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# Improving social dialogue: What employers expect from employee representatives

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## Abstract

The model of social dialogue within organisations between management and employees is facing unprecedented challenges, and changing rapidly. In this new context of labour relations, experiences and expectations of each other are key drivers for the primary parties to this social dialogue. There has been little systematic research investigating the conditions for constructive social dialogue, particularly when it comes to ‘soft factors’, such as perceived competences, trust, influence and conflict behaviours. Addressing these issues based on theories of conflict, trust and influence, this article investigates experiences and expectations of employee representatives on the part of human resource managers, their counterparts in social dialogue. The results of surveys conducted in 11 European countries indicate that, overall, employers found a model of structured

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dialogue with elected employee representatives useful. Furthermore, competences of employee representatives, cooperative conflict behaviours, informal relations and trust promoted the influence of employee representatives on organisational decision-making and the quality of these decisions. We discuss implications for different systems of industrial relations.

**JEL Code:** J50

### **Keywords**

Collective conflict, employee representatives, management, social dialogue

When it comes to social dialogue, I see it as much more than just a part of my portfolio. Indeed, I consider it a prerequisite for a competitive and fair social market economy.

(Marianne Thyssen (2016), European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility)

Worldwide, and also within the European Union (EU), there is a lively debate on the conditions for creative social dialogue in organisations. Employers and employees are essentially and positively dependent on each other. Their dialogue is both central and necessary and must be constructive to reach quality agreements. However, labour relations among employers, trade unions (TUs) and employees are rapidly changing in Europe (Guest, 2016; Hyman, 2015). And with a shift from national and sectoral to more organisational-level negotiations, social dialogue in organisations becomes more and more important. At this level, organisational conflicts in which representatives of the employees play a central role are increasingly evident. Examples include issues of downsizing and restructuring, violations of employee rights and development of inclusive human resource (HR) policies.

The role of employee representatives (from now on ERs) is the centrepiece of our exploration in this study. We examine this role from the perspective of ERs' counterpart in social dialogue. This typically is the HR director or HR manager, acting as representative of the employer. Our research questions are as follows: What are the experiences and expectations of HR managers about the attitudes and competences of ERs? What are their proposals for coping with the challenges that social dialogue is facing? To answer these research questions, we explore how different variables impact the process of workplace-level social dialogue, such as ERs' competences and conflict behaviours, as perceived by managers. While these variables are at the core of the process of social dialogue, they have been under-researched (Elgoibar et al., 2012; Euwema et al., 2015).

So, the aim of this article is to provide insight into actual experiences of, and expectations from, HR managers with regards to ERs. This analysis should contribute to theory and research into labour relations at organisational level. Furthermore, the article shows relations between these core organisational processes and the societal context of social dialogue, as we explore differences among 11 EU member states, which all operate under a common (legal) framework of the EU. The outcomes offer insights for improving social dialogue at organisational level. Before addressing the research questions, we summarise the key challenges for social partners and differences within Europe in terms of social dialogue.

## **Social dialogue in Europe: Changing dynamics**

One of the core values cherished by the EU is the belief in social dialogue as the dominant feature of collective industrial relations (Turnbull, 2010). Included in the definition of social dialogue are ‘all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy’ (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2005). The main goal of social dialogue is to promote consensus and democratic involvement among the main stakeholders, contributing to a more social and fair world of work. Previous research concludes that countries with strong social dialogue tended to be fairer during the recent crisis in terms of cooperation between the state, employers and their employees (Curtarelli et al., 2014; Welz et al., 2014).

Even if social dialogue is considered as a prerequisite for a fair and competitive social market economy (Thyssen, 2016), we see that the model is facing unprecedented challenges (Barnard, 2014). The main concerns are given by a decentralisation of the collective system (Marginson, 2015), the individualisation of employment relations (Baccaro and Howell, 2011; Edwards, 2009), and the decline of TU density (Curtarelli et al., 2014). These factors are framed by Marginson and Sisson (2004) as the Americanisation of industrial relations. A last challenge we include here refers to the contextual differences among countries sharing the same system (Koukiadaki et al., 2016). These challenges and their influence on social dialogue are introduced next.

### ***Decentralisation of the collective system***

Decentralisation in collective agreements from national and sectoral to organisational level has been taken place worldwide. A decrease in collective bargaining coverage is also a reality in many European countries (Glassner et al., 2011; Marginson, 2015). Macron, elected in 2017 as president of France, made this a key point in his reform of industrial relations. This is seen as a measure to better align wages with productivity at local and firm level, making room for more negotiation and decision-making at company level (European Commission, 2015; Gold et al., 2010; Marginson, 2015; Visser, 2010).

This flexibility in agreements clearly challenges social dialogue in organisations. Whereas 20 years ago agreements were negotiated between employers and unions at national or sectoral level, today, negotiations on working conditions, health and safety, working hours and pay become issues at the table at organisational level (Carley and Marginson, 2010a; Molina and Miguelez, 2013). In addition, stricter regulations and changing practices make it increasingly difficult to extend collective agreements to a wider share of employees (Bosch, 2015; European Commission, 2015).

### ***Individualisation of employment relations***

Previous literature (Lipsky et al., 2015) highlights the transition from a more collective system – with its roots embedded in the beginnings of the industrial era of the 20th century – towards an individualised model of labour relations, more in line with the knowledge era and the competitive context of the 21st century. New relationship forms between employees and employers are present, in which a decline in the collective orientation,

alternative forms of employee's representation and promotion of individualised employment relations or i-deals (Gillilan et al., 2014; Guest, 2016).

Guest (2014, 2016) argues that traditional systems of industrial relations have been broken, more notably in countries such as the US and the UK where there has been only a weak legal framework to support them, but also, to varying degrees, in European countries where there has been stronger institutional support for unions. This breakdown is reflected most noticeably in the decline of union membership and in some of the collective values associated with it (Hyman, 2015; Sen and Lee, 2015). More and more, labour contracts are negotiated individually. This change has been attributed to the 'desire and ability of employees to manage their career individually, and the scepticism concerning the relevance of collective labour relations' (Keune, 2015: 48), challenging the role of industrial relations actors at organisational level (Fells and Prowse, 2016; Keune, 2015), though whether the emergence of such attitudes is a cause or effect of institutional change is an open question.

### *Decline of TU density*

Universally, TU membership is in decline (Hyman, 2015; Sen and Lee, 2015), and the social and economic changes described above reduce the scope of union influence (Koukiadaki et al., 2016; Martínez-Lucio, 2016). This decline may lead workers to search for new forms of employee representation parallel to the unionised system (Hayter, 2015). Responding to these changes is a challenge for unions as well as for management. Both parties share the need to attract competent and motivated employees to negotiate efficiently (Euwema et al., 2015; Visser, 2010).

The decline in traditional industrial relations institutions makes union renewal an urgent challenge (Martínez-Lucio, 2016; Sen and Lee, 2015). Even with the decline of membership, recent literature firmly suggest that this is the moment where union 'revitalisation' becomes an important part of the labour and employment relations agenda (Fairbrother, 2015; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Martínez-Lucio, 2016; Simms, 2012).

### *Differences across countries*

Social dialogue is institutionalised in all European Commission (EC) member states, although the persistence of national variations impacts the way in which industrial relations are driven in each context (Marginson, 2015; Turnbull, 2010; Vos, 2006). The differences are related to national legislations, historical developments and societal cultures of industrial relations (Hyman, 2015; Kelly, 2015). The position and functioning of social dialogue in organisations is closely related to the broader context of industrial relations at national level. Thus, the role played by the system and the actors differs largely between countries (Koukiadaki et al., 2016; Pulignano et al., 2012). Therefore, we briefly explain the main structural differences between European countries.

First, unions engage in a variety of ways with legislatures. For example, within most Nordic countries, TUs and the state are closely related through national systems of representation. In Spain and Portugal, there are sector level agreements and there is a dialogue with the state, although this dialogue is not continuous. In Eastern Europe, TUs

and the state are weakly related. In the UK, the state–labour relation is not institutionalised (Pulignano et al., 2012).

Second, relations between TUs and employers vary across Europe. In Germany and Denmark, strong relations exist between leading corporations and unions. This is partly due to legislation; however, it is also due to an awareness of shared interests, such as a strong and competitive economy. Such relationships are absent in the United Kingdom. In most Southern European countries (such as Spain and Portugal), there is generally low trust between unions and employers (Elgoibar, 2013). Eastern European markets have other priorities than social dialogue, a circumstance which hinders the development of high-trust industrial relations in Eastern European countries (Teichmann and Lohmus, 2014).

Third, employee representation varies across Europe. The existence of workplace employee representation structures is a distinctive feature of industrial relations in Europe. Works councils are permanent elected bodies of workforce representatives, set up on the basis of law or collective agreements, with the task of promoting cooperation within the enterprise for the benefit of the enterprise itself and employees, by creating and maintaining good and stable employment conditions, increasing welfare and security of employees and an understanding of enterprise operations, finance and competitiveness (Martínez-Lucio and Weston, 2007). In the 27 EU states plus Norway, there are four states (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) where the main representation is through works councils with no statutory provision for unions at the workplace. In eight countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Sweden), representation is essentially through the unions. In another 11 countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain), it is a mixture of both, although sometimes TUs dominate. In a further five countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia and the United Kingdom), unions are the sole channel, although legislation now offers additional options (Pulignano et al., 2012). Thus, a heterogeneous scenario across Europe persists. Therefore, we should take into account the cross-cultural approach when explaining the European context of social dialogue.

### *The role of the social partners: ERs and management*

ERs are employees within the company who have a (part- or full-time) role as representative (Watson, 1988). They represent their co-workers in the decision-making processes with management. Within the European framework, their main representation tasks take place: (a) on disciplinary and grievance matters, (b) in works councils or other consultative bodies, (c) in collective bargaining of terms and conditions and (d) for making workforce agreements (Conchon, 2011). In the current context, ERs' ability to negotiate new organisational arrangements is fundamental for supporting employees' interests (Rocha, 2010). And this is what we explore in this study from the perspective of their counterpart, HR managers.

ERs act in representation of their co-workers (Gold et al., 2010) and their role is important for the communication between their constituency and management (Stuart and Lucio, 2002). ERs act not on their individual interests, but as agents for others (Elgoibar, 2013). Agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) underlies the actions of ERs, whereby ERs have

a principal-agent relationship with their co-workers. At the same time, HR managers in the framework of social dialogue act as agents of the management side.

## **Relevant factors in studying the experience and expectations of employers on ERs**

The overall aim of the study is to contribute to an improvement in the quality of social dialogue as a tool for social innovation, by presenting an exploration of European managers' experiences and expectations on structures, roles, attitudes and competencies of ERs. We start describing the outcomes of the social dialogue process, the quality of the agreement and how ERs influence decisions taken by management. We then explain why the level of conflict and perceptions of trustworthiness were chosen as key variables influencing the outcomes of social dialogue. Finally, perceived behaviour in conflict and competences of ERs are analysed as variables, assumed to be personal qualities of the ERs that are given at the start of the process. The analysis assumes these variables to be at the heart of any dialogue between employers and ERs. Finally, we analyse managers' perspectives on these variables in Europe and their proposals for improvement.

### *Quality of agreements*

Quality of agreements is defined in terms of the extent to which optimal solutions are reached through a process of dialogue, whereby all parties maximise their desired outcomes and realise a mutually satisfactory result, to which both parties are then committed (Lax and Sebenius, 1992; Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993; Sebenius, 2015). This definition can also be applied in social dialogue processes in organisations, in areas such as arrangements for health and safety, restructuring and other strategic issues (Garcia et al., 2017). To meet the interests of the different stakeholders, innovative and tailor-made solutions are typically required. Aaldering and Van de Velden (2016) demonstrate that representatives who take an integrative bargaining approach achieve higher outcomes, both for their constituencies, as in terms of joint outcomes. This is so because they can use the integrative potential more, before the distributive bargaining takes place.

Characteristics and quality of collective agreements in organisations depend on the way management and ERs solve conflictive issues (Amason et al., 1996). If both parties' needs are to be optimally met, and all parties at the negotiation table are to commit to this goal, then conflict management and ERs' competences have been identified as important factors (Garcia et al., 2017).

### *Influence on the decision-making process*

ERs serve as a bridge between managers and their co-workers, representing a key element of social dialogue. However, they have been losing influence in recent years, to a different degree in different countries (Koukiadaki et al., 2016; Molina and Miguelez, 2013). How much do ERs actually participate in decision-making in European organisations? Participation on some issues is mandated by law, and therefore these issues can be

seen as traditional, such as working conditions, working hours and wages (Guest, 2016), as well as the organisation of jobs (Van der Brempt, 2014). Other issues have developed more recently and are therefore referred to as innovative issues, such as work–life balance, equality, green production and corporate social responsibility (Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan, 2004). These innovative issues are likely to have less salience and putting them on the agenda may depend to a greater degree on the relationship between management and ERs (Garcia et al., 2017). Gaining influence is closely related to the labour legislation in each country. However, at the organisational level, the motivation and competencies of ERs and the attitudes of employers play a main role in determining ERs' power and influence in decision-making (Euwema and Elgoibar, 2012).

### *Perceived trustworthiness*

The most cited theoretical framework on trustworthiness was developed by Mayer et al. (1995). These authors state that perceived trustworthiness has three dimensions: ability, benevolence and integrity. As all three of these dimensions are significantly related to trust (Davis et al., 2000), which is fundamentally an aspect of an interpersonal relationship (Levin et al., 2006), and therefore some specific attachment between trustee and trustor seems to be a precondition (Mayer and Davis, 1999).

Managers' perceptions of ERs' trustworthiness to perform their role is therefore likely to be a basis for promoting the latter's participation, particularly in the discussion of innovative issues at the negotiating table, and this trustworthiness is most likely strongly determined by HR managers' perceptions of the abilities or competences, benevolence and integrity of ERs.

### *Frequency of conflict*

We differentiate relationship and task conflicts, the first being conflicts about values or interpersonal styles, while task conflicts refer to disagreements over distribution of resources, procedures and policies (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Euwema et al., 2015; Jehn, 1995). Traditionally, research has concluded that relationship conflict can damage the organisational climate and the performance of individuals, teams and organisations (Janssen et al., 1999). However, task conflict can be productive, enhancing the quality and acceptance of negotiated outcomes (Olson et al., 2007), but only under specific conditions and in a cooperative context (De Wit et al., 2012; Medina et al., 2008).

### *Competences*

Agents such as ERs have to balance between various interests: those of their constituencies (not necessarily sharing all the same interests), the organisation (in their role as being employees), other ERs, and their own self-interest as agents and employees (Garcia et al., 2017). Being a competent ER, therefore, can be quite challenging and stressful (Elgoibar, 2013). The notion of competence is defined as the capacity adequately to perform a task, duty or role in the context of a professional work setting.

Thus, a competence is understood to integrate knowledge, skills, personal values and attitudes, and to be acquired through work experience and learning by doing (Bartram and Roe, 2008). Managers perceive ERs as competent, to the extent that they are knowledgeable, have the appropriate skills and adequate attitudes to perform their role (Soares and Passos, 2012).

### ***Conflict management***

Conflict management is often defined as an individual's reaction to the perceptions that one's own and the other party's current aspiration cannot be achieved simultaneously (Deutsch, 1973; Pruitt, 2013). It is what people who experience conflict intend to do as well as what they actually do (De Dreu et al., 2001; Van de Vliert et al., 1997). Previous research on ERs' conflict management shows that ERs tend to combine cooperative and competitive behaviours (Elgoibar, 2013). This combination can include a more cooperative or competitive approach and is known as Conglomerate Conflict Behaviour (Van de Vliert et al., 1995). It has been shown that combining conflict behaviours drives towards effectiveness (Munduate et al., 1999; Van de Vliert et al., 1997). The main explanation for this conglomerate pattern of conflict behaviour is given by the perception that conflicts are often mixed-motive situations (Euwema and Van Emmerik, 2007).

### **Participants and procedure**

To address the research questions, we focused on HR directors and managers in organisations. This role represents the employer in negotiations with unions and ERs, such as Works Councils, and it is in charge of negotiating all labour related issues. In Europe, this is typically a responsibility of the HR Director, who in larger organisations might have a team of specialists working on specific issues (pay, additional benefits, learning and development, health & safety, etc.). In some organisations, this role can also be supported by a specialist who is dedicated to work with the unions and ERs (known as the 'social relations' director). In most organisations, the HR manager is also responsible for contracting all staff, development of HR policies, and the correct implementation and execution of all HR policies, as well as for assessment of the effectiveness of measures (including surveys of employees). In all these matters, HR represents the organisation, in relation to the employees.

The study includes quantitative data from 611 HR directors and HR managers and qualitative data from 110 interviews with these persons. Quantitative data were collected through an online survey in 11 European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. In all countries, HR directors and managers from different sectors and sizes were invited to participate using a range of networks. A random sampling procedure was followed in each country, distributing the surveys among networks, without preselection. The average age of the participants was 43.5 years, with 50% male and 47% female respondents (3% unanswered). The survey and instructions were translated into 10 languages (Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, French, German, Italian,



Polish, Portuguese and Spanish). For Belgium, both Dutch and French surveys were made available. In addition to measuring the key variables described in the previous section, information on participants (age, gender, role, education and years actively in contact with ERs) and organisations (number of employees, economic conditions) was gathered.

Qualitative data were collected with semi-structured interviews with HR directors and managers in the same participant countries. Results of the interviews will be mentioned to contextualise the quantitative data and illustrate the situation of social dialogue in each of the participant countries.

## Results and discussion

Despite differences within the employment relations structures in the 11 countries, quite clear commonalities also appeared in responses from employers in Europe. We summarise employers' experiences of social dialogue and expectations regarding its improvement.

The main descriptive results from the surveys are presented in Figure 1 and have been published by Euwema et al. (2015). We elaborate on the following key factors from the model: influence on decision-making, perceived competences, type and frequency of conflict (relationship and task conflict), conflict management, trustworthiness and informal relations, and quality of the agreements. We also address the diversity encountered among countries.

As we can observe in Figure 1, European managers perceived the influence of ERs on decision-making as moderately low. They also considered that ERs are underqualified for performing their role. In contrast, they generally had a more positive perception of ERs' benevolence and integrity. Commitment to the organisation by ERs was also generally perceived as high and managers indicated a willingness to empower the role of ERs. Finally, managers perceived strong differences among the ERs in their organisation; therefore, we should be cautious when generalising the results.

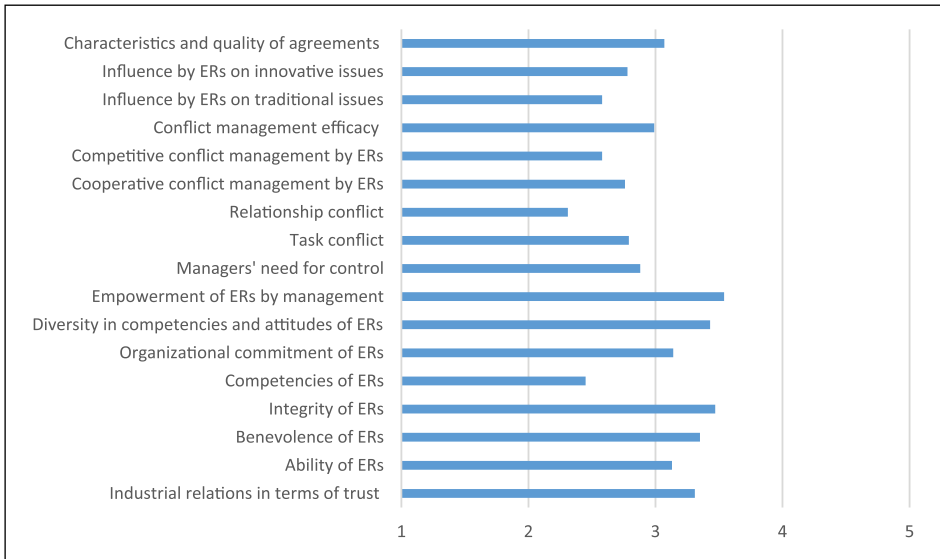
### *Quality of agreements*

The quality of the agreements perceived by managers (Figure 2) did not show large differences among countries and most countries scored around 3. This level shows that there are still possibilities for improvement regarding the agreements between ERs and management.

### *Influence on the decision-making process*

The results showed a relatively low score (under 3) for both types of influence – on traditional and on innovative issues – overall in Europe. However, when examining the scores in each country, we see quite significant differences (Figure 3).

When we look at these results in Figure 3, Germany's position in the top right corner stands out, pointing that managers perceive high influence of ERs on both types of issues



**Figure 1.** European means of the variables included in the study.

Source: Euwema et al., 2015: 13.

in Germany. In contrast, Portuguese managers perceive low influence of ERs on the decision-making of both types of issues. In some cases, for example, the Netherlands and Denmark, the scores for innovative issues were significantly higher than those of traditional issues. Previous research had shown that influence is positively related to the level of competences (Garcia et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2004):

Social dialogue is very effective here. Our ERs are very competent, they have the appropriate education. This arguably facilitated dialogue. (HR manager, education sector, Belgium)

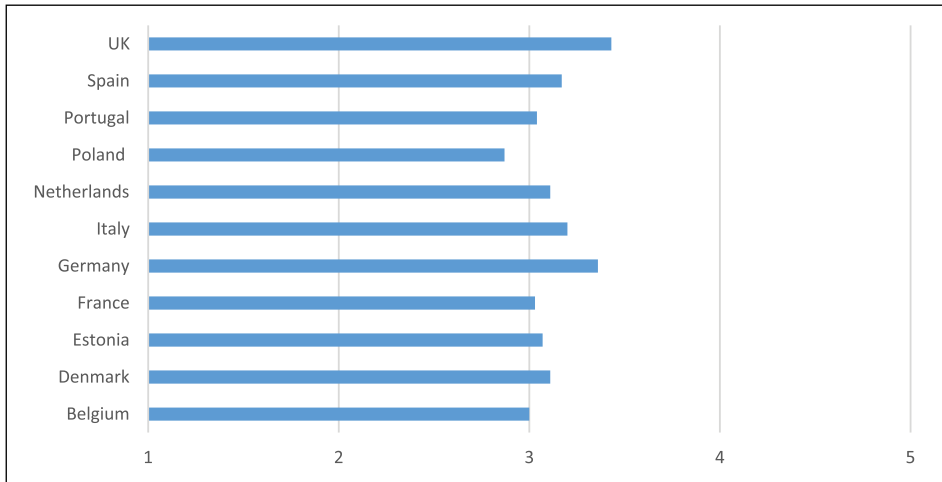
### *Trustworthiness*

Our observation that trustworthiness is a key factor for social dialogue was borne out in the perceptions of HR managers:

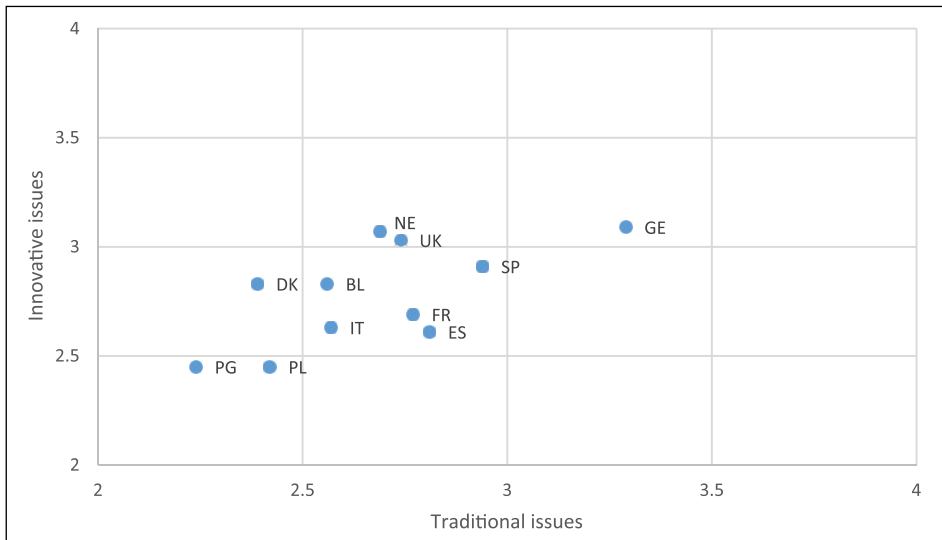
We trust each other. It is the precondition of a close cooperation. I have 100% trust in that they work well and are trustworthy, and that we can have talks off the record, where we think out loud together [...] The main task is the same: We need to have a good, healthy, well-functioning workplace and we all work together so that our customers experience a good bank. (German HR director)

### *Frequency of conflicts between management and ERs*

Regarding the frequency of conflicts between management and ERs (Figure 4), there's some variety depending on the country. They all showed scores below 3 for the

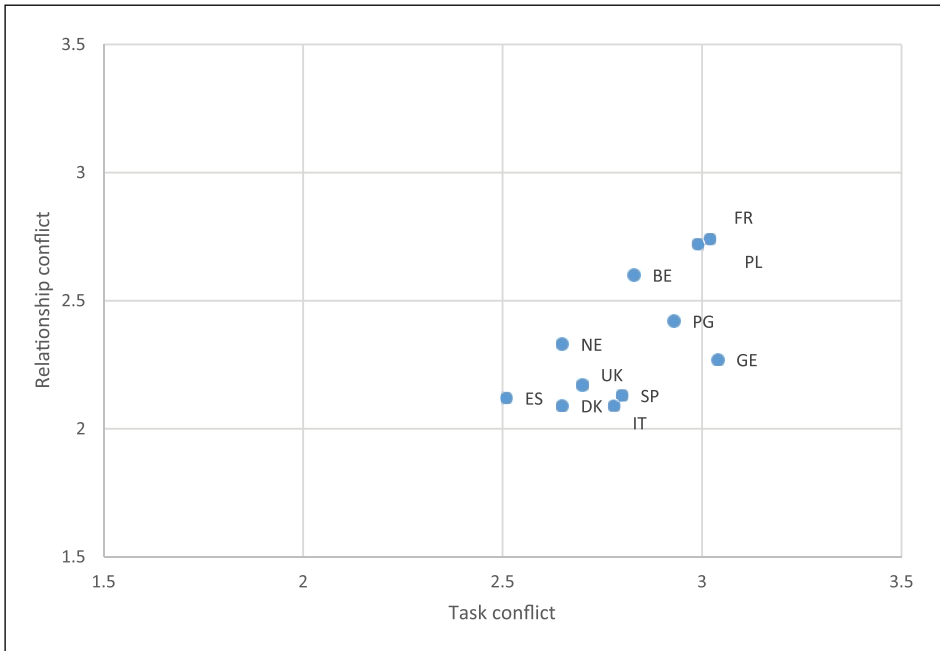


**Figure 2.** Perceived quality of agreements in 11 countries.  
Source: Garcia et al., 2015: 184.



**Figure 3.** Influence of ERs on innovative and traditional issues in 11 countries.  
Source: Garcia et al., 2015: 184.

perceived frequency of relationship conflicts and also in many cases for task conflict frequency. French managers perceive more conflicts than the average in Europe, of both types. Estonia shows low scores for relationship conflicts. The same goes for Belgium; however, here managers perceived the frequency of task conflicts as comparatively higher to the rest of Europe.



**Figure 4.** Frequency of task and relationship conflict in 11 countries.

Source: Garcia et al., 2015: 186.

## Competences

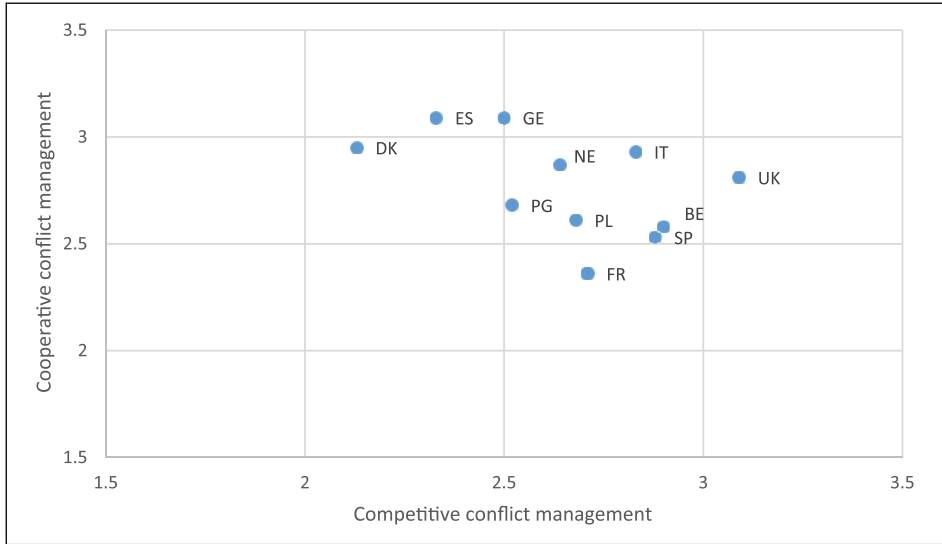
Managers who perceived ERs as competent considered ERs' influence to be higher in the decision-making process over traditional as well as innovative issues (Garcia et al., 2017). This result is in line with the theory of bases of power (French and Raven, 1959), underscoring that perceived competence can be seen as expert power (Munduate and Medina, 2017). If these competences are lacking in the eyes of HR managers, influence will be low. A quote from a Spanish manager illustrates this finding:

The only good thing I can say about them [ERs] is that they are nice people. (Spanish HR director)

A majority of HR managers were therefore willing to invest in development of the competences of ERs:

In our company we invest in the training of our ERs, we believe that we achieve more innovative and higher quality agreements if we negotiate with competent ERs. (HR manager, Belgium)

There was a general opinion that ERs need to be competent and that professionalising this role can become a win-win for both parties.



**Figure 5.** Cooperative and competitive conflict management by ERs in 11 countries.  
 Source: Garcia et al., 2015: 187.

### Conflict management

Figure 5 presents perceptions of cooperative and competitive conflict management behaviour by ERs. We note differences in the perception of ERs’ conflict management between countries. We can see more manager perceptions of cooperative trends in conflict management in countries such as Germany, Estonia and Denmark. In contrast, the results in Spain, Belgium and the UK point towards more competitive patterns, as perceived by management:

It is important to act in a way that the WC is able to save face. It is not about winning one battle but about a long term relationship. (HR manager, Germany)

I can perfectly understand that our ERs have to make a stand sometimes, even call for action. As long as this is in a common understanding that we will work it out in the end, it’s perfectly OK for me. (HR manager, the Netherlands)

### Conclusion

It has been the intention of the above analysis to map the factors that contribute to a constructive social dialogue in organisations. The results are based on the experiences and expectations of managers on ERs. As general conclusion, we have seen that employers, as one of the two primary parties involved in social dialogue are satisfied with the main outcomes provided by the system. They consider however, that there is place for improvement. We summarise here the factors oriented to improvement as perceived by HR managers when it comes to ERs.

By far most European employers prefer strong counterparts at the table who are competent, and show benevolence and integrity. They consider that a cooperative way of managing conflicts allows them to share more information and arrive at agreements of higher quality. And, they want to make agreements that meet the changing developments in the workforce and economy. Employers value a formal structure for social dialogue to make such agreements, also within the organisation.

## **Implications for the improvement of social dialogue**

### *Competences of ER: More innovative and less ideological TUs?*

Employers in most countries expressed appreciation for ERs, however were concerned about their level of competence and their attitudes towards innovation and change (Garcia et al., 2015). As in most countries, ERs are now closely related to unions and are trained by unions, and employers perceive that unions should be more adaptive to economic developments, including at organisational level. In this study, employers expressed the view that unions could improve their influence on decision-making in organisations if they were less conservative and less ideological. In the view of managers, organisations continuously need to adapt to the external environment and can hardly be aligned with a rigid attitude on the part of ERs. Management can contribute to the willingness to change by involving ERs early in the process and sharing information. ERs are expected to fight for the interests of the employees; however, this is not necessarily in conflict with the interests of the company.

### *Preventing relationship conflict: Investing in informal relations*

Within each country, we found clear differences among organisations on the matter of relationship management. A key factor mentioned by many HR managers was to develop good task-focused informal relations. Managers in Germany, Denmark and Belgium reported using informal communication mechanisms before negotiations, so as to get through some of the structures and possibly already thinking about solutions. A key element here is the development of good personal relations, so as to prevent relationship conflicts, when negotiation on task related conflicts.

### *Make the role of ERs attractive*

From the results, it can be seen that it is a main concern of managers to be able to recruit ERs who show high competencies and motivation. For this, the role has to be made attractive for people who fit this profile and expectations from management. Furthermore, young employees and employees with flexible attitude are a target of this recruitment. New practices were mentioned by Garcia et al. (2015: 192) such as the following: (a) rewarding the role of ERs, as part of career management; (b) promoting adequate remuneration, especially in large organisations; (c) not necessarily limiting wages at the level of entry, when ERs start; and (d) involving ERs for shorter periods or specific project assignments, instead of a long time commitment.

## *Constructive conflict management*

Many of the managers believed that constructive conflict management should be a priority. For example, some of the organisations who participated had groups of employers and ERs who worked to prevent conflicts before negotiations. These members all had experience and knowledge about the topics being discussed. Research has pointed to the benefits for developing constructive and innovative social dialogue of including experienced employees to workgroups.

The main contribution of this article to the literature on industrial relations at organisational level is the presentation of data on HR managers' perceptions and expectations of ERs, focusing on the processes central to social dialogue. Our study highlights the importance of differentiating between types of conflict (task and relationship), understanding the different bases of trustworthiness (competences, benevolence and integrity), as well as differentiating, when investigating the influence of ERs, among the nature of the topics at stake. The new differentiation made here between traditional and innovative issues, clarifies that future research should aim at understanding on what issues ERs do have influence, and what factors contribute to that influence, as well as the perceived quality of decision-making. Our study further makes clear, that employers do appreciate a structured dialogue with ERs. Several conditions contribute to this appreciation. However, the trend towards individualised contracts as alternative to a structured dialogue is now the case in most European organisations. What is essentially the finding here is the need to create a constructive dialogue at different levels in the organisation, as is picture in the metaphor of the Tree of Trust (Lewicki et al., 2016), where different layers of dialogue, as branches of a tree, are connected to promote dialogue at all levels within the organisation.

## **Limitations and future research**

This study has some limitations. First, we present only the perspective of employers: the HR managers. Therefore, we have to be careful when interpreting the data and certainly avoid any claims about what ERs actually do, or what their level of competences actually 'is'. However, this perception that HR managers have is essential, and drives their attitudes and behaviours, therefore adds to the literature. A second limitation is that the data collection is cross sectional; therefore, no conclusion about causality can be drawn. Particularly to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay among trust, conflicts, influence and quality of decisions made, future research should best use a longitudinal and multi-source design. Third, our samples in each country were limited in size, and we could not control the response rates. We therefore face the risk that these samples are not representative. This is an artefact of our methods; however, future studies could benefit from efforts to collect representative samples. Getting sufficient responses from this target group appears however challenging. In fact, it is easier to collect data on the side of ERs (Munduate et al., 2012). Finally, the current study was conducted in 11 European countries and results were rather consistent over these countries, although in some areas quite strong differences emerged. All these countries are EC-member states, and operate under one EC legislative frame. Industrial relations are embedded in legal

and cultural realities leading to different industrial relations in each country. Future studies should empirically investigate perceptions of management towards ERs, in whatever system or role they operate. This, we believe, is an important task for international, comparative research in the field of industrial relations.

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