
“What Do Workers Want? Findings of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey.” Pp. 279-287 in Bruno Stein, ed., *Contemporary Issues in Labor and Employment Law*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).

CHAPTER 11

What Do Workers Want? Findings of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey

Joel Rogers

University of Wisconsin-Madison

- §11.1 Introduction
- §11.2 WRPS Purpose and Design
- §11.3 Three Big Questions and Their Status
- §11.4 Conclusion

§11.1 INTRODUCTION

The Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS) is a four-part study of employee attitudes toward such matters as current human resource or personnel practices, modes of representation and participation programs (from unions to “employee involvement” programs), existing workplace rights, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as applied to workplace disputes, and worker-based regulatory committees.

The work reported here has been jointly done with Richard Freeman of Harvard, NBER, and London School of Economics.

Rogers, Joel. “What Do Worker’s Want? Findings of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey,” in *Contemporary Issues in Labor and Employment Law*, Bruno Stein, ed. New York: Little, Brown and Company (1996): 279-287.

The four parts of the WRPS are:

1. Focus groups of employees, grouped by occupation, in various regions of the country. Six focus groups were conducted in February of 1995, two each in Charlotte, North Carolina; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and San Diego, California. The occupational strata covered were: (1) low-level service workers in small firms; (2) low-level service workers in large firms; (3) manufacturing workers; (4) clerical workers; (5) "knowledge" workers; and (6) middle managers.¹
2. A national telephone survey of 2408 employees, including nonsupervisory personnel and low- and mid-level managers, in private sector establishments of 25 or more employees. The target population from which this sample was drawn equals approximately 75 percent of all employed private sector workers, or about 70 million workers. The survey, which ran about a half-hour for each respondent, was conducted over the period September 15,-October 13, 1994.
3. Several questions on an omnibus survey, reaching an additional 1,100 workers. These were used to expand the reach of the initial telephone survey and to test the scales used in questioning there. This omnibus supplement was conducted in two waves in November 1994.
4. A follow-up survey of roughly 800 of the participants in the national telephone survey. The follow-up was designed to probe some responses on the national survey and to see how respondents assess additional information on workplace relations and policies. The follow-up was conducted over the period December 6, 1994-January 24, 1995.

Focus here is on part two of the survey.

¹A summary of the findings is available in Worker Representation and Participation Survey: Focus Group Report (April 1994).

§11.2 WRPS PURPOSE AND DESIGN

The purpose of the WRPS is to provide an in-depth survey of how American employees regard how employers treat them at their workplace and to assess employee attitudes toward current work organization and human resource practices, and toward different forms of workplace participation and representation.

Understanding what employees want is vital to fashioning effective labor policies in an era when new technologies and forms of work organization demand change from both workers and managers, and when national labor institutions are themselves changing. The characteristics of jobs and the demography of the workforce differ from what they were decades ago, when the United States established its labor relations system. Private sector unions are in decline. Many firms are experimenting with employee involvement programs. Government regulation of the workplace has dramatically increased without parallel capacities to monitor and enforce the new laws. If these sorts of changes motivate a reconsideration of our national labor policies, they also underscore the need to hear directly from American workers about how they think the current system is performing.

The Clinton administration's 1993 appointment of the Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations provided an impetus for the WRPS, but the WRPS is wholly independent of the Commission. Funding comes exclusively from private foundations. One of the investigators is on the Commission, but the WRPS does not reflect the views of the Commission. It is independent academic work.

All too often in the past, issues of workplace relations have been the subject of battles between management and unions. Efforts to reform the nation's labor relations system have taken place in a setting of confrontation among Washington power players. We hope this survey begins the process of bringing the voice of American employees to bear on issues of employment and labor law reform, in addition to the voices of union and management lobbyists.

Considerable effort was made to assure the authority of the WRPS, making it qualitatively different from the standard opinion poll. Extensive focus group testing preceded the design of the telephone survey. The sample size was roughly double the standard national opinion survey; for those questions also asked on the omnibus instrument, it was three times the usual size. The length of the survey (26 minutes) pressed the outer bounds of conventional telephone surveys. The wording of questions and the sequence in which they were asked were varied to minimize possible biases due to wording or question placement. The survey instrument was pre-tested several times among a large group of respondents, resulting in extensive changes in question wording and placement. Use of the omnibus survey questions permitted testing of scaling biases. The ongoing feedback and counsel of our business, labor, and outside survey research experts contributed to making the survey as balanced and accurate as possible. The follow-up survey, large enough to qualify as an independent national poll in its own right, permitted probing of initial responses. Some of the questions will be platformed by fact sheets, mailed to respondents in advance of the telephone interview, on different areas of concern; this permitted more thoughtful judgment by respondents than is the norm.

The result is the most detailed look at employee attitudes toward work and representation issues since the Quality of Working Life surveys conducted by the Michigan Survey Research Center two decades ago. Every year or so, national pollsters ask Americans about their attitudes toward unions and various workplace issues. Many firms survey their workforces regularly, as do some unions. Various other groups have also conducted surveys of workplace conditions and attitudes at various times. What distinguishes this survey from the others is its comprehensive focus on representation and participation issues; the extensive effort to test alternative wording and sequencing on responses; the use of a separate management module to get managerial perspectives on representation and participation issues; and the detailed probing of the different dimensions of employee attitudes.

§11.3 THREE BIG QUESTIONS AND THEIR ANSWERS

While the WRPS is designed to gather information on a wide range of issues in present employment relations, at its core it seeks answers to three big questions:

- Do employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than is currently provided?
- What do employees see as essential to attaining their desired level of participation and representation?
- What solutions do employees favor to resolve any gap between their desired participation/representation and what they currently have?

Answers to these questions, in turn, are framed by certain background findings.

1. Despite popular discussion about the end of long-term jobs and careers, the vast majority of employees are sufficiently tied and loyal to their firm to have reasons to want to participate in workplace decisions.
2. At the same time, many employees are concerned about the quality of labor-management relations at their firm or organization, and with their job situation, and are worried about their future and not confident they can trust management with it.

Do employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than is currently provided?

Yes, employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than they have. For all age, sex, race, occupation, education, and earnings groups, there is a *representation/participation gap* between what employees believe they can contribute at the workplace and what current work organizations allow them to do.

1. The vast majority of employees want more involvement and greater say in company decisions affecting their workplace. They believe increased influence will not only give them greater job satisfaction, but also improve the competitive performance of companies and the performance of existing human resource programs.
2. Most employees welcome the adoption of "employee involvement" (EI) programs² and other policies emphasizing employee "empowerment" and management accessibility to employee-voice. But they do not believe these programs have gone far enough to encourage worker participation, and they think their effectiveness would improve with more of it.
3. Similarly, employees welcome widespread adoption of modern human resource policies and techniques to deal with individual employee problems at work, but most view them as only somewhat effective and think the antidote is more employee influence in their operation.
4. As with systems for resolving *individual* problems, employees have similar views on systems designed to resolve *group* problems and concerns. There is evidence of wide diffusion of relatively modern human resource policies. But employees find them only somewhat effective and want more say in their administration and design.

What do employees see as essential to attaining their desired level of participation and representation?

Employees see *management acceptance and cooperation* as the key to the success of the employee organizations and workplace practices needed to close the representation/participation gap.

²In the text, we use the term as shorthand. In the survey, we asked about "things like self-directed work teams, total quality management, quality circle, or other employee involvement programs."

1. Employee sensitivity to the importance of management acceptance and cooperation is expressed in different ways.
2. At the same time, employees and managers alike note management reluctance to embrace the changes many employees think are needed. This has a general aspect and special applicability to employees wishing to form unions.

What solutions do employees favor to resolve any gap between their desired participation/representation and what they currently have?

This question is difficult to answer, requiring special care and multiple approaches. This question is difficult because we must ask respondents to assess potential new workplace arrangements which they have not directly experienced. Difficult, too, because of the importance of management in how arrangements work; employees' assessment will presumably depend in part on how they see possible management cooperation, or lack thereof, to new arrangements. And difficult because the wide diversity in employees and workplaces implies that the same nominal program or policy will have different connotations to different employees.

We therefore tried to get some notion of the attributes of the organizations or programs that employees would like in several ways. With regard to unionization, we asked how employees would vote in a union election today — a question that has been asked in several other surveys — to which we added a second question about whether they thought 50 percent or more of the workers at their workplace favored a union. With regard to workplace organizations in general, we asked employees to specify the attributes of an employee organization that deals with workplace problems "if it was your decision alone to make, and everybody went along with it."

We also asked employees which method they preferred to increase employees' say and make sure employees are treated

fairly at workplaces from the following three choices: laws,³ joint employee management committees to discuss problems, and employee organizations or unions to negotiate or bargain over issues. Finally, we asked managers similar questions to find the areas of agreement and disagreement with employees about ways to close the representation/participation gap.

From all of these different approaches, we believe an answer does emerge.

1. To deal with workplace issues and give employees greater say in enterprise decision-making, most employees want *cooperative joint committees with some independent standing* inside their companies and many want *unions or union-like organizations*.
2. Given a choice between "laws that protect the rights of individual employees," "joint employee and management committees that discuss problems," and "unions" or "employee organizations that negotiate or bargain with management over issues," and asked to choose which one they thought would most effectively "increase employees' say in the workplace and make sure they are treated fairly," the majority of employees prefer joint committees; unions or union-like organizations came in second place, with more legal protections third.
3. On closer evaluation, it becomes clear that workers want both cooperation and independent powers.
4. While many managers report willingness to work with an employee organization to solve workplace problems, most of them favor a form of workplace organization that differs in important respects from what employees seem to want.

³This question did not hit respondents unaware; it was preceded by a series of questions about current workplace rights and regulations. Results of this portion of the questionnaire will be reported after completion of our follow-up survey, which in part focuses on alternative means of resolving disputes about such rights.

§11.4 CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the WRPS shows that most American employees want more involvement and greater say in their jobs. Many — sometimes a clear majority, sometimes a large minority — also want some form of workplace organization or policy that provides them with *group* as well as individual voice. Employees want such organizations or policies so they can have *independent* input into workplace decisions. A sizeable minority wants union or union-like organizations; the majority, favoring joint consultative committees, wants to be able to select their representatives to such committees.

At the same time, virtually all employees — including union members and those interested in joining unions — strongly prefer *cooperative* relations with management to contractual ones and are acutely sensitive to the need for *management acceptance* of representation and participation organizations or policies if those are to work. There are areas of agreement between employees and managers about how to close America's representation and participation gap. But there are also differences between employees and managers about the best form of workplace organizations — differences about the appropriate division of power and authority within the firm.

Further probing from the follow-up survey confirms all of the above, while making clearer that for most employees, "cooperation" from management directly implies substantial employee *power* in decision-making. The follow-up also shows support for worker-led forms of regulation, most prominently, in occupational safety and health and willingness to experiment with alternative means of workplace dispute resolution, prominently, arbitration, provided they do not threaten existing workplace rights.