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Managers' Perceptions of Cooperation and Joint Decision-Making with Trade Unions: A Regional Case Study in the Illawarra (Australia)

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Abstract

This paper examines managerial perceptions of cooperation and consultation, and tests the hypothesis of some unionists that cooperation and consultation as perceived by management minimise union input into the decision-making process. The increased adoption of a strategic HRM perspective on the employment relationship has led to a growing concern with building cooperation through employee consultation and participation at the workplace level. This perspective actually embraces two broad approaches: 'hard' HRM characterised by direct forms of job-related participation; and 'soft' HRM characterised by representative forms of participation, or joint decision making, between management and unions and/or works councils (or consultative committees), as favoured in much of Europe. The choice between these is influenced, among other things, by the industrial environment in which workplaces operate, particularly the strength of traditional industrial relations structures and perspectives.

This case study is based upon a survey of employment relations managers' attitudes to cooperation and joint decision making in a region characterised by a strong traditional industrial relations infrastructure, including strong unionism. It shows that whilst strategic HRM perspectives on employee participation have developed a significant presence in the region's workplaces, they have been adapted to the industrial environment. The managers overwhelmingly reported a cooperative relationship with unions, and a significant proportion believed in joint decision making with unions, albeit over a selective range of issues. Managers of public sector, tertiary sector and large workplaces were far more inclined to support joint decision making than others. The survey results also show that those respondents who perceived a cooperative relationship indicated a greater willingness on the part of management to share input with the union than those who perceived their relationship as confrontational.

The perspective of a pragmatic HRM shaped by its industrial environment is confirmed by comparing these results with those from a survey of US employee relations managers conducted by Perline and Sexton (1994). The results of this comparison diverge considerably. Perline and Sexton found for the US that 'those managers who perceived their relationship with the union to be cooperative were less likely to believe that issues should be jointly determined by management and the union', thus confirming the pessimistic union hypothesis.

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Introduction

Management of the employment relationship has been subject to significant change in the last two decades, as the process of globalisation has intensified competition in product and labour markets. The overall objective of changing approaches to people management has been to increase efficiency and productivity at the micro or workplace level by attempting to link employment policies and practice more specifically to corporate strategy. Some of the major components of these changes have included increased responsibility of line managers for employment policies, flexible employment practices, broadening job structures, performance appraisal, increased training, performance related pay schemes, direct communication with employees, policies designed to build employee commitment to the firm, and decentralisation of collective bargaining over wages and employment conditions towards the enterprise level, and even individual employee contracts. The growing incidence of these management practices has been widely documented in Australia and internationally (Kramar 1998; Kramar and Lake 1997; Moorehead et al. 1997; Sparrow, Schuler and Jackson 1994; Lansbury and Kitay 1995; Locke, Kochan and Piore 1995; Blyton and Turnbull 1992).

The management practices and policies described here have been commonly classified as part of a new generic typology of strategic human resource management. Such classification is usually contrasted with the 'older' typology of industrial relations (or personnel management and industrial relations), which is characterised by an assumption that conflict is inherent in the employment relationship, regulation of clearly delineated employment contracts through collective bargaining, national standards, customs and practice, employee management by specialist IR or HR managers, division of labour, and a major role for trade unions in bargaining and communication between management and employees (Kramar 1998; Looise and van Riemsdijk 1998; Storey 1992, 1995; Guest 1987; Beaumont 1991; Legge 1995).

These contrasting models represent ideal types which may rarely be implemented in their entirety, and many firms no doubt incorporate a mixture of practices from both typologies (see Simons, Shadur and Kienzle 1999; Robinson and Foote 1997). This qualification does not negate the observation of general trends, such as the growing influence of strategic HRM approaches, and even the displacement of personnel and industrial relations approaches to people management. However, it does suggest that there may be important countervailing factors which limit the full implementation of any typology of management of the employment relationship. These may include the strength of particular institutions or cultures of industrial relations at various levels, from the national level to the workplace. An important example of this is the continued importance of trade unions in many European countries in coexistence with the growth of strategic HRM policies, even though union decline, in membership and influence, has been associated with strategic HRM to a large extent. Indeed, this has led some to distinguish between 'hard' HRM in the mainly English speaking countries where union influence clearly has been undermined, and the 'soft' European variant of HRM which

maintains a role for unions (Navrbjerg, and Lubanski 1998; Munkeby and Hansen 1998; Muller-Jentsch 1998; Brewster 1993, 1994).

The difference in approach between 'hard' and 'soft' HRM may be seen clearly in the interconnected areas of communication, cooperation and consultation with employees, which generally fall under the heading of employee participation. Modern management theorists and researchers of all kinds have commonly emphasised the importance of two-way communication and cooperation between management and labour in determining the success of HRM strategy and in maximising workplace efficiency. Cooperation relies upon building employee commitment, and employee consultation and participation are intrinsic to this process (see Gollan and Davis 1998; Dunlop Commission 1994: 2; Keller 1995; Markey and Monat 1997: 6-12; Storey 1995: 3-33). Indeed, some researchers argue that employee participation and empowerment are progressive management practices which have universal benefits to performance enhancement, as opposed to most other HRM practices whose success is contingent upon the organisational context (Arthur 1994; Delaney and Huselid 1996). The 'hard' HRM approach is identified with direct methods of communication between management and employees, such as team briefings, electronic mail systems, company newsletters and surveys seeking views of employees, and delegation of job-based decision-making discretion to employees. It is also identified with direct forms of employee participation, such as teamwork and quality circles. 'Soft' HRM approaches, on the other hand, are identified with communication and employee participation via representative bodies such as trade unions, as well as works councils or consultative committees, although not necessarily to the exclusion of direct participation (O'Kelly 1998).

Western Europe and Japan have been characterised by a 'soft' HRM approach which has allowed a major role for unions and/or other representative bodies such as works councils in management/employee communications and in achieving efficiency and flexibility outcomes in the workplace. Unions and/or works councils have often played a partnership role with management in these areas, particularly in Scandinavia and Germany for example. Indeed, the works council system is currently being extended in the European Union, and unions have frequently played a very influential role in the European works councils (Cressey 1997; Crouch 1993; Lecher 1997; Markey and Monat 1997: 412-15; Schulten 1996; Rivest 1996; Rogers and Streeck 1995; *Transfer* 1995; Veersma and Tegelaers 1997).

The predominantly English speaking countries have offered the most distinctive contrast between 'hard' HRM approaches and an adversarial personnel management and industrial relations approach to people management. Building on a long tradition of employer hostility to unionism, the USA has been characterised by a combination of 'hard' anti-union HRM side-by-side with adversarial industrial relations in some unionised sectors. The other predominately English speaking countries have been more dominated by an adversarial industrial relations approach, which has involved far greater acceptance of unions. However, in the case of these countries and the USA, traditional industrial relations systems have lost ground to 'hard' HRM approaches.

Generally, non-union representative forms of employee participation have been much slower in taking root in mainly English-speaking countries, largely as a result of management

reluctance to cede managerial authority. Where labour/management cooperation and consultation has occurred in the mainly English-speaking countries, employees have been commonly represented by unions rather than the works councils or consultative committees which have characterised codetermination in much of western Europe (see Markey and Monat 1997: 412-15; Markey and Reglar 1997; Donahue 1997; Dunlop Commission Report Part II 1994; Markey 1987). Unions in the mainly English-speaking countries also commonly have harboured suspicions that managerial notions of cooperation involve concessions from employees but little genuine joint decision-making (Banks and Metzgar 1989; Voos and Cheng 1989; Perline and Sexton 1994; Markey 1989).

Cooperation and employee consultation and participation clearly mean different things to different people, but if these terms are to mean anything more substantial than the mere managerialist strategy often suspected by unions in these countries, then they must involve an enhancement of communication and information sharing, and some input into decision-making by employees or their representatives. This chapter seeks to answer the question 'what do managers mean by cooperation with unions?' by exploring the degree of cooperation which they have with unions, the extent to which they support joint decision-making with unions, and linking the two. In so doing the article examines and tests the hypothesis of many unionists in mainly English-speaking countries that cooperation and consultation as perceived by management minimise union input into the decision-making process. The reverse hypothesis of 'soft' HRM which we also test is that management will be more willing to jointly determine many issues if they perceive their relationship with unions to be cooperative.

The study is based on a survey of managers in the highly-unionised Illawarra region of Australia, with a brief comparison to the attitudes of some of their counterparts in the USA. The nature of this data allows important insights into the impact on workplace relations of different perspectives of people management - 'hard' and 'soft' HRM, and traditional industrial relations - and their interaction. The growth of employee consultation and participation in the Illawarra region would indicate the adoption of strategic HRM practices. However, in the context of the well-entrenched traditional industrial relations structures of the region, strategic HRM may choose between two perspectives: a 'hard' HRM approach which is anti-union (and to which unions are hostile), or a 'soft' HRM approach which works with unions, adapting to them and being adapted to by them.

Methodology

In 1996-97 the Labour Market and Regional Studies Centre at the University of Wollongong conducted a comprehensive study of workplace relations in the Illawarra region, in the state of New South Wales, Australia. The Illawarra Regional Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (IRWIRS) examined workplace practices in small, medium and large workplaces of the region, replicating the national survey of the (then) Australian Department of Industrial Relations, the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS). The results of AWIRS were published in Morehead et al. (1997), and results of IRWIRS appeared in Markey et al. (1997, 1998, 2000).

A number of surveys were implemented in the regional study, IRWIRS, including a Labour-Management questionnaire which examined the attitude of managers towards cooperation and joint decision-making with unions. This questionnaire was administered to those managers responsible for employee relations in Illawarra workplaces, and replicated a survey conducted in the USA by Perline and Sexton in 1986-87 (1994) for the purpose of comparison.

The sampling frame for the regional Australian study in the Illawarra consisted of a judgment sample of 200 workplace locations selected from a regional database of private and public sector workplaces employing 20 or more persons, with at least one employee as a member of a union. The questionnaire was self-completed by the organisation's employee relations manager. A total of 119 usable responses was received, representing a cross section of industries and workplace sizes.

The US data of Perline and Sexton (1994) derived from 78 usable responses to a mailed self-completed questionnaire from employee relations managers of large corporations in 23 traditionally unionised industries during 1986-87. This response was based upon a sampling frame with a judgment sample of 213 large corporations contained in *Standard and Poor's Largest Corporations* and a special issue of *Business Week* which contained a list of the 1,000 largest companies in the US.

This study focuses upon the Illawarra survey since it is obvious that the two sets of data are not directly comparable. The Illawarra data is based on a representative sample of *workplaces*, in terms of industry dispersion, in a region where industrial relations are not typical of Australia. The US data is based on a non-representative national sample of large *corporations*, in unionised industries. The US study also was conducted a decade before the regional Australian one, and in that time HRM approaches have extended their influence in Australia, and unionisation of the workforce has declined. However, a limited comparison between the two sample bases is worthwhile because of the shared strength of union presence, since it is managers' perceptions of cooperation with unions with which we are concerned.

Since both the regional Illawarra and US studies are based upon relatively highly-unionised samples, we might expect approaches to employee relations which differ somewhat from the classic 'hard' HRM approach described earlier, which is particularly associated with weakly or non-unionised sectors. We might also expect that this difference is particularly pronounced in the area of employee consultation, participation and cooperation.

Context

Australia trade unions generally have enjoyed a relatively high degree of acceptance in industrial relations for most of the twentieth century. This has been partly because of their close relationship with the Australian Labor Party, and especially because of their privileged position in the state conciliation and arbitration tribunal system which has dominated Australian industrial relations for most of the twentieth century. The importance of this system has been diluted in recent years, and unions are probably facing the most hostile political and industrial environment they have encountered for many decades. Together with the changing structure of employment, this diminished acceptance of union legitimacy has contributed to a recent

decline in Australian union density to below 30%. However, whilst unionism in the Illawarra region which provided the sample for the Australian survey has also declined somewhat, the region is a relative stronghold of unionism in Australia.

The Illawarra region of Australia, 80 kilometres south of Sydney, has been characterised by a relatively narrow, heavily industrialised economic base in steel, metals manufacturing and coal. In the early 1980s manufacturing and mining employed 35 per cent of the Illawarra workforce. By 1996 this had fallen to 21 per cent, but this was still higher than the 16 per cent for the state of New South Wales as a whole (Markey et al. 1999: 121). The economic importance of these industries which have traditionally been strongholds of unionism, has ensured a major role for the organised labour movement in Illawarra industrial relations. This has been based upon high levels of union membership and a strong culture of unionism in the workforce of the region, which also has impacted upon the Community Services, Retail and Wholesale industry sectors, whose share of regional employment has grown as that of steel and mining has declined. Figures for union density are not provided on a regional basis by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, but the IRWIRS found that it reached 59 per cent in workplaces of 20 or more employees, well above the national figure of 50 per cent. In small private sector, single site workplaces of 5-19 employees the Illawarra union density was found to be 24 per cent compared with 17 per cent for Australia as a whole (Markey et al. 1997: 16-17; 1998: 31-32; 1988).

In the context of the economic decline of its main industries - steel and coal - over the last fifteen years, a degree of regional corporatism has emerged to encourage industry and protect employment (see Markey 1988). In this context employers might be expected to have been more accustomed in this region than elsewhere in Australia to incorporate unions into participation and consultation schemes. However, whilst this has been the case with a small number of major employers (such as BHP Steel), the incidence of consultative committees in the Illawarra seems to be slightly lower than for Australia as a whole. At the same time, direct participation is more favoured by Illawarra employers, particularly Total Quality Management approaches (see Markey and Reglar 1997; Markey et al. 2000). These trends indicate substantial inroads into the traditional industrial relations system of the Illawarra region by strategic HRM approaches, even by 'hard' HRM.

On the other hand, since the late 1970s Australian unions have increasingly supported forms of employee participation and consultation which have offered genuine scope for joint decision-making, particularly if they involve unions. Previously they had been very suspicious of participation schemes, especially of the 'direct' kind. The turning point in this development was the adoption of a specific policy on industrial democracy by the ACTU in 1977, but this policy was also enshrined in the Prices and Income Accord between the ACTU and the Labor Party government in 1983, and in the government policies and industry plans which resulted from that over the next few years (see Markey 1989: 12-22; Markey and Reglar 1997: 358-62).

These shifts were supported by changes in the legislation for and practice of the state arbitration tribunals at this time, supported by High Court jurisdictional decisions. The Court and the tribunals had long protected outright managerial prerogative in most areas outside

wages and physical working conditions, thus effectively blocking union involvement in participation schemes for most of the twentieth century. However, from the mid 1980s Court and tribunals also shifted so that most managerial decisions over structure and deployment in the firm became recognised as legitimately subject to institutional industrial relations processes. The *Commonwealth Workplace Relations Act 1996* has shifted this emphasis back to the pre-1980s situation, but this legislation was not effective until after the Illawarra survey. Nevertheless, since the 1980s there has been a significant institutional and attitudinal shift in favour of consultation and cooperative industrial relations, nationally and regionally, and of direct and representative kinds (see Morehead et al. 1997:187).

Since we offer some comparisons with US data, the substantially different American context for industrial relations, unionism and employee participation are important to recognise. The acceptance of unions by United States employers as legitimately representative of their employees for industrial relations purposes 'has always been rather grudging, and based more upon necessity than choice' (Wheeler and McClendon 1998: 73). Since the mid-1970s amongst US employers there has also been an increase in anti-union activities, which were predominant in industrial relations up to the 1930s, and which never really disappeared from the US environment. US union density has now fallen to about 12%, because of these factors and the changing structure of employment. Although it often exists, the degree of employer hostility to unionism in Australia still falls short of that in the US, at least overtly.

Another contrast to the Australian context in the US lies in the different union policies towards the issue of consultation. There remains considerable distrust amongst US unions towards the types of consultative schemes which are commonly accepted by European unions, reflecting a different historical experience. In the US for example, what Europeans might call works councils are similar to the company unions established by many employers in the 1920s and 1930s as an anti-union weapon (see Pelling 1965: 146, 160; Rayback 1966: 304-06). This historical perspective still shapes the thinking of many US unionists, especially in the light of the anti-union attitude of many employers (for example, Donahue 1997; and Dissenting Opinion of Douglas A. Fraser, union representative on Dunlop Commission, to Part II of Report).

Finally, divergent paths between Australia and the US in union policy development in the area of employee consultation and participation in decision-making in the workplace have been partly based upon different experiences with participation schemes, and different institutional frameworks for industrial relations. For example, the US National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 virtually outlaws works councils, reflecting the experience with company unions of the era in which the legislation was conceived (Section 8(a)(1) NLRA; see Dunlop Commission Report Part II).

Management/Union Relationship

Managers were asked a series of questions concerning their relationship with the workplace's union. Table 1 shows the various responses for the Australian sample. Only 5% of unionised workplaces in the Illawarra region of Australia perceived their union to be confrontational, and almost two thirds considered their relationship was cooperative. No significant differences were found across industry or size over perceptions of general relationships with unions, but

secondary sector workplaces were more likely to consider their goals incompatible with the unions': 19% compared with 12% overall.

Only 9% of unionised Illawarra workplaces reported that the union interferes with their ability to manage to a large extent, with a further 39% suggesting the union interferes to some extent. The perception of union interference was significantly higher amongst secondary sector workplaces, where 16% indicated the union interferes to a large extent and 41% suggested to some extent.

One in four Illawarra managers indicated the level of support for the workplace union by its membership was weak. In addition a strong correlation was found between management perception of union support and size of workplace. Almost 38% of managers in workplaces with 20-49 employees indicated the level of union support to members was very weak. This figure declined to 16% for workplaces with 50-99 employees and 15% for workplaces of 100+ employees.

Table 1: Illawarra Managers' Perception of Management/Union Relationship - %

	Confrontational	**Accommodating**	**Cooperative**
How do you perceive your relationship with the union?	5	31	64
	Incompatible	**Somewhat Compatible**	**Very Compatible**
How do you view the goals of the union in terms of compatibility with those of the firm?	12	71	17
	To A Large Extent	**To Some Extent**	**Very Little**
Do you believe the union interferes with your ability to manage?	9	40	51
	Very Weak	**About Average**	**Very Strong**
How do you perceive the level of support for the union by its membership?	24	56	20

Employee Participation

The manager respondents were asked whether their workplace was involved in 'employee participation plans such as quality circles, quality of work-life projects or other similar programmes'. The examples cited in the question related to direct forms of participation, although the general nature of the question did not necessarily exclude representative forms of participation. Seventy per cent of the Illawarra managers surveyed indicated that their workplace was at least somewhat involved in these employee participation plans, and 17 per cent claimed to be very involved. No significant difference was found in the extent of company involvement with employee participation plans by industry or size of workplace.

The flow of information from the firm to unions appears to have improved considerably over the past five years. While 4% of the Illawarra managers suggested they were providing less information to their unions, an overwhelming 42% indicated they were more willing to share information about the firm with the union. Overall these results indicate a significant degree of adoption of one important aspect of strategic HRM approaches to people management amongst Illawarra managers.

Decision Making

Employee relations managers were presented with a wide range of key workplace practices. The practices related to employee discipline, production methods and processes, job design, staff recruitment, selection and promotion, occupational health and safety, quality standards and marketing and financial policies. The manager was asked to indicate if s/he believed whether each issue should be determined solely by management or decided jointly between the union and management in the workplace. Table 2 shows the survey results by size of firm for the Illawarra managers. For the purposes of this section only, we have taken any difference of ten percentage points as indicating significance.

Workplace decisions regarding pricing, financial policies, employee promotion, and products and services provided were most likely to be perceived by Illawarra managers as solely the prerogative of management. Unions were most likely to be recognised as validly having input into decisions concerning health and safety of employees, maintenance of employee discipline, employee dismissals, job content, the processes, techniques, methods and means of production, and layout and equipment determination. These were very similar results to those for the US managers.

Analysis of decision making by sector and workplace size revealed some significant differences. Overall, secondary and tertiary sector workplaces were almost equal in the number of issues where each indicated the higher incidence of desirability of joint decision-making. Many of these differences were relatively marginal. However, Illawarra management in *secondary sector workplaces* were significantly more likely to desire sole determination of issues regarding:

- application of seniority provisions of contracts,
- transfer of workers within plants,
- promotion to non-supervisory positions,
- customer relations,
- the contracting out of work,
- allocation and assignment of work to employees,
- scheduling of shifts,
- determination of production processes,
- determination of layout and equipment, and
- quality standards.

Tertiary sector managers were significantly more likely to believe in joint decision making between management and unions regarding:

- management organisation of production units,

- selection of employees for promotion to supervisory or managerial positions,
- health and safety, and
- policy affecting employee selection.

Private and public sector managers also diverged over their belief in joint determination for a number of types of workplace decisions. Illawarra public sector managers recorded a higher incidence of belief in joint decision-making than private sector managers in four times as many issues. *Public sector managers* were significantly more likely than private sector managers to believe in a joint decision making process for issues such as:

- management organisation,
- selection of employees for promotion,
- materials to use and the size of inventories,
- location of the business,
- layout and equipment used,
- job content,
- allocation and assignment of work,
- scheduling of shifts,
- health and safety, and
- employee selection policies.

Private sector managers were significantly more likely to believe in joint decision making between unions and management only for:

- penalties imposed as a result of disciplinary action, and
- property protection measures.

The size of their workplace had a significant impact upon managers' beliefs regarding he process used for decision making (refer to table 2). Of the 28 issues tested, there were significant variations in the range of responses between differently sized firms in eleven issues. Managers of *large workplaces* (100+ employees) were significantly more likely than those of either small (20-29 employees) or medium-sized firms (50-99 employees) to believe unions should have input in decisions regarding five issues:

- employee discipline,
- job content,
- employee penalties,
- control and use of plant property, and
- employee selection policy.

Managers of *middle-sized workplaces* (50-99 employees) were significantly more likely than those in either large or small firms to believe unions should have input in decision-making in only one case: application of seniority provisions of contracts. But managers of middle-sized workplaces were significantly less likely than large or small firms to accept union input into determination of penalties imposed as a result of disciplinary action, and quality standards.

Overall, managers of *smaller workplaces* (20-49 employees) were least likely to support joint determination in two thirds of all issues, and this was significantly lower than managers in either large or medium-sized firms for four issues: management organisation of production

units, services to be rendered, distribution of service or product, and layout of plant and equipment. Generally, we may observe that belief in appropriateness of union input into decision-making increased with the size of the firm. This is consistent with a number of other studies which indicate that both union presence and employee participation in decision-making through unions or representative committees (or works councils) increases with firm size. (for example, see range of articles in *Bulletin of Comparative Labour Relations* 1993; Markey and Monat 1997: 432-3; du Toit 1997: 348-50; Morehead et al. 1997: 140-41, 187).

Table 2: Extent to Which Illawarra Managers Believe in Joint Decision Making with Unions over Specific Issues, by Workplace Size

	% workplaces in each category			
Issue to be decided	**20-49 Employees**	**50-99 Employees**	**100+ Employees**	**Total**
Determination of health and safety of employees where legal responsibility of the employer is involved	60.0	68.0	71.7	66.7
Maintenance of discipline and determination of discharge of employees for cause	48.8	43.5	65.9	54.6
Determination of job content	37.5	44.0	67.4	51.4
Determination of the processes, techniques, methods, and means of manufacture	38.2	47.1	56.8	47.7
Determination of penalties imposed as the result of disciplinary action	46.3	25.0	58.1	47.1
Determination of the layout and equipment to be used in the business	40.0	50.0	51.1	46.8
Scheduling of shifts	45.7	38.1	45.5	44.0
Determination of the quality standards and judgment of workmanship required	45.0	29.2	39.1	39.1
Determination of transfer of workers within plants	35.5	25.0	43.9	37.5
Determination of the allocation and assignment of work to workers	26.8	36.0	38.3	33.6
Determination of work that can be contracted out	29.7	41.2	33.3	33.3
Scheduling of operations	32.5	38.1	28.9	32.1
Determination of customer relations	29.3	26.1	31.8	29.6
Determination of the policies affecting the selection of employees	17.5	25.0	40.9	28.7
Determination of property protection measures	25.6	30.4	29.5	28.3
Determination of control and use of the plant property	18.9	18.2	34.9	25.5
Determination of management organisation of each producing or distributing unit	12.5	29.2	24.4	21.0
Determination of promotion to non-supervisory positions	17.1	26.1	19.6	20.0
Determination of the location of the business (including establishment of new ones or moving of the old ones)	18.4	21.1	19.5	19.4
Determination of the size of the work force	17.5	18.2	18.2	17.9
Determination of materials to be used and the size of inventories	11.4	17.6	23.7	17.8
Determination of the distribution of the service or product	10.0	27.8	19.5	17.2
Determination of services to be rendered	7.9	26.1	19.0	16.5
Determination of the application of seniority provisions of contracts	10.7	25.0	13.0	14.9
Determination of the selection of employees for promotion to supervisory or managerial positions	7.8	20.0	13.6	12.7
Determination of products to be manufactured	7.1	13.3	10.3	9.7
Determination of financial policies	2.6	12.0	4.9	5.7
Determination of pricing of goods and services	2.5	4.8	4.9	3.9

Employee Relations managers were also asked to nominate five of the issues listed that they believed were most appropriate for the sole determination of management and five issues which are most appropriate for joint, union-management determination. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Most Appropriate Issue for Sole Determination of Management According to Illawarra Managers

Issue	% respondents
Financial policies	66
Management of producing unit	40
Employee promotion to management	39
Size of workforce	36
Pricing	35
Products manufactured	27
Services rendered	26
Location of business	19
Customer relations	18
Allocation/assignment of work	17

Table 4. Most Appropriate Issue for Joint Union/Management Determination According to Illawarra Managers

Issue	% respondents
Health and safety of employees	58
Penalties imposed for disciplinary action	49
Maintenance of discipline	48
Job content	34
Processes, techniques of manufacture	27
Quality standards	21
Allocation/assignment of work	20
Plant layout and equipment used	18
Property protection measures	16
Scheduling of shifts	14

Decisions relating to financial policies were clearly highlighted as an area where management generally desired sole prerogative. Other issues included size of workforce, promotion to management, and marketing and product related decisions. Decisions concerning the health and safety of employees were highlighted by management as the most critical area for joint decision making between unions and workplace management, possibly because of legislation requiring workplace committees in this area. Employee discipline and penalties were nominated next as key joint decision-making issues, which may be interpreted as a strong desire amongst regional Illawarra management to incorporate unions into the disciplinary process for the workforce. However, significant numbers of managers also considered job content and production methods to be suitable areas for joint determination.

These responses were consistent with those indicated in Table 2. Generally, they indicate that management is most likely to consider job-related and workplace discipline issues most appropriate for joint determination with unions, and higher level decisions to be most appropriately a management prerogative. This distribution of issues between joint or sole determination is consistent with a 'hard' HRM approach to employee participation. However, involvement of unions in determination of these issues is more consistent with a 'soft' HRM approach. A traditional industrial relations approach, on the other hand, would not favour union involvement in joint determination of most of these issues.

Comparative Analysis

For the Australian and US data, a composite score was developed based on how management perceived the 28 workplace practices (as outlined in Table 2) should be determined, jointly with unions or solely by management. This score, defined as 'joint' was correlated with a number of selected variables, such as perceived relationship with union, compatibility of goals (refer to Table 1), the company's involvement in participation plans, and the company's willingness to share information with the union. These simple correlations allowed us to test the hypothesis that managers who indicated that their relationship with the union was cooperative would be willing to allow more joint determination of these issues than would those who perceived their relationship to be less cooperative. The results are shown in Table 5.

The analysis found that there was in the Illawarra a strong and significant positive correlation between variables joint and relationship. Those respondents perceiving a cooperative relationship indicated a greater willingness on the part of management to share input with the unions, than those who perceived the relationship as confrontational. This outcome was in direct contrast to the key findings of the US study, where there was a negative and highly significant correlation coefficient, indicating that 'those managers who perceived their relationship with the union to be cooperative were less likely to believe that issues should be jointly determined by management and the union' (Perline and Sexton 1994: 382).

Table 5: Correlations Between Selected Variables In US and Australian (Illawarra) Samples

Variables	US correlation	Aust. correlation
Joint - Relationship	-0.3827*	0.2840**
Joint - Compatibility	-0.1091	0.1209
Joint - Interference	-0.2398**	0.0317
Joint - Participation Plans	0.0189	0.2618**
Joint - Information Sharing	0.1821	0.3681**
Joint - Job Description	0.1255	0.1866
Relationship - Compatibility	0.5460*	0.3653**
Relationship - Interference	0.4403*	0.4484**
Relationship - Participation Plans	0.0958	-0.0808
Relationship - Information Sharing	0.2231**	0.2330
Compatibility - Interference	0.4407*	0.3774**
Compatibility - Participation Plans	-0.0087	0.0213
Compatibility -Information Sharing	0.2099***	0.1268
Interference - Participation Plans	0.1778	-0.1113
Interference - Information Sharing	0.1798	0.1052
Interference - Job Descriptions	0.1506	0.145
Participation Plans - Information Sharing	0.2793**	0.1278

* Statistically significant at the 0.01 level; ** statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **** Statistically significant at the 0.10 level.

A number of other positive correlations were found in the Illawarra survey. A positive and significant relationship was found between joint and participation plans, joint and information sharing and relationship and compatibility. The Australian survey allowed us to conclude that managers of workplaces which are more heavily involved in employee participation plans and information sharing are more likely to believe in involving unions in decision making. Further, the Australian sample found that managers who perceived they have a more cooperative relationship with their union, believed the goals of union and the company were more compatible. Conversely, those firms which indicated that the union interferes to some extent with their ability to manage perceived their relationship to be more confrontational and their goals incompatible. There were no statistically significant negative correlations.

Again, these results contrasted with those from the US. The relationship between 'joint' and 'interference' in this case was negative and significant, which indicates that the US managers who believed in joint decision-making tended to equate it with union interference with management. The positive and generally significant correlations between 'relationship' and the other variables are consistent with these negative US trends. Perline and Sexton (384) note that they

are to be expected since each of the questions was designed to measure the same thing: the managers' perceptions of and/or attitude toward cooperation. The fact that each of these correlations is positive, and that most are significant, leads us to believe that we are indeed picking up the attitude that we intended to in the Relationship variable, and that its negative correlation with Joint is not simply spurious.

Tables 6 and 7 examine the mean values of variables by perceived relationship between the union and management. In both Tables there is a consistent and significant difference in the mean value of the 'joint' variable across the three possible levels of cooperation represented by 'relationship'. They move in opposite directions in the Tables, consistent with the earlier results of the correlation technique. In other words, the US managers who perceive their relationship with the union as cooperative indicate a significantly lower number of issues where they are willing to accept joint decision-making. In contrast the Australian managers perceiving a cooperative relationship indicated a greater willingness to share decision-making input with the unions than those who perceived the relationship as confrontational.

Table 6: Mean Values Of Variables Used In Study For Entire Australian (Illawarra) Sample And By Level Of Cooperation

Variable	Entire Sample	Coop-erative	Accomm-odating	Confront-ational	F Stat
Joint *	7.44	8.4533	6.3514	1.5000	5.5163
Relationship	2.58	3.00	2.00	1.000	-
Compatibility *	2.05	2.2133	1.7500	1.8333	11.1740
Interference *	2.41	2.6267	2.1081	1.6667	14.5073
Participation Plans	1.87	1.8243	1.9189	2.000	0.3754
Information Sharing *	2.38	2.4800	2.1944	2.1667	3.6617
Sample Size	*118*	*75*	*37*	*6*	

* Based on an analysis of variance technique these variables have statistically significant differences in mean values across the three levels of cooperation at the 0.05 level.

Table 7: Mean Values Of Variables Used In Study For Entire US Sample And By Level Of Cooperation

Variable	Entire Sample	Coop-erative	Accomm-odating	Confront-ational	F Stat
Joint *	4.3178	3.2000	4.7241	6.5714	6.46
Relationship	2.2692	3.0000	2.0000	1.0000	-
Compatibility *	1.9359	2.2000	1.8621	1.4286	16.07
Interference *	2.1410	2.3714	2.0690	1.7143	9.05
Participation Plans	1.9487	2.0857	1.7586	2.0000	1.63
Information Sharing	2.5890	2.7420	2.4828	2.4286	2.24
					1.73
Sample Size	*78*	*35*	*29*	*14*	

* Based on an analysis of variance technique these variables have statistically significant differences in mean values across the three levels of cooperation at the 0.01 level.

In other areas there is more similarity between the respondents. In both Tables those who indicated there was a strong compatibility between union and company goals also perceived their relationship with the union to be cooperative, as might be expected. In addition, those firms who indicated the union interferes to some extent with their ability to manage perceived their relationship with the union to be more confrontational. Finally, respondents who indicated they share more information with the union than five years ago perceived their relationship to be more cooperative (although in the US case this is not a statistically significant correlation).

Conclusions

The Illawarra survey clearly shows the impact of strategic HRM practices in the workplaces of the region, insofar as employee participation practices, particularly of a direct kind, are very well-established in a large majority of workplaces. There also are indications of the recent expansion of these practices especially in the growth of information sharing. This has occurred within a region where the employment relationship remains dominated by traditional industrial relations perspectives to a higher than average degree in the Australian context.

This has occurred whilst maintaining an overwhelmingly positive relationship with unions in managers' eyes, and this is confirmed by the other survey material referred to in this study. Almost two thirds of managers considered that their relationship with unions was cooperative, almost the same proportion who reported employee participation practices. An overwhelming 88% of Illawarra managers believed the goals of their firm and the unions compatible, and a majority believed that union interference in their ability to manage was minimal, even though many acknowledged joint decision making. Our first conclusion, therefore, must be that

strategic HRM can make inroads in the area of participation within a traditional industrial context without necessarily creating a hostile relationship with unions or seeking to displace the industrial relations framework. This may be described as a pragmatic characteristic of HRM under certain circumstances.

Significant proportions of the Illawarra managers surveyed displayed a positive attitude towards joint decision making with unions, but over most issues they constituted a minority. They were also very selective in this regard. Only health and safety, where there are some statutory requirements for joint determination, and discipline attracted a majority in favour of joint decision making with unions. Generally, the Illawarra managers were more inclined to support joint decision making in job-related and disciplinary issues, but much less inclined for higher levels of managerial prerogative in finances, marketing, workforce size and promotion. These trends indicate the combination of a classic 'hard' HRM approach with a traditional adversarial industrial relations perspective which acknowledges the role of unions, but clearly seeks to maintain limits to their inroads upon managerial prerogative.

The breakdown by workplace size and industry sector of managers' responses to the notion of joint decision making with unions are even more instructive. Secondary industry and private sector managers were less inclined to believe in joint decision making with unions, and more likely to confine it to job-related issues only. Consequently, these managers are the main determinants of the overall perspective of 'hard' HRM combined with traditional industrial relations. Managers in tertiary industry, the public sector (with which there would be considerable overlap), and in larger workplaces were more likely to believe in joint decision making and across a wider range of issues. These managers may, therefore, be classified as more likely to adopt a 'soft' HRM perspective to employee participation, and have been commonly associated with more progressive workplace practices. They have also been involved in more recent growth areas of regional employment in the case of tertiary and public sectors, and are less likely as a result to be tied to longstanding traditional industrial relations perspectives than secondary and private sectors of industry.

Overall, we can conclude in this regard that the expansion of HRM participation practices amongst Illawarra managers has been based upon elements of both 'soft' and 'hard' perspectives, which are concentrated in different industry sectors and workplace sizes. Neither HRM perspective is as fully developed as in overseas cases, in that the 'hard' approach is not anti-union to a significant degree, and the 'soft' approach is not as inclusive of unions in decision making as might be found in Scandinavia or Germany. These observations confirm how adaptive HRM is to its environment, including one where an industrial relations perspective to people management remains so strong as in the Illawarra.

These observations were extended by the testing of the relationship between cooperation and joint decision making. The results of this comparison diverge considerably between the US and Australian samples. Perline and Sexton concluded for the US that 'managers who perceive their relationship with the union as cooperative are those who are least likely to believe that the union should have input into decisions made within the corporation' (385). Conversely, those managers who perceived their relationship with the union to be confrontational were more willing to share input into decision-making with unions. Perline and

Sexton conclude that 'when managers speak of cooperation, they perceive that cooperative relationships are those in which the union has less rather than more input into decision-making' (383), thus confirming the pessimistic union hypothesis. In other words, in the US case, the relationship between cooperation and joint decision-making, from the point of view of management, is inverse.

In contrast, the Australian results show that those respondents who perceived a cooperative relationship indicated a greater willingness on the part of management to share input with the union than those who perceived their relationship as confrontational. Unlike their US counterparts, the Australian managers did not tend to equate joint decision-making with union interference in management, and indicated a strong correlation between joint decision-making and both the implementation of participation plans and information sharing. The Australian sample was also more likely to identify compatible goals with unions.

There are many possible explanations for the divergent results, bearing in mind the very limited possibilities for valid comparison between these samples. One obvious explanation lies in the different levels of acceptance of unions in the industrial cultures of the two countries. This study magnifies the difference because of its focus on the Illawarra, which as a region exhibits much greater acceptance of unionism than Australia as a whole. Even as Australian union density has declined, it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of managers are willing to engage unions in joint decision making. Another explanation for Illawarra/US differences lies in the different union policies towards the issue of participation, with the Australian unions becoming far more positive in approach than their US counterparts over the last twenty years. In this they have received support form the main institutions of industrial relations which in the US have been unable to offer this support.

Of course, there was also an important time difference between the two surveys. It is significant in this regard that Perline and Sexton failed to gain an adequate response from managers when they attempted to replicate their survey in 1997. However, from their more positive response, Perline concluded that unions now did desire more input into the decision-making process than they did previously (correspondence 3 July 1998). If the Australian survey had been conducted in the mid to late 1980s it is also likely that a less positive response to union input into decision-making might have resulted.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, however, the comparison between the US and Australia is instructive for three reasons. First, it demonstrates highly varied managerial attitudes to the issues of union cooperation and consultation even within adversarialist frameworks of industrial relations. Secondly, the Australian case appears to indicate a systemic shift away from adversarialism towards a more cooperative approach to industrial relations. Finally, the contrast between the US and Australian managers again confirms the degree to which HRM practices are shaped by their industrial environment.

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