



# BroadVoice

Broadening the spectrum of employee voice in workplace innovation

## The European BroadVoice Project and the recognition of Workers' "Voice" through Direct Participation

### Italy – National Report

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#### Rationale and objectives of the project

Recognising the "voice of workers" is increasingly acknowledged as an important tool not only for improving organisational performance but also for enhancing workers' health and wellbeing. In recent decades, the growth of workplace practices such as self-organised teamwork and employee-driven innovation has had a positive impact on businesses and working lives.

The key concept is workplace innovation, adopted by the European Commission in 2012. It refers to a participatory process of organisational transformation that leads to greater worker autonomy, enhanced learning and development, and high levels of engagement in improvement and innovation. Workplace innovation has been shown to deliver significant and sustainable improvements in both organisational performance and employee engagement and wellbeing.

More recently, the European Commission, along with numerous experts, has stressed the need for "human-centred" workplaces to play a central role in the "twin transition" towards digitalisation and environmental sustainability – a transformation framed politically as "Industry 5.0".

In short, these transitions are unlikely to succeed without harnessing and developing employees' skills, tacit knowledge and innate creativity.

However, as recent surveys remind us, only a minority of European companies are systematically adopting these empowering practices. There remains a "long tail" of private and public organisations locked into traditional "command and control" working methods, with negative economic, social, health and environmental consequences.

What does all this mean for the role of trade unionists and workers' representatives? Is representative participation in the form of collective bargaining, codetermination and worker representation now in competition with workplace innovation? Or does workplace innovation open up new arenas for trade union and worker representative engagement and influence?

There remains a lack of in-depth analysis of the interaction between forms of direct worker participation represented by workplace innovation and the traditional industrial relations framework composed of trade unions, worker representation, collective bargaining and social dialogue.

By bringing together, at European level, research institutes with expertise in industrial relations and work organisation from six EU Member States and 14 national and EU-level social partners, BroadVoice is studying – and thereby helping to promote – the role of trade unions and worker representatives as informed and critical participants in workplace innovation, bringing workers’ rich experience and insights to the pursuit of win–win outcomes that simultaneously enhance working life and performance.

Likewise, BroadVoice is exploring how collective bargaining and labour representation structures can become drivers and “guardians” of workplace innovation at enterprise level.

### The analytical framework

The project’s analytical framework outlines four models of interaction between workplace industrial relations and direct worker participation:

- i. the bipartite (adversarial) model, where worker participation is largely representative, while direct channels tend to be less developed and/or shaped exclusively by management;
- ii. the HRM model, in which direct participation is the dominant form of worker voice, promoted and shaped by management for economic purposes, while worker representation is relatively weak;
- iii. the hybrid (cooperative) model, where both representative and direct forms of worker participation coexist and develop in near-equal measure;
- iv. the democratic (participatory) model, where both direct and representative participation channels are not only present but also interconnected, forming the organisational architecture of broader enterprise innovation plans.

These models should not be viewed as static but rather as repertoires of possible combinations of direct participation and industrial relations within a given workplace context over time.

- i. The framework also explores key features of direct worker participation, including:
- ii. objectives - primarily economic, social, democratic and humanistic, though managerial objectives related to worker control and information flows are also identified;
- iii. intensity - ranging from information and consultation (and joint examination) to codetermination (or joint decision-making) and worker autonomy;
- iv. forms - involving individuals or groups, verbal or written procedures, etc..
- v. scope – comprising cultural, executive, managerial and strategic decisions at corporate level

The framework also assesses the impacts of direct worker participation on workers, organisations and transformations, highlighting social, organisational and innovation outcomes. These effects are also mediated by external factors (such as company context, worker characteristics and the institutional framework).

The aim of the BroadVoice project is to assist policymakers, social partners and the scientific community itself in outlining and defining direct participation and its possible relations with worker representation, including in the context of organisational and technological innovation. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more precise and coherent evaluations, guidelines and recommendations on the topic.

### The Italian empirical research

Regarding the Italian research, an extensive review of the national literature (through analysis of quantitative and qualitative data) was conducted to achieve these objectives, alongside a detailed analysis of the institutional framework regulating forms of worker participation in Italy, followed by the examination of selected case studies.

Specifically, two sectoral studies were conducted (one in manufacturing and one in advanced tertiary), each involving two companies. This enabled an in-depth understanding of the actual dynamics of direct participation and industrial relations in these specific sectors and work contexts.

Each company case study was based on documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources and at least three semi-structured interviews with company managers responsible for direct participation and with worker representatives (a total of 18 interviewees). Furthermore, the preliminary research findings were discussed and validated at a national workshop held on 23 January 2025, attended by 25 participants, including (employer and trade union) representatives from the surveyed companies, representatives of territorial and national trade union and employer associations from the relevant sectors, and other stakeholders (such as researchers and consultants).

Our analysis confirms that the area of interaction between direct participation and industrial relations in Italian companies is difficult to identify. This is largely due to a lack of shared understanding, both among companies and worker representatives, of what direct participation is and how it can be developed in the workplace. Moreover, the often informal nature of direct participation and its still relatively limited implementation in Italian companies, hinder its identification.

Nevertheless, since 2016, tax legislation has sought to encourage the emergence of direct participation practices by offering tax relief on performance-related bonuses, formalised within specific “Innovation Plans” to be defined according to the guidelines set out in second-level collective agreements. However, this promotional legislative measure has not yet achieved significant results: direct participation practices are found in just over 10% of the detaxed agreements.

Although interest in worker participation in organizational decision-making has grown among national-level social partners, a clear and unified conceptual framework is still lacking. This hampers the ability of trade unions and employers to effectively guide company-level actors in managing direct participation.

However, our empirical findings show that direct and representative worker participation often coexist. While they typically operate in distinct domains, overlaps do occur—especially in areas such as training, welfare, and working time. These forms of participation are not mutually exclusive; when effectively integrated, they can complement each other and improve outcomes for both workers and firms.

Positive examples of this interplay emerge in two areas: (i) working time autonomy and flexibility; and (ii) organisational innovation.

In such cases, worker voice becomes both broader and deeper, with industrial relations playing a key role in shaping, implementing, and overseeing direct participation within formal structures. Despite some challenges, the overall impact is largely positive.

However, risks for worker representatives remain—particularly the threats of marginalization given the uncontrolled rise of direct participation, or co-optation by management in innovation projects. To remain effective, worker representatives must not ignore yet critically engage with direct participation, without abandoning the broader goals of industrial relations. By framing direct participation within a balanced perspective of *efficiency*, *equity*, and *voice*, they can ensure that worker individual autonomy and involvement translate into meaningful and collective workplace improvements.

