Workers' participation in continuing training decision-making

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Continuing training may be associated with a plurality of goals and values. For companies, it may be geared toward enhancing performance, increasing employees' motivation, generating commitment to the corporate culture (Fearfull, 1997; Felstead *et al.*, 2010); for workers, it can be a matter of professionalization, skill, career or personal development, wage increase, improvement of work conditions or work-life balance (Kim, 2005). These sometimes conflicting purposes draw attention to the competing values attached to continuing training in concrete corporate configurations as well as to the channels that allow people to express these values, make them count and transform them, or not, into valuable training achievements.

Most of the existing literature leaves this issue out of scope, focusing either on the employer's perspective or on the employee's. Further, the predominant focus of employee-oriented training studies on training opportunities and outputs, e.g. who gets training and what kind (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Albert *et al.*, 2010) leaves the processes that lead from opportunities to achievements under-investigated (Subramanian & Zimmermann, 2017). Despite the existence of two segments of literature dedicated, on the one hand, to the impact of industrial relations and the presence of trade unions on corporate vocational training (Cooney & Stuart, 2012; Dobbie *et al.*, 2017; Stuart & Huzzard, 2017; Waddoups, 2014), on the other hand, on the organizational strategies and practices related to employees' training (Ashton, 2004; Asplund, 2005; Grugulis, 2007; Neirotti & Paolucci, 2013; Percival *et al.*, 2013; Thang *et al.*, 2008; Tharenou *et al.*, 2007), the training decision-making processes and how employees' get involved in them, remains a black box.

This special issue fills this gap by addressing workers' voice from an individual and a collective angle, bringing together in one and the same contributions, employees' voice triggered by organizational devices and voice mediated through industrial relations and trade union activities. The concept of voice we use is based on Hirschmann's (1970) conceptualization. It asks whether or not employees have the possibility to have a say in training decision-making and raises the issue of the channels involved. Existing research has identified different voice mechanisms (Mowbray *et al.*, 2015, p. 390). Voice can be direct, fostered by HR procedures like individual interviews; or indirect, mediated through independent representative bodies like trade unions or through consultative committees organized by HR departments. It can be formal, e.g. through a workers' committee;or informal, e.g. through face to face communication

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or empowerment by the supervisor. In addition, as Barry and Wilkinson (2016) noted, conceptions of voice differ depending on disciplinary perspective. These authors contrast more specifically the framing of voice in the organization behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) literature with that in employment relations (ER) research. They argue that fundamentally OB and HRM use voice as a vehicle to assist management on their own terms, whilst ER notions of voice acknowledge the asymmetry of employment relationships. They contend that voice not only enables the challenging of management, but also serves as an important means of self determination. These notions are central to the investigations presented in this special issue. Bringing them together in the same vein of research leads to the consideration of employees' voice in training decision-making as the result of a process involving a variety of interacting factors. Exploring this processual character of employees' voice appears to be a crucial step for embracing its different determinants into an integrative framework. Such exploration requires a notion of a process that goes beyond HR procedures and process management in order to include more broadly the variety of actors, steps and issues involved in going from training offers and opportunities to achievements. It requires an understanding of processes as interactive social dynamics (Abbott, 2016).

The collection of articles gathered in this special issue covers a broad variety of voice channels; it explores the kind of voice employees get access to, how it operates, its role in expressing and realizing individuals' training goals, as well as the corporate features that have an impact upon it. It investigates how continuing training is enacted at the company level and the processes that govern training access, choice, implementation and outcomes. Such processes involve organizational communication tools and participation schemes as well as industrial relations arrangements and inter-individual relationships. The papers show that one voice mechanism alone, whether it be direct or indirect, formal or informal, is not a sufficient condition for employees having a say on training decision-making; they shed light on the multi-tiered character of the voice processes affecting employees' participation in training decision-making.

Three of the articles (Bryson's, Sigot &Vero's, Zimmermann's) look beyond the firm to question the role that national institutions may play in facilitating worker's voice. Together, the set of papers emphasizes that a complete picture of workers' participation in training decision-making requires attention to three different but interdependent perspectives: institutional, organizational and individual. According to this three-level scheme (Bryson, 2010; Wilkinson, 2018; Zimmermann, 2018), the institutional scale pertains to the regulatory frameworks defined from outside the firm, e.g. labor and training laws, industrial relations and vocational training arrangements. These frameworks shape organization training processes by stating how they should be, establishing responsibilities for funding of training provision and mechanisms for voice. The organizational scale is the location where training and voice practices actually take place according to specific corporate features and arrangements. Finally, the individual level relates to how people experience training and voice, how they interact with others in these matters and the effect this has on their professional pathways and projects. The meaning given to the institutional dimension is subject to variation from one paper to another depending on whether public policy institutions are integrated or left out of scope. In the latter case (Barry *et al.*'s, Wotschack's and Kambayashi's articles), institutions are associated with trade unions, as well as organizational devices like employee consultative committees or HR departments and processes.

The six contributions span perspectives from multiple countries with different institutional and cultural settings, including France, Germany, Japan, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Two of them adopt a comparative perspective: between Australia, United Kingdom, Canada and the United States for Barry, Gomez, Kaufman, Zhang & Wilkinson's, between France and Germany for Zimmermann's. Belonging to different disciplines, economics, sociology, organization and management studies, the authors use either quantitative or qualitative methods. They draw on a diverse range of theoretical frames. Sen's (1999) capability approach, Becker's (1964) human capital theory, Arrow's (1973) filter theory, Granovetter's (1985) concept of social embeddedness, institutionalist industrial relations perspectives

(Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Kaufman & Levine, 2000) and Fuller and Unwin's (2004) categorization of approaches to workforce development are variously used as lenses to examine worker participation in training decision-making.

The first paper by Barry, Gomez, Kaufman, Zhang and Wilkinson, using data from a cross-national survey of Australian, British, Canadian and American employees, shows that rather than individual characteristics as argued in human capital approaches, organizational features and institutions are the greater predictor of job-related training. They find that workplace voice mechanisms and the organizations' strategic choices are vital to shaping the adoption of training as well as employees' perceptions of having a meaningful say on it. They establish that the presence of a union and a human resource (HR) department are strong positive predictors of job-related training, but that most important appears to be a product market strategy oriented toward high quality and employee voice within workplace consultative committees. Their findings confirm the industrial relations features of voice as an important channel for employees' participation in training-decision making.

The paper of Kambayashi and Kato also examines union driven organizational institutions together with HR ones as channels that impact on employees' voice in training matters. While the former are legally based 'de jure' institutions, the latter are 'de facto' channels without any legal foundation. With a focus on the Japanese firm, they utilize Japanese government data sets, to analyze the impact of these different mechanisms of labor-management communication on the willingness of managers and employees to communicate about training. Their findings show that union-related communication channels like collective bargaining may crowd out the willingness or opportunity of managers and employees to discuss training, if they are not coupled with 'de facto' channels. Complementing their inquiry by an investigation of the wage structure in the companies under study, the authors speculate that in the Japanese case, union-related channels are dominated by the need to deal with short term demands of wages and working hours whilst training may be considered a longer-term issue which is discussed over 'de facto' channels. They conclude on the importance of bridging these different channels in a multi-tiered structure of labor-management communication for employees' voice-friendly training policies in Japanese companies.

The paper by Bryson sheds another light on the role of trade union collective voice in workers' access to training, taking New Zealand as a case in point. The author uses the lens of restrictive versus expansive approaches to workforce development (Fuller & Unwin, 2004), in order to evaluate training provisions in collective employment agreements. Restrictive approaches to workforce development do not recognize a need for training and learning or perceive it purely as a short-term employer concern. In contrast, expansive approaches encourage worker participation in training decision-making, facilitate broader personal development (not just firm-specific skills) in order to align individual and organizational goals and embed such arrangements in formal entitlements and structured opportunities. Bryson shows that, in the New Zealand case, collectively bargained entitlement to training in employment agreements frequently appears more restrictive in nature and thus entitlement does not equate to, nor guarantees, meaningful access to training decision-making. Follow-up interviews with trade unions highlighted structural challenges to access and participation in training decision-making including management philosophy, cost-driven company strategies, contracting practices. The author concludes that a culture supportive of more expansive workforce development requires clear institutional regulatory signals, infrastructure and mechanisms at the national, industry, organizational and community levels.

Wotschack's article also emphasizes the need for more binding regulatory signals and an orientation to training as a longer-term investment. This paper focuses on a vulnerable group of workers – those in low skilled jobs. Using survey data of German companies, it investigates the drivers of training participation by those in low skilled jobs. In the presence of voice mechanisms, labor shortages are shown to drive organizations to increase training for this group of workers, but technology and innovation do not act as a driver. The author argues that collective agreements can play an important role, yet their overall impact on training participation of this group is weak.

However, in combination, structural characteristics such as voice formalized through employee representation and formal HR practices link to higher levels of training of those in low skilled jobs.

The paper by Zimmermann pursues the exploration of the German case, while stretching the focus to the comparison of the institutional and organizational conditions which enable employees to express and achieve what they value in relation to lifelong education in France and Germany. Using the capability approach, she introduces a difference between a 'weak voice' that gives an employee the possibility to articulate her training needs and a 'strong voice' that allows an employee to be heard and influence her training. Comparing two subsidiaries of a multinational firm, while using a multi-level perspective integrating qualitative data that documents the institutional background, organizational practices and employees' individual experiences, the paper demonstrates that individual voice rests in France and Germany on two different models of responsibility-sharing between public bodies, corporations and individual workers. In Germany employees' voice is associated with self-determination and self-care as a consequence of the externalization of lifelong education outside the confines of the firm; the result is a weak training voice within the organization that requires personal or family resources in order to get converted into valuable training achievements. In France, as a consequence of the firm's legal responsibility in training matters established by national legislation, the workers' voice is closely shaped by organizational factors. Whether employees have a weak or strong voice depends at the end upon the organizational strategy, practices and actual involvement in lifelong training.

Following the same line of inquiry on French employees' training voice and capabilities, the paper by Sigot and Vero explores, beyond single organizations, the influence of subcontracting relationships. Using quantitative data from the French linked employer-employee survey of training and career paths (DEFIS), the authors discuss the correlation between cascading subcontracting and employees' participation in training and its' associated decision-making. They highlight inequalities in employee participation depending on the company's position in the production chain. Employees of subcontractors at the bottom of a chain fare the worst, with high levels of economic dependence leading to training being treated as a cost to be reduced. They conclude that to overcome this requires looking beyond the traditional employment relationship to consider inter-company relationships, in particular the negative effects stemming from a hierarchical subcontracting network in which the principal contractor has no responsibility for the plight of the subcontractor's employees.

In combination, these six papers underscore the importance of specific institutional, organizational and individual factors to the realization of meaningful worker participation in training decision making. At the institutional level clear regulatory signals, funding and structural arrangements are pivotal to guiding the actions and investment decisions of firms, employers, workers and other agents. Inter-firm relationships and contracting arrangements must also be considered. At the level of the organization training-friendly business strategy, formalized HR practices, mechanisms for individual and collective worker voice and union presence are all important. An all-encompassing culture of expansive workforce development is more than an entitlement to training, more than meeting short term employer goals. It requires shared responsibility, empowerment to be heard in order to accommodate individual values and goals, and a long-term organizational commitment to training. At the individual level, supportive managers and union representatives facilitate the effective voice and agency of workers. Employees' voice in training decision making depends on how these different factors interact.

As an extension of these empirical findings, this special issue opens avenues of research for future studies. First, given the recurring conflict between organizational profit-oriented horizons and employees' life course horizons, future research would benefit from a better integration of the issue of time horizons into empirical investigations. A second avenue calls for in-depth exploration not only of the voice mechanisms associated with the fact of being able or unable to participate in training, but of the

broader process that allows an employee to have a say in training decision-making about the kind of training she will get. Two further requirements of a methodological nature follow. The first one is a plea in favor of a multi-level approach to research so that a single study considers altogether institutional, organizational and individual dimensions, in order to better embrace the different factors that impact employees' participation. Such a multi-level perspective appears as a prerequisite for further developing the process-based approach outlined in this issue. Finally, mixed-methods combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, represent another promising avenue for a consistent process-based approach. Although no paper went along this road, a comprehensive analysis of data reaching from legal prescription and organizational strategies to situated practices and interactions, combined with a statistical analysis of recurrences, correlations and discriminating variables over a large sample, would provide the best chance for unraveling the various ties involved in training decision-making processes.

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