IMPACT OF THE INTERNET UPON PLURALISTIC INDUSTRIALISM

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Organisations are increasingly utilising computer based information systems to manage their employment relations functions. Information is shared and exchanged through internet and intranet sites in virtually all aspects of employment relations. As access to information and participation in processes is facilitated or denied, there would appear to be implications for Kerr's notion of pluralistic industrialism; that is, a type of society in which power (or at least influence) is shared formally or informally by a number of parties (Kerr, 1983). By altering the nature of who has access to what information, the internet (and intranets) may not only cause a shift in power between the traditional key stakeholders in employment relations but may bring about quite fundamental and significant changes in the membership of key stakeholders.

The aim of this paper is to identify the critical factors likely to determine the impact of internet-based employment relations processes upon industrial pluralism. The access of third parties to information concerning aspects of the employment relationship in the context of the internet and its associated technologies is explored. The direct nature of the transaction of information between management and individuals is seen to potentially and significantly alter the distribution of power between the parties. The barriers to entry into this relationship between management and individual employees (or prospective employees) for unions, government and other interested parties is discussed. Finally, the implications of e-business for pluralistic industrialism are explored.

Introduction

The notion of convergence between national systems of employment relations (ER), originally promulgated by Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers (1960) in their seminal work *Industrialism and Industrial Man* has remained an abiding focus of interest for academics despite strong critiques of their thesis (Bamber and Lansbury, 1998: 13-14, Verma, Kochan and Lansbury, 1995: 3; Chamberlain, 1961: 480). Underpinning their convergence thesis was the notion of *pluralistic industrialism* or 'an industrial society which is governed neither by one all-powerful elite... nor by the impersonal interaction of innumerable small groups with relatively equal and fractionalised power (Kerr *et al*, 1960: 376). Kerr (1983) expanded upon the meaning of *pluralistic industrialism* asserting that it referred to a type of society in which 'power (or at least influence) is shared formally or informally' by a number of specified parties.

In the past twenty years a great deal has changed in the nature of work in industrial societies. Various electronic forms of communication have been utilised by organisations to communicate and perform business processes including those specifically concerned with aspects of employment relations. The internet, in particular, has radically altered the nature of organisations, how they are structured, how management functions including employment relations are executed and how people work (Leonard, 2001; Towers Perrin, 2001). 'HR departments have been some of the most enthusiastic developers of Intranet applications because of the large amounts of paper-based processes that can be transferred to the web' (Tapsell, 2001: 37). The implications of these changes for the distribution of power in society are not yet understood. Nor have the implications of the internet-based communication and information

systems in employment relations for pluralistic industrialism been a focus of much research activity.

The aim of this paper is to identify the key factors likely to determine the impact of internet-based employment relations processes upon industrial pluralism. In other words, how does e-ER (or e-HR as it is sometimes referred to) impact upon the distribution of power in employment relations? Of particular interest are the implications for third party access to information concerning fundamental aspects of the employment relationship. The paper begins with a discussion of several concepts critical to this paper including industrial pluralism, employment relations stakeholders and the nature of electronic or computer based information systems in employment relations. The literature dealing with the implications of the internet for power in employment relations is discussed. The use of the internet in employment relations is examined and the implications for industrial pluralism explored.

Key Concepts and Literature

Internet and intranet based software applications are increasingly being used to conduct aspects of both intra and inter organisational relations in employment relations. The term 'internet' is often used rather loosely to refer to a variety of forms of computer based information systems that are likely to have different implications for the distribution of power in employment relations. The nature of the internet and intranets, the technology used to access them such as fixed PC's verse mobile phones, who has access to what information and who determines what information is distributed are factors impacting upon outcomes. The internet is an external network used around the globe although access is limited by a number of factors including language, technical knowledge and poverty. The Internet is a global computer network made up of hundreds of smaller networks linked together by the international telephone system. Individuals or groups of individuals link into this matrix of networks by connecting through a phone line and modem to the nearest node. There is no central computer or controlling authority for the Internet (Clancy-Kelly, 1995). Similar to the Internet, the Intranet is an internal network within organisations that enables individuals to link into that network, however access is restricted. 'An Intranet uses Internet technology inside an organisation, and its goal is to let people communicate better. ..... Intranets encourage the exchange of knowledge in firms, employees are more informed and have the ability to make better, faster decisions' (Tapsell, 2001: 37).

The internet and intranet are increasing the range and depth of communications at all levels of employment relations activity. They are enabling access to people, organisations and information not previously available. Thus the ways in which this technology is used and controlled in employment relations has significant implications for the distribution of power and influence between stakeholders.

In 1962 Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers argued that there is a global tendency for technological and market forces associated with industrialism to push national industrial relations systems towards uniformity or 'convergence'. Kerr argued that: 'Industrial society converges on what we called *pluralistic industrialism*, a type of society in which power (or at least influence) is shared formally or informally by political leaders, however chosen; by managers, whether of state or of private enterprises; by workers, whose consent must be obtained by contract or by assent on the job; and even by intellectuals and by trained professionals' (Kerr, 1983: 351). Kerr identified a number of different arrangements and within each of these possible arrangements are differing distributions of power between the state, the intermediate organisation and the individual; each has influence and none is dominant (1983: 351).

Much of the analysis and criticism directed to the work of Kerr *et al* has focused on the issue of whether or not national industrial relations systems are moving towards uniformity or whether national forces for divergence were underestimated (Bean, 1994:10; Bamber and Lansbury, 1998: 13-20). Of greater interest in this paper is whether the key stakeholders identified by Kerr *et al* adequately recognises the range of interest groups possessing power in employment relations and whether the distribution of power between these stakeholders has changed as a result of the internet.

There are two ways in which the use of internet and intranet technology in employment relations may have consequences for the relevance of Kerr *et al's* notion of pluralistic industrialism. First, the technology appears to have facilitated communications and knowledge flow within organisations and this may have altered the distribution of power between various parties. Secondly, an examination of power and influence in employment relations today appears to involve a more complex array of stakeholders. A variety of interest groups, including for example human rights groups, and even perhaps some individuals such as Bill Gates appear to exercise considerable power and influence in employment relations matters. Computer based information systems and the internet in particular may have increased the range of interest groups throughout society exercising influence in employment relations. The need to recognise a greater range of stakeholder interests in employment relations has been addressed by many scholars including Beer *et al* (1984) in their 'Harvard Model of HRM'.

The impact of the internet upon power in employment relations has been a focus of research for a number of writers interested specifically in the impact upon power within unions. Greene *et al* (2001) explore the implications of electronic communications for internal union democracy utilising the work of Michels (1962). They argue that the relevance of Michels' thesis of oligarchy to the issue of union democracy to the potential of new technologies, is that he clearly identifies the constraints upon members exercising control over the direction of trade union praxis. They argue that unions can utilise E-forms of trade union activities to more effectively achieve their goals. From their examination of Michel's thesis, they identify four distinct 'forces' that are seen to generate oligarchy within the trade union context: inequality of knowledge (between officials and ordinary members); differential control over the means of communication; time, energy and space poverty (of ordinary members) and uneven distribution of communicative skill (the art of politics) (Greene *et al*, 2001:4). The authors examine each of these forces, detailing how pre-existing modes of communication have served to reinforce oligarchy and proceed to discuss the ways in which electronic forms of communication might challenge oligarchical tendencies.

They argue that 'inequality of knowledge' may be reduced through E-forms such as websites that can provide the means through which information and resources can be shared openly. 'Differential control over the means of communication', it is argued, may be altered as 'E-forms also allow for the possibility of imposing transparency on the use of information by increasing transparency of the behaviour of union officials to the union membership and enabling an independent assessment of performance of officials, in a manner that was never previously possible' (Greene *et al*, 2001: 6). They argue that E-forms allow the 'time and space' considerations of trade union participation and activism to be reconfigured as those who were traditionally separated from collective organisation and solidarity by the physical barriers of distance are 'now highly proximate electronically' (Greene *et al*, 2001:7). Whilst recognising associated problems, they assert that E-forms have the potential to reintegrate work and home demands, reducing the power of oligarchy. Finally, 'communicative skills' may be developed and confidence built as the E-form allows people to rehearse in safe spaces and then deliver when the participant is confident.

Greene *et al* conclude from their analysis that E-forms have the potential to challenge the inevitability of oligarchy within trade union organisation and to promote a more distributed form of trade union organisation. Communication processes within unions may be democratised as greater numbers of people can access information and resources as well as evaluate the actions of union leaders and officials (2001:9). However, they identify several barriers to this process including access to the technology, potential domination of communication by traditional cliques and the need to reconcile increased demands, both paid and unpaid, upon time and energy at work and home (2001:11-12).

Web Based ER Applications

Essential to understanding the implications of the internet for pluralistic industrialism is a basic appreciation of how it is being used in employment relations. Employers are increasingly using Web technology for employment relations but particularly human resource management (HRM) services. Watson Wyatt's year 2000 annual survey of HRM found that the Internet is becoming the predominant medium for delivery of HR services (Jones 2000). The employers surveyed consisted of 295 companies employing more than 1.7 million full-time workers across a range of industries and company sizes. The research found that of the employers surveyed, 79 per cent used a company intranet as the primary method for delivery of HR services, up from 50 per cent just two years ago, while 70 per cent used the Internet for HR services. Intranet services were used most often for enhancing employee communications (reported by 78% of respondents), followed by the Internet (53%), call centres (43%), and interactive voice response systems (IVR) (30%). Intranets also were used most often for increasing productivity (44%), followed by the Internet (41%) and IVR (40%). Of the ten automated HR tasks identified in the survey, respondents used Web-based technologies most commonly for corporate communications (78%), providing benefits information (75%), and job postings (75%). For benefits enrolment, IVR was the most commonly cited technology, and outsourcing was used most often for total compensation statements (Jones, 2000: 54-61).

Internet technology has revolutionised many ER and HR activities and impacted upon how professionals performing these roles interact with employees. Vast improvements in efficiencies in HR activities can be achieved through using technology and going online. The HR department can put data directly in the hands of the appropriate person without regard to geography or computing systems (Ulrich 1996). Technology has transformed verbal face-to-face and phone communication to non-verbal communication accessing information sourced through a computer.

The Oracle corporation introduced the automation of the entire business-to-employee (B2E) relationship via the Internet, which enhanced employee productivity. B2E also enabled efficiencies and economies of scale. Oracle found that there were immediate efficiencies in their HR operations when the Intranet was launched. 'With less time spent on administration, HR professionals are finding increased time to focus their expertise on more productive activities related to recruiting, staffing, training, compensation and benefits program' (Collett, 2001: 22).

Internet technology has been employed very visibly to aid in recruitment of staff. The Internet has been widely used to advertise vacancies online, either on an organisations own website or through online recruitment service providers such as seek.com and monster.com. These organisations provide the site for organisations to post jobs online for a small fee in comparison to traditional newspaper advertising. One effect of online advertising is that anyone from anywhere in the world can view and apply for jobs posted on these sites. Many organisations, in addition to advertising on the Internet also use their own website to advertise current vacancies.

Websites can be designed to contain relevant company information such as organisational structure, company history, which prospective employees can view. More advanced websites allow prospective employees to submit their resume for any future vacancies. 'Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that prospective staff members are the biggest users of the websites' (Williams, 2001:31). At Sony Music, for example, their website allows prospective employees to view the company structure, current vacancies, work experience program and send their resume via e-mail directly to the HR department. Prospective employees receive an automatic reply acknowledging receipt of their resume which is placed on a database that can be used to source suitable candidates for future vacancies.

Training materials can be presented and developed online, allowing the cost of investment in training to be minimised, whilst maximising the benefit (Williams, 2001). 'Web-based training is certainly more economical and convenient. For a small investment, you can train a lot of people' (Zimmerman, 2001: 37). The potential benefits of online training include the elimination of travel and accommodation expenses, less time spent away from their workplace, easier monitoring of course participation and tracking of test results.

Providing staff with feedback, evaluation and coaching is one of the most important aspects of the employment relationship however if is often neglected due to the administration burden. If an organisation already has a successful performance management process, automating the process and forms can improve employee access and reduce the paperwork burden. PerformancePro.net is one example of an online system that provides a mechanism for developing performance plans, goals and objectives. Managers and employees can track progress of objectives and evaluate and document performance allowing for early detection of performance problems. This also allows the employee to self-manage his or her own performance against objectives. Password protection allows only the staff member and manager to view it. Preparation and presentation of review forms can be standardised and it can also be used as a tool for 360-degree feedback and collating results (Meyer, 2000).

The Internet has significantly increased employees' access to information 'from their desktop. Management consultant firms, such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Ernst and Young, have a database that gives employees worldwide access to consultancy reports and industry specific research. 'When you can have information in one shared system worldwide, you can have individuals throughout the world log on and add local information to the shared information database' (Hays, 1999:47). 'Around the world and across the international time barriers, human resources executives are reaching out to their employees with the help of the Web's technological capabilities' (Hays, 1999: 46).

The Impact of the Internet on Pluralistic Industrialism

The four forces utilised by Greene *et a* (2001: 4) to access the impact of electronic forms of communication upon union oligarchical tendencies may also be applied to the broader question of industrial pluralism. Insights to the impact of the internet upon the distribution of power in employment relations may be gleaned by examining the how the internet in employment relations impacts upon the four forces: inequality of knowledge; differential control over the means of communication; time, energy and space poverty; and uneven distribution of communicative skill.

The internet appears to reduce inequality of knowledge by facilitating access to information concerning employment matters. Employees' access to information concerning their own entitlements and more general company information has been greatly facilitated by the posting of such data by organisations on their intranets and internets. Those outside an organisation,

including potential employees and other interested parties, have also achieved greater access to employment related information both formally through the internet and more informally through emails, chat rooms and interest based web sites. While trade union access to published company information has increased, improved direct communication between employer and employee may actually undermine the traditional role of the union. Access to information and to communication for non-union third parties appear to have been facilitated by the internet. Human rights and other special interest groups have effectively utilised the internet to conduct campaigns against organisations accused of labour abuses.

The apparent increased access to information via the internet requires much closer scrutiny before any conclusions can be reached regarding the implications for power distribution. However, it appears likely that some change has occurred. The borderless world of internet communications is a challenge to the power of national political leaders to regulate employment conditions. The distribution of power between managers and workers is also impacted as workers have more direct access to information but as managers also achieve a greater capacity to monitor workers on-line. As organisations seek to transform individual employee knowledge into working knowledge and a company asset, employees will find themselves in a double bind. Participation in knowledge exchange through the internet, or more particularly intranets, will form the basis of their value and hence compensation within an organisation and yet the very act of exchange will leave them vulnerable. '...once an individuals' intellectual capital is transfused vitality becomes vulnerable. If one is not constantly engaged in the performativity of transforming oneself as one simultaneously transfuses vitality into the organisation, one runs the risk of being sucked dry, spat out, made redundant' (Garrick and Clegg 2000: 285).

As identified by Greene *et al* (2001), the implications for power distribution of greater access to information will be influenced by the extent of differential control over the means of communication. The traditional controllers of such information generally control the information made available over the internet to employees and others by organisations on their own sites. However, to the extent that individuals and others post their own communications, power is diffused. The wide spread use of emails, chat rooms and special interest web sites indicates a spreading of power in communications via the internet. Employer efforts to regulate employee use of the internet reinforce traditional differential control of communications.

The internet has reduced time, energy and space barriers to communication in employment relations. Barriers to participation, particularly those related to family responsibilities, still exist but access has never the less increased substantially. The greatest barrier to internet based communication is of course lack of access to the technology or lack of desire to utilise it. Poverty and resistance to change in the form of internet based communications are likely to intensify the disparity in power between people.

Similarly, while communicative skills are not equal or universal, as noted by Greene *et al* (2001), the internet not does require a high level of communication skill to participate and it does facilitate skill development in a relatively 'safe' environment. While Kerr's 'intellectuals and by trained professionals' do themselves utilise the internet in employment relations, their status as a 'power elite' is challenged by the greater ease of access for the less educated. English language skills are likely to be an important factor influencing communication power via the internet. English is the language of the World Wide Web and although some sites over translations, access for non-English speakers (and readers) is very limited. Moreover, the speed of much of the internet-based communications is such that efforts to redress this imbalance are likely to have little effect.

Conclusions

The internet is not only profoundly altering the way organisations conduct major elements of their employment relations but is also changing the way individuals communicate about employment relations matters. As access to information and participation in communication processes is facilitated or denied, there are implications for Kerr *et al's* notion of *pluralistic industrialism*; that is, a type of society in which power (or at least influence) is shared formally or informally by a number of parties (Kerr, 1983). By altering the nature of who has access to what information, the internet (and intranets) are not only facilitating a shift in power between the traditional key stakeholders in employment relations but are also leading to changes in the membership of societies' key stakeholders. Individuals and groups not traditionally viewed as key stakeholders in employment relations may exert a greater power and influence through the availability of information and access to internet communications. The power of those who once controlled (and largely still do) the formal communication channels may be challenged by those with access to more informal internet based communications.

The four 'forces' identified by Greene *et al* (2001) as generating oligarchy within the trade union context provide a useful basis from which to examine the impact of the internet upon pluralistic industrialism. The use of the internet in employment relations can be seen to potentially reduce inequality of knowledge, the differential control over the means of communication, the poverty of time, energy and space as well as the traditional uneven distribution of communicative skill. How real and meaningful is this redistribution of power will depend upon several factors including access to the technology, potential domination of communication by traditional cliques and the need to reconcile increased demands, both paid and unpaid, upon time and energy at work and home (Greene *et al*, 2000: 11-12). Willingness to engage in the technology for employment relations purposes and English language skills are also thought to be important determinants.

Internet applications in employment relations potentially reinforce industrial pluralism. A lack of access to the internet must be seen as a force for unitarism. Initiatives designed to limit and control employee use of the internet, including employer policies to curtail personal use and to monitor employee usage, must act to reinforce the oligarchy. Given the apparent desire by employers to exercise control in employment relations, the ability of individuals to access personal computers in their own time is likely to become an increasingly important factor influencing the impact of the internet upon pluralistic industrialism.

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Oppenheim, Rachel. (1993) 'Performance Appraisal of Teams', *Human Resource Quarterly* 6,10 (October 1993): 39-54.

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