

## **THE EFFICACY OF U.S. EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION PROGRAMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cooperation between management and unions to improve productivity in the American workplace was one of the most popular topics in the industrial relations literature of the 1970s. Interest in such cooperative efforts continued to increase in the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period considerable experimentation in labor-management cooperation and employee participation in both union and nonunion firms took place. The wider use of employee participation programs seems to have been triggered by the need to respond to environmental forces such as increased domestic and foreign competition, technological advances, and changing labor force demographics. The growth of these programs has led to considerable interest among researchers regarding their effects on the existing system of industrial relations. This article reviews the recent literature on employee participation programs to assess their impact on outcomes for employers, employees, and unions. Several issues for the study and practice of employee participation are raised and future research directions are suggested.

Cooperation between management and unions to improve productivity in the American workplace was one of the most popular topics in the industrial relations literature of the 1970s [1]. Interest in such cooperative efforts continued to increase in the 1980s. During this period considerable experimentation in labor-management cooperation and employee participation in both union and nonunion

firms took place [2]. The wider use of employee participation programs in the 1980s seems to have been triggered by the need to respond to environmental forces such as increased domestic and foreign competition, technology advances, and changing labor force demographics [3, 4].

The concept of labor-management cooperation is based on the idea that both labor and management can gain from concerted action toward goals that are mutually beneficial to employees and management [5]. One concern that has been raised within the academic community and the labor movement, however, is whether such cooperative efforts can coexist with unions and collective bargaining as currently constituted. Since these workplace innovations began initially in nonunion firms that were committed to keeping unions out [6], it is not surprising that the labor movement has in the past been suspicious and even hostile toward employee participation programs. In the view of Kochan, Katz, and McKersie [7], the active and extensive use of quality-of-work life (QWL) and other workplace innovations by employers and behavioral science consultants as part of a broader strategy to keep out unions was the most significant obstacle to the acceptance and diffusion of similar cooperative efforts in unionized workplaces in the 1970s.

Although union opposition still exists in some cases, union leaders have in general become less oppositional and more diversified in their views. For example, Eaton and Voos [8] reported a diverse range of union responses to workplace innovations including direct opposition, passive indifference, protective involvement, and wholehearted involvement and collaboration. Juravich, Harris, and Brooks [9], in their survey of both management and union respondents, found that although unions were less enthusiastic than management about employee involvement programs, they did not regard such programs as serious threats. In fact, they were either neutral or somewhat positive toward such cooperative efforts. In another study, Wolters [10] surveyed sixty-two management and thirty-nine union practitioners in Alabama to determine their attitudes toward labor-management cooperation. The results indicated that both groups favored such cooperative efforts; however, union representatives demonstrated more positive attitudes overall.

The development and growth of employee participation programs have also led to an interest among researchers in the industrial relations field regarding the impact of these programs on the existing system of industrial relations. Of interest is also the effect of such programs on various economic and noneconomic outcomes for management, employees, and unions. There is considerable debate among academic scholars and labor practitioners concerning whether employee participation programs will, in the long run, have positive or negative effects on the interests of unions and the workers they represent. This article reviews some of the empirical evidence on the impact (benefit, costs, risks) of employee participation programs and outlines some recommendations and research suggestions.

## **A DEFINITION OF EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION**

According to Eaton and Voos [6], employee participation is a general term used to encompass many programs, all of which attempt to involve employees in decision making by holding regular meetings. These meetings are usually held among a small number of persons in the same work group. Attendance may be voluntary or involuntary, compensated or uncompensated, and training may or may not be provided. Programs vary widely in the issues to be addressed by groups and the degree of authority given. Programs such as quality circles, quality of work life, and employee involvement are all considered employee participation programs.

For the purpose of this article, employee participation will be taken to mean programs involving the participation of employees in decision making and problem solving over workplace issues outside of traditional collective bargaining and will include programs that have been labeled as quality circles, quality of work life, or employee involvement.

## **IMPACT OF EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION PROGRAMS**

The ultimate goal of all employee participation efforts from management's perspective is the improvement of workplace, work group, or company-level performance in productivity or product/service quality. From the union's perspective, the goal of such programs is to improve the quality of work life of their members. Studies on the effects of employee participation programs have yielded mixed results. Whereas some researchers report significant positive effects, some find little or no meaningful effect, and a few even report negative effects [11]. Effects of cooperation, whether in terms of benefits or costs, must be examined through the eyes of both management and labor. Therefore, in reviewing the literature on the effects of employee participation programs, an attempt will be made to distinguish these benefits and costs as they may be realized or perceived by these two parties to cooperative efforts.

### **Impact on Management**

A wide range of potential benefits from employee participation programs ranging from increased productivity and efficiency, improved quality, improved relationships between supervisors and employees, stronger employee commitment and identification, and reduced absenteeism and turnover can be identified from the existing literature on labor-management cooperation. For example, Voos [12, 13], in a survey of cooperative programs in 343 unionized Wisconsin firms, found significant positive effects on the union-management relations outcomes she examined. Specifically, Voos concluded from her findings that employee

participation programs have positive effects on productivity, quality, labor costs, profits, absenteeism, and turnover. Schuster, in a field study utilizing a triangulation approach (i.e., using several methodologies to study the same phenomenon), also found support for the employee participation-productivity relationship [14]. In this study, eleven of the twenty-three research sites examined were found to report an increase in productivity following the introduction of cooperative programs.

Empirical evidence supporting the contention that employee participation programs result in improved quality is provided by Cooke [15]. In his study, Cooke investigated the effectiveness of employee participation in achieving product quality improvement in unionized versus nonunionized firms and in programs administered solely by management versus programs with joint union-management administration. The results of this study indicated that, on average, unionized firms with jointly administered participation programs achieved greater product quality improvements than did those with no participation programs. In addition, the quality improvements achieved through jointly administered participation programs in unionized firms were equivalent to those achieved through participation programs in nonunion firms.

Employee participation programs have also been found to result in non-pecuniary outcomes such as higher employee commitment to and identification with the goals of the organization and improved relationships between workers and their supervisors. For example, Verma and McKersie [16], in a survey of 534 workers in a unionized plant of a Fortune 100 company, found participants of a quality circle-type employee participation program identified more strongly with the company and the company's goals than did nonparticipants of such a program. In an analysis of survey responses provided by ninety-two unionized manufacturing plants with formalized joint union-management programs, Cooke concluded that improvements in employee-supervisor relations can result from such joint programs [17]. However, these benefits were found to result only under certain conditions, that is, when the programs were structured to have highly active team-based efforts and substantial union leader participation; when the programs were in their first few years of activities; when there has been substantial growth or decline in employment levels; and when the employer has refrained from subcontracting out bargaining unit work.

In contrast to the optimistic findings in the above studies, some studies have yielded less positive results, especially with regard to the impact on productivity. For example, Kochan, Katz, and Mower, in a study of QWL efforts in the auto industry, found very small effects of such efforts on performance [18]. Similarly, Katz, Kochan, and Gobielle, in a study of eighteen plants found QWL efforts to have no effect on efficiency, although there was a modest improvement in quality [19]. In another study, Katz, Kochan, and Weber used a longitudinal design to assess the relationships between efforts to improve the quality of work life and selected measures of organizational effectiveness in twenty-five manufacturing

plants of a company [20]. The researchers found efforts to improve quality of work life to have little impact on direct labor efficiency. In yet another study, Kelley and Harrison examined the influence of joint labor-management committees on efficiency and found plants with such committees to be substantially less efficient than plants (both union and nonunion) without such workplace innovations [21]. These researchers concluded that nonunion workplaces with joint labor-management problem-solving committees are less efficient than those with a traditional union-based system of workplace governance. Finally, Juravich et al., in their study of a diverse group of 236 employee involvement programs in Pennsylvania, concluded that employee involvement programs have more impact on social-psychological issues such as employee morale and plant manager-union officer relationship than on economic issues such as labor costs [9].

Based on the findings of the various empirical studies described above, it appears that employee participation processes have more impact on improving quality than on efficiency or productivity. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that quality improvement can be controlled more directly by employees, whereas labor efficiency and costs are subject to the influence of a wider variety of external factors that are beyond the direct control of employees. Furthermore, whereas efforts to increase productivity and efficiency carry with it the potential for labor-management conflict associated with production speedups and layoffs arising from increased productivity, quality improvements are not associated with such problems.

Employee participation programs may also pose potential costs to management. Joint efforts demand a great investment of time, energy, and resources to implement and to sustain. Organizational shifts from traditional and generally adversarial collective bargaining relationships and nonparticipative practices are bound to involve substantial changes in an organization's culture. These changes sometimes require substantial resources for reorientation and training of managers, supervisors, rank-and-file employees, and union representatives [22]. In addition, employee participation programs require greater communication among employees, supervisors, managers, union leaders, etc. As more parties are involved in making and carrying out decisions, transaction costs will increase, and these added costs reduce the net benefits derived from employee participation efforts.

The costs of changes resulting from employee participation processes are not all financial but may include nonfinancial costs in the form of perceived loss of authority, power, and status for managers and supervisors. Needless to say, managers and supervisors will be less enthusiastic in embracing cooperative efforts that they perceive would threaten their status quo. According to Klein, supervisors rarely show open resistance to employee involvement programs initiated by top management [23]. Instead, they may occasionally criticize a program in discussions with peers or subordinates or remain silent but demonstrate only mild enthusiasm for these programs. When workers perceive their

supervisors as being less than enthusiastic, they too will quickly lose interest in these programs.

Overall, the existing research evidence on the effects of employee participation programs on outcomes for management is still largely incomplete; therefore, no definitive conclusions can be made. Even when there is evidence for positive effects, it is unclear whether the benefits can be sustained over time. For example, Griffin, using a well-designed longitudinal and experimental research design, tracked seventy-three employees organized into eight quality circles over a three-year period and found initial improvements in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance evaluations for this experimental group [24]. These improvements, however, dropped back to their previous levels after eighteen months. The researcher believed this plateauing effect may be due to declining interest and enthusiasm as the quality circle approach becomes more mechanistic in the long term and suggested that quality circles be best used as an organic short-term strategy for enhancing organizational effectiveness. The leveling process in this study has been supported by other empirical studies [9, 25] and also has been mentioned frequently in the nonquantitative literature [26].

### **Impact on Employees and Union**

The potential benefits of employee participation programs to employees are mostly intrinsic, that is, in the form of greater say in decision making, heightened self-esteem and pride, improved relationship with supervisors, fewer grievance disputes, quicker problem resolution, and improved working conditions [17, 22]. Partial support for these benefits was found in a study of union members of a large manufacturing plant who were actively involved in a QWL program. In this study, Ellinger and Nissen found the majority of their sample to report positive program effects on grievance rate, ability to solve grievances and problems, relations between members and union stewards, relations between workers and supervisors, and employee morale [27].

In the case of unions, advocates of cooperation claim that union management in employee participation programs can result in recognition from members if the programs are successful and satisfy members' interests. In addition, involvement in such participative efforts are believed to lead to more positive attitudes toward the union as well as stronger union identification and commitment among members. Other potential benefits include improved communication and relations between union leaders and managers and greater knowledge of and input into management decisions. Several studies attest to the above proposed effects. For example, Thacker and Fields investigated potential outcomes for unions involved in joint union-management QWL efforts and found support for a program effect [28]. In this study, more than 700 rank-and-file union members from three different QWL efforts in a large midwestern utility were identified and surveyed at two points in time. The objective was to determine the impact a QWL program

would have on union members' perceptions of the union. Results of this longitudinal, within-subjects study indicated that union members who participated in a QWL program perceived a higher level of union influence in both traditional and nontraditional job areas. Furthermore, a majority of members who perceived QWL as successful gave credit for the success to both union and management, whereas those who perceived QWL efforts as unsuccessful tended to blame management for the lack of success. Based on these findings, the researchers argued there is little risk for unions to get involved in cooperative efforts with management.

In another investigation of employee participation processes, Kochan et al. examined survey data of approximately 930 workers as well as data from several case studies and concluded that worker participation processes can have a positive effect on workers' job-related experiences and their evaluation of the performance of their union [18]. The findings indicated that participants of QWL programs whose unions had the greatest involvement in the program rated the union as significantly more effective in bread-and-butter issues and quality of work life than did nonparticipants. There was, however, no evidence in the data that a union would be strengthened by being active in the participation process in the face of poor union performance on its traditional bread-and-butter responsibilities. Kochan et al. also caution against viewing successful employee participation efforts as an effective substitute for an inability on the part of the employer to deliver economic benefits and job security.

In a second study, Kochan et al., using both survey procedures and in-depth structured interviews to determine the views of local union activists and officers toward employee participation programs, found that a QWL program did not reduce member interest in the union nor undermine the union's ability to enforce a collective bargaining agreement [29]. The majority of the sample in the study felt that the overall effect of a QWL program was to strengthen the union. Finally, Eaton, Gordon, and Keefe, in a survey of four bargaining units of a local industrial union, found union members who participated in QWL programs to be more loyal to the union than were nonparticipants [30].

Whereas all the above studies provide empirical support for the positive consequences of employee participation for employees and unions, critics of joint efforts contend that employee participation programs can pose certain threats and risks for labor. For example, management may promote cooperative activities as a guise for having employees work harder or as an attempt to manipulate workers through the illusion of being consulted. Also, employees run the risk of being displaced or laid off when productivity increases [22].

In the case of the union, one potential risk of embracing cooperation to union leaders is being co-opted or being perceived as being co-opted by management. In some cases, union leaders may become so closely identified with management that they lose touch with the needs of their members. In other cases, union leaders may not have been co-opted but, nevertheless, are perceived by their membership

as being co-opted. In either case, union leaders are likely to lose credibility with their membership.

Employee participation processes might also be used by management to weaken the role of the union. For example, these cooperative processes might be used as substitutes for, rather than supplements to, the collective bargaining process and existing grievance procedures. Workers may begin to question the need for a union if they see employers listening to and resolving their problems and grievances through employee participation processes [18]. Finally, there is also the possibility that as employees begin to accept and identify more closely with the company's goals, their loyalty and commitment to the union may diminish. In one case, for instance, local union activists reported that the QWL program in their company had reduced union members' interest in the union [27].

Some observers have also questioned whether or not employee participation programs have a positive effect on union-management relations. The argument is that such participative programs often promise more than they can deliver, be it in terms of genuine employee control over work life or financial gains. As a result, employees become disillusioned, and as their level of dissatisfaction increases, so will the level of conflict in union-management relations [13]. Employee participation programs may also worsen union-management relations if the local union is not involved in instituting, implementing, and operating these programs. Finally, employers who use participative processes to undermine support for the union will definitely jeopardize their relationship with the union.

## CONCLUSION

A considerable number of research studies have been conducted on employee participation programs over the last several years. In reviewing the evidence on the effects of employee participation efforts, several general observations can be made. First, the research findings from the various studies reviewed in this article indicate no simple answer as to whether employee participation will give rise to positive or negative effects. The effectiveness of such programs will vary with the form of the program, the criterion for effectiveness used, the setting in which the program has been instituted, and a host of other variables. For example, employee participation programs may not yield the productivity outcomes desired but may be considered a success if the criterion of effectiveness is improved employee-management relations.

With regard to setting, employee participation activities, like other organizational change interventions (e.g., job enrichment and management by objectives), are more appropriate and effective in some settings than others. For example, some researchers contend that employee participation programs are more effective and have higher survival rates in unionized settings. Eaton and Voos argue that without a union, participation tends to be limited and individual workers often



lack the information and knowledge to be effective at higher levels of decision making [6]. Hecksher suggested that nonunion firms rarely create mechanisms for linking different problem-solving groups, thus obscuring common issues and interests [31]. Joyce stated that without the hard muscle of collective bargaining and union representation, QWL programs are inherently manipulative, and participation in policy-making forums is at best an opportunity to exchange views and information [32].

The second observation is that the majority of the studies assessing the effects of participation processes have relied on surveys that measure perceptions of impact rather than tangible effects such as actual changes in output, working conditions, or the behavior of employees and managers. Even in cases in which the emphasis is on actual changes and not perceptions, methodological and data problems limit the generalizability of the results obtained. For instance, most studies have been limited to large manufacturing plants, although the majority of workplaces are small and the service sector is an important part of the U.S. economy. Comparability across studies is also limited by the piecemeal approach of most studies. Moreover, most of the existing research is in the form of cross-sectional case studies of successful employee participation programs after the program has already been instituted, thus making it difficult to differentiate the effects of the presence or absence of employee participation. As pointed out by Kelley and Harrison, before-and-after studies are generally unreliable except under the most careful experimental conditions because so many other factors can have an impact on the situation [21]. In short, unless methodological problems are resolved, it is not possible to eliminate the possibility of obtaining spurious effects from a study.

Third, there remains a dearth of literature assessing the conditions and circumstances under which employee participation programs are likely to be most effective. The potential effects of participation programs are bound to differ across organizations as circumstances differ. As noted by Cooke [15], any potential outcomes of participation efforts will depend on how well-designed, structured, and administered the participation activities are [15]. In addition, contextual factors such as the employment climate, firm characteristics (e.g., size), and employee characteristics (e.g., age) can influence the effectiveness of employee participation programs. Existing studies, however, have generally failed to examine how these moderating factors might affect the outcomes of interest.

Finally, the existing literature is still vague about the magnitude of the effects of participative processes on a variety of outcomes and the duration of such effects when they occur. Researchers also have not fully examined employee participation processes using a cost-benefit assessment approach to determine net effects. Most studies have emphasized the gross benefits of employee participation programs without taking into account the costs involved in implementing these programs.

## CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION

Although the record of evidence concerning the effects of employee participation programs is still incomplete, it is possible that significant benefits can be gained from these programs if the problems and barriers that undermine successful cooperation can be resolved. Several general types of problems are typically encountered in the process of establishing and implementing employee participation programs. These problems include lack of trust between employees and management, lack of commitment on the part of management, demoralization from employment insecurity and failure to realize anticipated gains, and the inherent difficulties of balancing traditional collective bargaining and cooperation [22]. In addition, lack of support from union leaders who view cooperative programs as a threat to traditional collective bargaining as well as lack of support from supervisors who fear becoming redundant under a system of participative management are factors that can impede the establishment and smooth functioning of cooperative arrangements between unions and employers. Therefore, for those parties that choose to engage in cooperative efforts, establishing trust and commitment between labor and management should be a top priority.

According to Cohen-Rosenthal and Burton, a critical element to any successful joint union-management effort is the setting of important and realistic goals [3]. The authors also stress the importance of putting the goals and objectives of the joint effort in writing. Although there should be at least one common goal between the union and management, this does not necessarily mean that cooperation requires the two parties involved to shift their fundamental priority goals or the fundamental values and ideologies underlying these goals [22]. In other words, the union still seeks to gain as much as possible for its membership in compensation and in the terms and conditions of employment, and management still seeks to optimize profits. The important thing is that each party in the joint effort understands how the joint effort will contribute to the separate economic and organizational interests of the other party and recognizes each other's interests.

Another important determinant of successful cooperative efforts in which both employees and employers can reap the gains of such efforts is union support for and management commitment to these cooperative processes. According to Kochan et al., to make union support viable management must accept the legitimacy of the union [18]. If management is unwilling to accept the union as the employees' bargaining representative or is constantly trying to undermine union leadership and the collective bargaining process, then it makes little sense for the union to cooperate. No union will participate in a program that eventually contributes to its own demise. Unions might also appropriately oppose participation programs that are posed as solutions for problems that do not exist or are the wrong solutions for problems that do exist [31].

Union support for the employee participation process cannot make the process work without commitment from top management, especially in terms of

willingness to allocate resources to support participation efforts. For example, because both parties (workers and managers) suffer from lack of experience in the concept of shop-floor participation in decision making [33], management must be willing to invest in cooperative training.

According to Cohen-Rosenthal and Burton, training makes a critical contribution to the success of a joint program as it accomplishes the following: a) explains what the program is and how it will work; b) teaches the basic principles, processes, and procedures by which the activities of the program will run; c) provides skills in the specific areas necessary to meet the goals and objectives of the program; and d) builds support for and commitment to the program [3].

The success of a cooperative program will also depend on the effectiveness of the communication process. Information and knowledge need to be regularly and systematically shared by all participants in the program. In particular, managers must regularly and honestly share valid data and knowledge about the organization and the work unit as well as future plans with employees so that employees understand how the organization and work unit operate, feel responsible for the results of joint efforts, and have a sense of where the organization is heading [26]. Other than sharing information and knowledge, management must also be willing to share its power. Management must be willing to relinquish some of its control by allowing employees to influence a number of decisions that affect their day-to-day work life.

The long-term survival of employee participation programs will depend on whether or not employees who have invested their time and energy in these programs are being properly and adequately rewarded for their participation. This is an especially complex issue for it is exceedingly difficult if not impossible to accurately measure the portion of any overall gain attributable to cooperation and then measure each party's contribution to these cooperative gains. Some formula for sharing productivity gains must, however, still be devised and agreed upon. Employers and employees must come to some explicit agreement at the outset on how gains from joint efforts are to be shared equitably.

From the union's perspective, sharing the gains of cooperation has as much to do with job security as it does with financial rewards. As suggested by Eaton, one way unions can ensure that employee participation programs do not jeopardize employees' job security is to negotiate a written agreement with the employer guaranteeing there will be no layoffs as a result of the program [34]. Likewise, when a union is confronted with an employee participation program, it may negotiate contract clauses that strictly separate collective bargaining issues from the participative process. Although such clauses may be difficult to enforce in practice (as many participation activities affect production standards, work rules, and other contract items), the existence of these clauses offers some sort of a safeguard for the union. As noted by Eaton and Voos [8], these clauses protect the union by giving it the option of taking management to arbitration on violation of these clauses [8].

## CONCLUSION

It seems likely that labor-management cooperation in the form of employee participation programs will continue to be espoused as an important workplace innovation for resolving productivity and quality problems for at least the near future. The literature on participation strongly argues for its positive effects on a variety of outcomes, although the empirical evidence is mixed. Nevertheless, a number of studies do indicate that under the appropriate conditions, employee participation programs can result in positive consequences for both union and management. However, the ultimate choice of whether or not to actively support an employee participation program can best be made by local union leaders based on a careful analysis of not only the potential effects but also factors such as the need for change in the bargaining relationship. Both union and management should assess also the benefits and risks of participating in a cooperative program before venturing into one. Factors that need to be considered in assessing risks and benefits include the existing organizational climate, labor-management relationship, past cooperative efforts, and level of internal commitment. In the case of management, the legal ramifications of instituting an employee participation program must also be considered, especially in light of the National Labor Relations Board's (NLRB) recent decision in the Electromation case, in which the NLRB ruled that employee participation committees constituted an unlawful "labor organization" dominated by the employer [35]. Until more definitive guidelines are available as to what constitutes permissible employer-employee cooperation, employers will have to tread carefully. It is hoped that future NLRB cases, such as the E. I. Dupont deNemours & Co. case that has raised similar questions about employee involvement, will offer employers clearer guidelines on how to establish lawful employee participation programs.

Because our understanding of employee participation processes is still fragmented and largely incomplete, there is a need for additional research into the effects of such processes, especially with regard to the net effects of participation programs, the conditions under which these programs are most likely to be effective, and the most appropriate ways to manage these programs. Additionally, questions such as how long the effects of employee participation programs can be sustained before losing momentum and/or fading away and whether these programs are best used as a transitional technique or self-contained intervention strategy need to be addressed. For example, participation efforts may serve as a starting point for other organizational changes that have greater long-term returns to the company and its employees.

To approach the above questions, it will be necessary to direct research efforts toward a wider variety of organizations, include both participation-level and organizational measures and data, and take a long-term perspective using experimental and longitudinal designs. Experimental designs will enable causal effects to be determined, and the longer timeframe of longitudinal designs will enable

researchers to assess the staying power of employee participation programs. More studies on organizations where such programs have failed are also required.

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