responses to crises. He finds that the resource-based view of the firm would anticipate that core groups of employees should continue

to receive direct EIP from organisations, while direct EIP is likely to be especially reduced for external workers like outsourced employees. And finally, Marchington is keenly aware of the role that the institutional environment plays in shaping contextual responses to EIP in times of crisis. He finds that variations in EIP-oriented responses to the GFC depend deeply on political economies, where liberal market economies (LMEs) provide firms with a greater range of options for shifting EIP platforms during a crisis, while coordinated market economies are more restrictive on firm behaviour.

This final point leads us to highlight a second external influence on EIP (in addition to the GFC) that forms a key theme in Marchington's work, which is the different effects that national institutional structures and forces have on shaping organisations' EIP practices. Marchington (2015) developed core arguments regarding the role of national institutions in shaping EIP patterns in Anglo-American countries. Here, Marchington again steers clear of a singular perspective, instead choosing to compare the influence of 'hard' institutional forces (like legislative environments or national business systems) against 'soft' forces (like government-funded initiatives or semi-autonomous government activities) on EIP. In keeping with pluralistic traditions, one of Marchington's key arguments within this paper is that most scholarship on EIP focuses on more micro-level participants without giving enough consideration to macro-level or institutional contexts that is highlighted in industrial relations scholarship. Similar concerns regarding the increasingly insular and narrow lens through which workplace practices and behaviours are being examined without consideration of institutional contexts would be later raised by authors like Budd (2020), and the enduring importance of Marchington's concern with external determinants of HRM is further reflected in the special issue on situating HRM in the political economy that recently appeared in this journal (Vincent et al., 2020; also see Martinez Lucio & MacKenzie, 2022).

To examine how institutions shape EIP, Marchington (2015) looks at four Anglo-American countries (UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand), and he uses interviews with several groups (government agencies, unions, and HR managers) to determine that 'soft' forces are generally more likely to shape EIP than 'hard' forces. Marchington argues that this is primarily a result of 'soft' forces being more voluntary in nature, which gives employers flexibility in how to implement them depending on the national business system within a country. However, Marchington also points out that 'soft' forces are inherently fragile since they rely on voluntarism and can be affected by situational shifts such as a change in government or new priorities for the parties involved in the 'soft' EIP institutions.

Marchington also returns to these themes in considering how external environments shape conceptualisations of fair voice. Marchington and Dundon (2017)'s key elements that characterise fair voice include the degree of voice (i.e., the extent to which employees have genuine input into work matters), the level of voice (i.e., whether input is far removed from day-to-day employee concerns), the scope of voice (i.e., the range of issues on which workers and their representatives are involved), and the form of voice (i.e., whether voice is representative, direct, or informal in nature). Returning to the above typology of different institutional forces, he argues that 'hard' and 'soft' forces affect forms of voice in particular. In LMEs especially, 'hard' forces like labour laws may struggle to effectuate fair voice if the form it takes is direct or informal, since these forms are not commonly included in legislative acts; but these forces may result in fairer representative voice depending on the degree of take-up and the processes accompanying that take-up. Marchington also notes that 'soft' forces are subject to similar concerns regarding fair voice to those posited earlier, which are that these forces may work well as long as all parties buy into their value, but may be fragile and subject to longevity concerns. Finally, he holds that 'intermediary' forces, like employers' organisations and professional associations interested in voice, can affect fair voice. This is particularly true when it comes to direct and informal voice in LMEs, though Marchington maintains that in this case as well, the extent to which intermediary forces shape fair voice is unstable since they are not enshrined in law but rather rely on flexible business systems and neoliberal political ideologies.

## 5 | APPLYING THE MARCHINGTON FRAMEWORK TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The contributions of Marchington's scholarship on voice and EIP are apparent in the insights directly generated, but the richness of this scholarship is powerfully revealed by its enduring usefulness. Specifically, this scholarship provides a framework for us to understand new pressures on voice and EIP. We consider a key concern currently facing workers: the relationship between EIP and the ongoing COVID crisis. We believe this is a particularly interesting avenue down which we can apply our interpretation of Marchington's perspective since the COVID crisis is the most similar globally turbulent event to the GFC, yet it also brings with it several unique workplace challenges that may be helpfully resolved by borrowing from Marchington's perspectives. It is a testament to Marchington's nuanced, multi-level theorising that the lessons from Marchington's perspective on voice apply so insightfully to this new, yet likely enduring, climate of uncertainty.

On one hand, the root origins of the GFC and COVID crises were different, which may contribute to a set of unique firm responses during each (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). On the other hand, the GFC and the COVID pandemic share some commonalities in that both have involved deep economic uncertainties that needed to be balanced against employee well-being. And, like the GFC, the COVID pandemic resulted in various short-term and long-term employer strategic choices that affected voice practices both broadly (e.g., at the national level) and narrowly (e.g., within single firms). We argue that Marchington's theory that EIP during times of turbulence will be affected differently according to waves, business models, and HR architecture concepts can usefully explain the variations we saw in voice responses to COVID, both broadly and narrowly.

Grounded in the importance of managerial influence on EIP, recall that Marchington's waves thesis operates in contrast to the more radical 'cycles' theory. The 'cycles' theory predicts a uniform trajectory of EIP as organisations react in unison to the shock of the pandemic. The first stage occurs during the early months of the pandemic (2020–2021) when the dominant firm response would be to restrict EIP unilaterally given a lack of worker power as a result of high unemployment and general labour market uncertainty. But as the pandemic progressed, shifts in worker voice expectations are predicted to result in a dominant trajectory of an expansion of EIP as firms acquiesce to worker preferences in the face of increased worker activism and power. Putting these stages together yields a predicted cycle as EIP broadly contracts and expands in ways that follow broad shifts in employer and employee power.

In contrast, Marchington's 'waves' theory allows us to explain uneven firm responses to COVID, some of which might be more EIP-favouring than others. That is, firms are not predicted to necessarily respond to the early crisis points of the pandemic by curtailing voice nor would they consistently respond to shifts in worker voice preferences as the pandemic wore on by improving participation arrangements. And, crucially, employers would be expected to behave in non-uniform ways, determined by how external factors are filtered through the internal dynamics of the organisation and the specific unique decision-making processes of leaders and line managers. Moreover, Marchington's research on informal voice reminds us that we should expect to see these dynamics resulting in varying trajectories of both formal and informal mechanisms.

Starting at the broadest level of analysis, Marchington's 'waves' thesis serves as a helpful lens for explaining firm behaviour toward voice at the macro institutional level. When the GFC hit in the late-2000s, firms in many countries opted out of 'social partnership' or tripartite social dialogue policies in many liberal market economies like Ireland (Teague & Donaghey, 2015). Following from the 'cycles' thesis, it might therefore be logical to expect that, at the onset of the COVID crisis, we would see firms operate similarly by rejecting social partnership, dialogue, and tripartite decision-making in unison. However, evidence suggests that since the COVID crisis hit, social partnership and social dialogue has in fact frequently *increased* rather than decreased, and has done so in a meaningful and constructive way in many countries (Brandl [forthcoming](#)). The fact that there was not consistent uniform rejection of tripartite decision-making on work issues at the macro level after COVID hit (which would have mirrored the common macro response to the GFC), and that the intensity of the cooperation between groups varied across countries (while being generally positive in most instances) can be helpfully explained by Marchington. His perspective on voice holds that employer groups can broadly change the degree to which they prioritise EIP schemes depending on time, context,

and the external and internal characteristics of the companies themselves. That firms' EIP responses at a macro level appear quite different during the pandemic than during the GFC reinforces the Marchington approach that details matter. Indeed, that the EIP responses at a macro level appear different could be taken as an indication that the nature of the GFC and COVID pandemic are distinctive crises, and again a waves approach pushes us to think more specifically about nuanced differences.

That is, the Marchington's waves' thesis calls for anticipating variation in specific employer responses throughout the pandemic. Starting first with collective, unionised voice, this framework helps us to make sense of the between-firm differences that emerged in aspects of EIP during COVID. At some unionised companies, early in the pandemic rather than simply imposing new policies on workers under the guise of "management rights," employers elected instead to bargain with unions to add addenda to collective bargaining agreements that would improve workplace health and safety (McNicholas et al., 2020). In our view, the act of consulting with unions rather than simply imposing rules on workers is a foundational element of EIP and Marchington's framework maps nicely onto this behaviour when the 'cycles' theory might have anticipated a different set of firm behaviours. Yet as the pandemic wore on, we saw some firms engage in EIP-disfavouring policies at the collective level. For instance, in what became known as "Striketober" (due its occurrence in October 2021), 18 months into the COVID pandemic, many workers reacted to deep voice inequities by striking. At these companies, unionised workers felt that they had made significant sacrifices in the early days of COVID only for their employers to engage in several collective voice-disfavouring behaviours in response (Kerrissey & Stepan-Norris, 2021). In explaining these complexities, Marchington's approach to voice would point toward how the relationships between companies and their unions may have changed in nuanced ways over the 18 month timeframe, based on both changes to the external environment as well as shifts in managerial strategies and decision-making among key actors.

Turning next to individual employee (direct) voice, Marchington's expectation of unevenness and complexity in voice responses again nicely helps explain the behaviours we saw during the COVID crisis, even within the same industries or firms over time. On one hand, in the immediate aftermath of mobility restrictions to curb the spread of COVID in early-2020, a diverse array of companies offered many workers the choice to work remotely, to modify their work schedules, and to relax any formal attendance policies based on direct consultation. In the tech industry, for instance, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced in May 2020 that his company's employees could choose to work from home "forever" if they wished, while also giving workers that preferred to return to the office the opportunity to do so. Being able to work from home can be considered acts of individual employee autonomy and self-determination, which we view as core facets of voice and participation. So from our perspective, these actions conform to a set of positive EIP actions in response to the pandemic.

But also, as the pandemic progressed, significant numbers of individual employees began expressing deep dissatisfaction with their employers. At several companies, working conditions arguably worsened as a result of firm-level choices made during the pandemic, and large swaths of employees chose to exit *en masse*, in what became known as the "great resignation" of 2021–2022. Turning again to firm behaviours over time in the tech industry, in contrast to Twitter's positive EIP response, ostensibly similar companies like Facebook and Google allowed employees to work remotely for an indefinite amount of time if they chose but punished that choice by imposing a pay cut on these workers up to 25%. And, in 2021, tech giant Apple reversed an earlier EIP-favouring policy and planned to require employees to return to their offices three days a week without any employee consultation. The withdrawal of EIP led employees to petition, resign, and speak out publicly in criticism of the company's policy. While puzzling through the lenses of theories that predict more homogenous voice responses, this variation can be usefully explained by Marchington's theorising. Specifically, using Marchington's scholarship as our lens, we can predict that the uneven, episodic nature of individual-level employer EIP responses are a result of specific strategic choices made by line managers and upper managers at various time points, even among firms that face the same external shocks. To elaborate on this, we show how Marchington's theorising is borne out by Lamare et al.'s (2021) empirical research into employer responses to COVID.



Lamare et al. (2021) examined data provided by a non-profit organisation (Just Capital) on the 301 largest US firms' responses to COVID from March 25 to June 29 2020. Using factor analysis, they found that specific companies bifurcated their responses into market-oriented and people-oriented practices. Market-oriented responses include things like closing stores or suspending services, pay cuts, or forcing furloughs and unpaid leave on employees, all of which correlate with approaches that are effectively EIP-disfavouring. People-oriented responses include actions like adjusting hours, customer accommodations, offering financial assistance to workers, providing health and safety options to employees, and giving both paid and unpaid sick leave options, all of which correlate with EIP-favouring approaches. These findings are consistent with Marchington's general voice perspective, which would have predicted empirical variation in voice responses between these firms.

Marchington's perspective also usefully helps anticipate a second empirical finding by Lamare et al. (2021), which revealed that various factors predicted which firms would engage in people-oriented (EIP-favouring) responses and which would engage in market-oriented (EIP-disfavouring) actions. As Marchington would likely have anticipated, complex combinations of factors predicted the two responses. For instance, statewide stay-at-home orders and COVID caseloads (both of which are external, environmental elements) predicted EIP-disfavouring responses. But also, firms that could strategically classify themselves as being 'essential' to the economy were more likely to engage in EIP-favouring responses than were either those face-to-face businesses that could not transition to remote work, or companies that were non-essential but could move to remote employment. Ultimately, we believe Marchington would ascribe the fact that similarly situated companies approached EIP in an empirically different way when it came to work strategies at various points during COVID pandemic at least somewhat to variations in internal firm choices, based on the firm's culture and history as well as the behaviours of its senior and middle managers, as well as external market environments, pressures, and geopolitical circumstances. The advantage of Marchington's approach to voice is that it both allows for and usefully helps to explain all of these empirical nuances and complexities.

And finally, at the same time, Marchington's work also tells us to be cautious about drawing strong conclusions based on examples found within one specific industry, firm, or academic study. We should especially be wary of relying exclusively on data provided from firms' public pronouncements or formal initiatives. To really understand whether EIP has changed during the pandemic, we need to take into account the depth and breadth of formal and informal practices, which Marchington would predict also varies within firms due to the importance of individual managers for how EIP is implemented in practice. Careful studies are needed to explore this within-firm differences, and Marchington's research provides a very useful guide for undertaking these analyses.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Mick Marchington's scholarship on voice, participation, and involvement is uniquely powerful through its embrace of complex, multi-layered approaches over simplistic ones. His empirical work often involved comparative organisational case studies and stressed the interaction of internal and external context in explaining the diversity of organisational actions and experiences, as well as why similar organisations can behave differently. Marchington was clearly located in the pluralist camp of British industrial relations, retaining a commitment to the value of independent union voice, while also viewing alternative forms of voice as potentially complementary. However, he rejected macro level explanations of political economy as too simplistic and deterministic, and instead saw scope for management choice and agency over decisions at the organisational level. However, unlike unitarist analyses which often assume management is a unified and omnipotent entity with the potential to effect change as desired, his work emphasised the constraints that limit management choice, as well as the contested and highly political nature of managerial decision making. In short, managerial behaviour was believed to be an important explanation of how and why organisations might adopt and adapt specific voice practices, but also that this behaviour transpires in the context of a wider constellation of internal and external forces which influence and shape organisational decisions and practices, which then have important impacts on varied stakeholders.

This rich approach to studying voice, participation, and involvement runs counter to the individualistic and shareholder-oriented focus of the Michigan model that often dominates HRM scholarship (Fombrun et al., 1984). Instead, Marchington's theorising is more aligned with the Harvard model that takes a somewhat broader social systems approach (Beer et al., 1984). This is notable because it's this latter approach which is being heralded as the better way forward to understanding the complexities of HRM in a turbulent world fraught with big societal problems (Beer et al., 2015; Gooderham et al., 2019). Though by some accounts, the Michigan-Harvard differences are of a minor order as both can be critiqued for prioritising the internal context over the external, universal explanations over contingent ones, and organisational goals over workers' interests (Kaufman, 2015). The same is clearly not true for Marchington's scholarship, which makes it particularly noteworthy and important, and puts it at a leading edge of more recent calls for greater contextualization of HRM research (Cooke, 2018).

In developing his nuanced approach to theorising voice, Marchington first imbued union stewards (e.g., Marchington & Armstrong, 1981) and then managers (e.g., Marchington et al., 1993) with agency, and placed them in complex environments with myriad influences. This provides a rich framework for continuing to deepen our understanding of voice, participation, and involvement as managers and their organisations as well as workers' and their representatives are confronted with new social, economic, and political challenges. And notably, Marchington's inclusive style encouraged his students and colleagues to embrace his work and use it to establish their own scholarly approaches. Marchington's influence and contribution to HRM also extends far beyond his personal research. For instance, he's a lead author of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) core textbook *Human Resource Management at Work at Work* now in its seventh edition (Marchington et al., 2021), and was a long-time advisor to CIPD on professional standards and qualifications.

We can carry on Marchington's legacy by building on his scholarship and adapting it to shifts in the world of work and new theorising, just as Marchington would have done. For example, worker agency has not received the same level of treatment as the agency of stewards and managers. And, as we have demonstrated in this paper via the COVID pandemic, new crises that confront societies are fertile areas into which we can apply Marchington's perspectives. Indeed, it is important to highlight that responses to the health crisis that is currently unfolding is by no means the only turbulent event that can be usefully examined using Marchington's framework for voice. For instance, another significant change in the environment in recent years has been a sharp increase in political polarization (Cumming et al., 2020). It is a testament to the scope of Marchington's scholarship that we are confident his perspective provides a natural framework for thinking about how we could theorise and investigate the consequences of something as ostensibly far afield as polarization for EIP in future research. In so doing, we would emphasise the importance of managerial agency, organisational diversity, and waves rather than cycles and anticipating varied rather than homogeneous causes and solutions to the polarization crisis. Marchington's perspective would also suggest that a careful approach to modelling this organisational diversity would need to theorise how something like polarization might affect the preferences of organisational leaders as well as line managers. And empirically, we'd again need to carefully look at the actual operation of formal and informal practices rather than relying on labels.

There is now also an increasing appreciation of the diversity of modern workers and employment arrangements, and the potential implications for voice preferences and opportunities. More fully developing these aspects would not only further enhance the theoretical power of the framework Marchington left for us, but would also be a fitting testament to Marchington's commitment to the dignity and well-being of workers, as well as his refusal to accept a simple, deterministic, one-size-fits-all solutions to deeply complex problems confronting workers and societies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the editors for giving us this opportunity to honor Mick Marchington. As a former MSc student, Stewart remembers Mick as a very popular and committed educator who inspired his interest in employee voice, as well as opportunities for doctoral study and an academic career. As his former colleague, Ryan found Mick to be incredibly welcoming and supportive toward junior academics. He is forever indebted to Mick for the guidance and friendship he provided early in Ryan's academic career.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Funding was not provided for this project and there are no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No primary data were used for this article. Secondary sources are all available.

## ORCID

John W. Budd  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3971-7327>

Stewart Johnstone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7181-4795>

J. Ryan Lamare  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4935-2341>

## REFERENCES

- Bacon, N., & Storey, J. (1993). Individualization of the employment relationship and the implications for trade unions. *Employee Relations*, 15(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425459310024893>
- Beaumont, P. B. (1991). Trade unions and HRM. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 22(4), 300–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.1991.tb00646.x>
- Beer, M., Boselie, P., & Brewster, C. (2015). Back to the future: Implications for the field of HRM of the multistakeholder perspective proposed 30 years ago. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 54(3), 427–438. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21726>
- Beer, M., Spector, B., Lawrence, P., Mills, D. Q., & Walton, R. (1984). *Managing human assets*. Free Press.
- Brandl, B. (Forthcoming). *The cooperation between business organizations, trade unions, and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparative analysis of the nature of the tripartite relationship*. *Industrial Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12300>
- Budd, J. W. (2020). The psychologisation of employment relations, alternative models of the employment relationship, and the OB turn. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(1), 73–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12274>
- Cooke, F. L. (2018). Concepts, contexts, and mindsets: Putting human resource management research in perspectives. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12163>
- Cox, A., Marchington, M., & Suter, J. (2009). Employee involvement and participation: Developing the concept of institutional embeddedness using WERS2004. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(10), 2150–2168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190903178104>
- Cox, A., Zagelmeyer, S., & Marchington, M. (2006). Embedding employee involvement and participation at work. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 16(3), 250–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2006.00017.x>
- Cumming, D. J., Wood, G., & Zahra, S. A. (2020). Human resource management practices in the context of rising right-wing populism. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(4), 525–536. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12269>
- Fombrun, C., Tichy, N., & Devanna, M. (1984). *Strategic human resource management*. Wiley.
- Gooderham, P. N., Mayrhofer, W., & Brewster, C. (2019). A framework for comparative institutional research on HRM. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(1), 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1521462>
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), 481–510. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228311>
- Johnstone, S., & Dobbins, T. (2021). Employment relations in the United Kingdom. In G. Bamber, F. Cooke, V. Doellgast, & C. Wright (Eds.), *International and comparative employment relations: Global crises and institutional responses* (pp. 29–55). SAGE.
- Johnstone, S., & Wilkinson, A. (2016). *Developing positive employment relations: International experiences of labour management partnership*. Palgrave.
- Johnstone, S., & Wilkinson, A. (2018). The potential of labour–Management partnership: A longitudinal case analysis. *British Journal of Management*, 29(3), 554–570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12240>
- Kaufman, B. E. (2015). Evolution of strategic HRM as seen through two founding books: A 30th anniversary perspective on development of the field. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 54(3), 389–407. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21720>
- Kerrissey, J., & Stepan-Norris, J. (2021). U.S. workers have been striking in startling numbers. Will that continue? *New York Times*, November 11.
- Kochan, T., Katz, H., & McKersie, R. (1986). *The transformation of American industrial relations*. Basic Books.
- Lamare, J. R., Riordan, C., & Chen, L. (2021). *People or markets? An empirical examination of responses to the COVID-19 crisis among large US firms*. Working paper.
- Marchington, M. (2015). The role of institutional and intermediary forces in shaping patterns of employee involvement and participation (EIP) in Anglo-American countries. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(20), 2594–2616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.1003088>

- Marchington, M., & Armstrong, R. (1981). Employee participation: Problems for the shop steward. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 12(1), 46–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.1981.tb00249.x>
- Marchington, M., & Dundon, T. (2017). The challenges for fair voice in liberal market economies. In D. Grimshaw, C. Fagan, G. Hebson, & I. Tavora (Eds.), *Making work more equal. A new segmentation approach* (pp. 90–107). Manchester University Press.
- Marchington, M., Goodman, J., Wilkinson, A., & Ackers, P. (1992). *New developments in employee involvement. Employment Department Research Paper Series No 2*. HMSO.
- Marchington, M., & Kynighou, A. (2012). The dynamics of employee involvement and participation during turbulent times. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23(16), 3336–3354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2012.689161>
- Marchington, M., & Suter, J. (2013). Where informality really matters: Patterns of employee involvement and participation (EIP) in a non-union firm. *Industrial Relations*, 52(s1), 284–313. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12004>
- Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A., Ackers, P., & Dundon, T. (2001). *Management choice and employee voice*. CIPD.
- Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A., Ackers, P., & Goodman, J. (1993). The influence of managerial relations on waves of employee involvement. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 31(4), 553–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8543.1993.tb00413.x>
- Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A., Donnelly, R., & Kynighou, A. (2021). *Human resource management at work: The definitive guide* (7th ed.). Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Martinez Lucio, M., & MacKenzie, R. (2022). *International human resource management: The transformation of work in a global context* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- McNicholas, C., Rhinehart, L., Poydock, M., Shierholz, H., & Perez, D. (2020). Why unions are good for workers—especially in a crisis like COVID-19. *Economic Policy Institute*, August 25.
- Ramsay, H. (1977). Cycles of control: Worker participation in sociological and historical perspective. *Sociology*, 11(3), 481–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003803857701100304>
- Sarkar, S., & Osiyevskyy, O. (2018). Organizational change and rigidity during crisis: A review of the paradox. *European Management Journal*, 36(1), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2017.03.007>
- Teague, P., & Donaghey, J. (2015). The life and death of Irish social partnership: Lessons for social pacts. *Business History*, 57(3), 418–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2014.983482>
- Van Emmerik, H., & Sanders, K. (2004). Social embeddedness and job performance of tenured and non-tenured professionals. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 14(1), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2004.tb00111.x>
- Vincent, S., Bamber, G. J., Delbridge, R., Doellgast, V., Grady, J., & Grugulis, I. (2020). Situating human resource management in the political economy: Multilevel theorising and opportunities for kaleidoscopic imagination. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(4), 461–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12328>

**How to cite this article:** Budd, J. W., Johnstone, S., & Lamare, J. R. (2022). Never 'one-size-fits-all': Mick Marchington's unique voice on voice, from micro-level informality to macro-level turbulence. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12451>