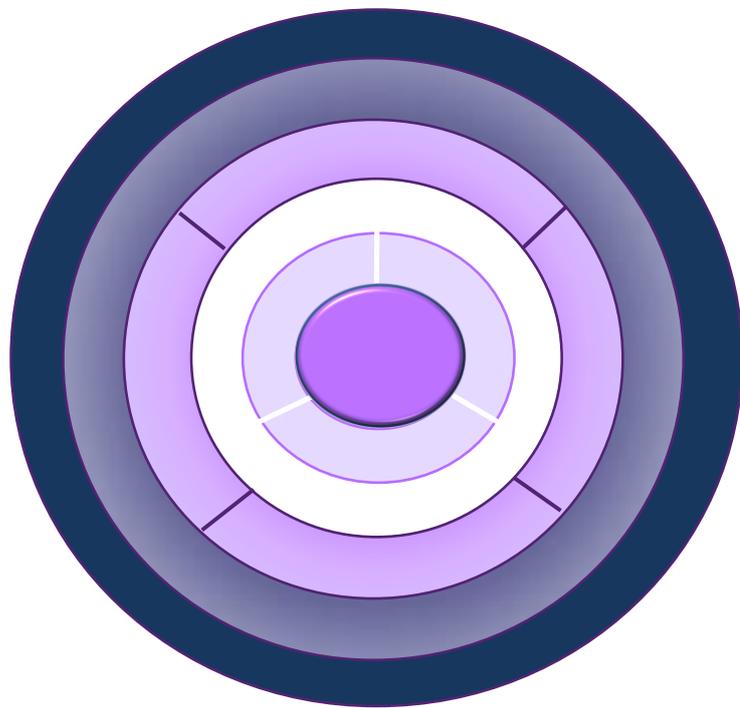


# Rethinking employee voice

Voice at TUI UK & Ireland



tomorrow's  
company

# Voice case studies overview

We want to understand the value of employee voice to both employers and employees in companies operating within the UK.

Although the literature, and in particular the WERS survey, shows the spread of voice across UK workplaces, and the number of voice practices in workplaces, it is not able to show the relationship between different voice mechanisms, the organisational culture and the perceived value of voice to workplace actors. Moreover, the pace of change within UK workplaces has meant that the academic literature has yet to fully capture recent innovations in voice such as the introduction of legislation requiring greater consultation and the continued expansion of online communication and the spread of social media.

The case studies, therefore, enable us to firstly map some of the voice arrangements deemed to be effective for employers and employees in different sectors of the economy. Secondly, they will allow us to explore some of the dynamics between the different voice mechanisms and also the cultural context in which they exist, including management approaches.

The case studies are not intended to be representative of the UK economy, nor of UK practice. They are explicitly designed to identify good practice, by which we mean practice that is seen as valuable to employers and employees.

In particular we aim to understand:

- What structures and cultures a range of different organisations have in place to harness employee voice
- What factors enable and inhibit employee voice
- What benefits are associated with employee voice
- Whether there are any tools or techniques that can be applied in other companies.

# Part 1: Introduction

This case study describes the structures and underpinning culture of employee voice at TUI UK & Ireland part of the TUI Travel PLC group. It also explores the values placed on voice by both the business and employees and identifies the factors that inhibit and enable it.

TUI Travel is one of the world's leading leisure travel companies, it operates in 180 countries, serves 30 million customers across 31 key markets and employees around 53,000 people.

TUI UK and Ireland is the UK's largest tour operator. Key brands include Thomson and First Choice. They employ a team of 13,800 employees and serve over 5.5 million customers each year. Thomson and First Choice currently have around 750 retail shops across the UK.

TUI UK and Ireland's airline, Thomson Airways is the UK's third largest airline with 57 aircraft and employs over 4,000 people in the UK and Ireland operating to over 88 destinations in 30 countries.

## Part 2: Background of voice at TUI UK & Ireland

At TUI UK & Ireland, employee engagement is seen as one of the three key strategic imperatives for their business. Their target is for an engagement score of 82%. TUI Travel recognises that employee voice, as one of the enablers of engagement, is central to them maintaining and improving engagement and performance in their workforce.

The nature of the workforce itself at TUI UK & Ireland provides some unique challenges in terms of accessing employee voice. The workforce is spread across a number of locations from the head office functions, retail estate, call centres, overseas resorts and airline bases. The organisation provides a full and diverse range of travel services and the workforce reflects this diversity. TUI UK & Ireland staff perform a wide variety of functions, from retail and booking to air-travel and resort hosting.

TUI UK & Ireland recognises that they need to reach out to all of their workforce populations and enable them all to have a voice. Through doing so TUI UK & Ireland are able to understand the different needs and views among the different sections of the workforce. They are also able to work closely with their staff in order to identify solutions that support their business goals.

## Part 3: Voice at TUI UK & Ireland

### ‘Be Involved’ Forum

TUI UK & Ireland has a well-established and effective staff forum that helps facilitate employee voice within the organisation. ‘Be Involved’ serves to channel employee voice upward to a divisional and UK & Ireland level and to make for a more participative culture. They see the forum as “ensuring we have an ongoing dialogue and involve colleagues with matters that are important to them”.

Be Involved serves three distinct roles. First, it has a national role. 17 employee representatives from across Head Office divisions meet monthly with HR and a Board Director (where appropriate) to discuss the key issues of the day. Directors are able to raise questions or issues with forum members in advance for them to consider and to gather feedback from their colleagues. Relevant teams also use this forum to discuss proposed changes to policy.

Second, there is the divisional role. Representatives for the division normally attend Divisional Leader Meetings to participate in discussions around relevant issues. This provides vital feedback to management on what they call the ‘Word on the Street’. Some representatives also have monthly 1:1s with Board Directors to discuss key topics and get detailed feedback on the key issues for staff in their area. This role is still evolving across the business, with representatives and directorates sharing best practice on what works well in different areas.

Finally, Be Involved also serves a legal and procedural purpose as a formal body for information and consultation. Representatives are at times required to collectively represent their colleagues if the business proposes a change which impacts on roles being at risk of redundancy.

TUI UK & Ireland continually reviews the working of the forum in order to identify how it can be made more effective and proactive within the business. They are currently looking at the development and skills needs of representatives in order for them better to fulfil their role. TUI UK & Ireland are also looking at what information they can bring to the attention of the forum and how. They want to identify and deal with the key themes that have an impact on engagement.

Asides from the head office Be Involved forum, TUI UK & Ireland also have separate forums within their retail and call centre operations. These focus in on the specific issues that matter to these teams.

## Union representation

As mentioned above, TUI UK & Ireland's approach to voice is flexible and takes account of the differences between their various functions. For example, unlike the rest of their workforce, their airline is unionised. TUI UK & Ireland sees the union as an "integral stakeholder in contributing to employee voice within the company" and they understand the importance of fostering a positive working relationship with them.

As with their Be Involved forum, they hold regular monthly meetings between union representatives and their management team to discuss the issues that are important to members. TUI UK & Ireland understand that the key to maintaining a positive relationship with the union is for both sides to be open and transparent, sharing information, working in partnership and involving the representatives at an early stage in discussions.

## Individual voice

In addition to these well-established collective and representative structures for employee voice, TUI UK & Ireland understands the importance of direct and individual voice. As they explain, *“Whilst the relationships we have with the Be Involved representatives and trade union representatives are key to how we approach employee voice this does not take any importance away from the direct communications and open discussions which we have with all individuals and we place a great importance on how we communicate with people within the business”*. Martin Gash, HR Director

TUI UK & Ireland has a number of channels to support the expression of individual voice. They continue to place a high importance on one-to-one meetings between employees and managers. They see these as vital for the expression of employee voice as they provide an open and honest forum for communication.

Employee voice is routinely accessed through team meetings and briefings as well as periodic away-days. These provide an open forum for communication and discussion, in which managers can update employees and raise company-wide issues to their attention

Town Halls are also conducted on a monthly basis by David Burling, Managing Director with regular participation from other Board Directors and Senior Managers. The town halls which are webcast to the wider business are very popular and are used to update on business performance, key themes, developments and challenges.

In addition to this face-to-face contact, TUI UK & Ireland undertakes an annual opinion survey. They see this as vital to their understanding of employee voice. As their annual report explains, *“employee survey findings form an important strategic tool for our Board and leaders. It ensures that they are provided with honest feedback that can drive business improvements.”* The survey, ‘Your Voice’ is seen as an important tool for understanding how employees feel. As well as measuring employee voice, the survey also examines employee engagement and employee enablement – the extent to which employees are supported to perform their roles effectively.

Following the completion of the survey, results are provided for each division and department. Communication sessions are held with staff leading to individually tailored plans for every area addressing the key areas identified in the survey where improvements can be made. A key part of the feedback loop is ‘You Said. We Did’, whereby staff are updated on a monthly basis on the activity that has taken place in areas identified in the staff survey. This is seen as *“one of key methods for ensuring that people see that the actions we take are in response to what they told us. Where we might not be able to make specific changes it is also important that we do tell people about this and the reason why.”* Martin Gash, HR Director

Given the geographic spread of their workforce, TUI UK & Ireland makes full use of online channels for communication. They recognise that their intranet and social media can be *“very important”* in overcoming the challenges which they face in this regard.

On their intranet, they have a discussion board where staff can raise discussion topics and their thoughts about work and company-related matters. In addition, they have blogs from the Managing Director and several senior Directors. These are regularly updated with news about what is happening in the organisation and they give employees the opportunity to comment and to put forward their thoughts and ideas. As one member of staff explained, the use of blogs and the intranet allow people to *“have their say on important issues which will allow the business to gauge employee response.”*

# Part 4: Factors influencing voice at TUI UK & Ireland

## Organisation, structure and ownership

The structure of TUI UK & Ireland makes accessing Voice a significant challenge. As mentioned above, the workforce is split across dozens of countries and they fulfil a wide variety of diverse roles. As Alison Brewer, HR Business Partner explains, *“We’re continually looking at ways to improve on what we do. It is still challenging – given the dispersed nature of our workforce – to capture what everyone is thinking.”* TUI UK & Ireland have adapted their approach to meet this challenge including through the extensive and varied use of social media, the intranet and a global staff survey.

## Customer relationships

TUI UK & Ireland understands the importance of the link between voice, engagement and performance. As they explain in their annual report, *“We believe that engaged and happy colleagues are key to both superior customer service and the Group’s continued success and profitability. With people who believe in our products and services, and the right approach, we will continue to be our customers’ preferred choice for leisure travel”.*

The travel industry is dynamic and highly competitive, particularly as family budgets have been squeezed over the last few years. To ensure success, providers need to understand their customers, and to respond to their needs. By facilitating voice, listening to staff and involving them, TUI UK & Ireland is able to access the accumulated knowledge and experience of staff to inform decision-making. As one employee commented, employee voice at TUI UK & Ireland *“gives employees from all levels a chance to contribute to important business discussions.”*

Much of TUI UK & Ireland operations are customer-facing, whether in terms of their call-centres, the airline or their in-resort staff. There is a proven link between good employee engagement and quality customer service. By driving employee engagement, voice can therefore have an impact on customer service.

## Leadership style

The leadership style at TUI UK & Ireland is open and inclusive. Senior management understand the importance of employee voice and the wider area of engagement to their business success.

Senior managers often address the Be Involved forum to update them on the state of the business and the key issues affecting it.

The style of leadership and management at TUI UK & Ireland clearly has an impact on staff. 85% of employees agree that managers encourage them to ‘go the extra mile’, a massive 25% above the national benchmark.

## Principles, goals and values

TUI UK & Ireland strategy is detailed through their 'Big Picture', a pictorial way of demonstrating, where the business has come from, where it is today, strategy for success and long term vision.

To ensure that all employees understand the big picture, all areas across the business hold 'the big conversation'. This is about everyone having the opportunity to: discuss their role in delivering the strategy in their area, think through, as a team and as individuals, barriers that may stop the business from achieving its goals and work out what might need to change going forward.

By introducing these conversations the business is able to create a more open and involving culture.

## Part 5: Benefits

TUI UK & Ireland recognises the importance of their people to their business. As they explain in their annual report, *“we believe that engaged and happy colleagues are key to both superior customer service and the Group’s continued success and profitability.”* They also recognise how employee voice can contribute to both high levels of engagement and high levels of performance.

It is clear that they have been successful in delivering high levels of engagement in the workforce:

- 82% of staff demonstrate high levels of engagement, 5% higher than the national benchmark.
- 90% of staff agree that the organisation is passionate about delivering the very best for customers, 14% higher than the national benchmark.

These high levels of engagement and customer-focus have fed through and contributed to exceptional levels of performance in recent years. Despite the challenging global economic environment and the turmoil caused by the Arab Spring, it has shown impressive levels of resilience in terms of revenue and profits.

## Conclusion

There is widespread recognition of the importance of employee voice at TUI UK & Ireland. As one representative on the staff forum commented, “*voice is integral to the success of the company*”. This view seems to be shared by the Managing Director and senior management; employee engagement is seen as one of the three key strategic imperatives for their business and they recognise the role of voice in delivering business success.

The approach to voice at TUI UK & Ireland is adapted to the nature of the workforce. Given the size, diversity and geographical distribution of the workforce, accessing employee voice could be difficult but this challenge has been overcome by the use of a wide array of channels including online platforms.

TUI UK & Ireland know they need to offer both high quality service and travel products that meet the needs of their customers. Employee voice helps deliver both of these aims. Through supporting employee engagement, voice helps maintain quality customer service. Through involving customers in decision-making, voice helps TUI UK & Ireland remain innovative and competitive.

And they are clearly doing something right. In a challenging and competitive market, beset by economic and geopolitical challenges, TUI UK & Ireland has been going from strength to strength. Their success in maintaining employee engagement has been reflected by their strong and resilient financial performance.