

# The determinants of project worker voice in project-based organisations: An initial conceptualisation and research agenda

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## Abstract

The growing projectification trend has brought to the forefront the importance of project-based organising as a work mode and of project-based organisations (PBOs) as key employers. However, research in certain human resource management (HRM) areas (including voice) has been limited in PBOs because of the decentralised and changing nature of HRM functions in these types of organisations. In dynamic project organisations, voice is highly important in recruitment, innovation and improvement; it therefore has to be conceptualised systematically. To this end, we focus on project workers as the key employee group and conceptualise the determining system factors that shape their voice in PBOs. The conceptual framework is based on a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles and contributes to employee voice theory as a vehicle for the study of voice in temporary employment relationships.

## KEYWORDS

determinants, project-based organisations, project workers, temporary employment relationship, voice

**Abbreviations:** ER, employment relations; HR, human resource; HRM, human resource management; IR, industrial relations; OB, organisational behaviour; PBO, project-based organisation; PMO, project management office.

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### Practitioner notes

1. Voice in project-based organisations (PBOs) is important because it can stimulate project worker engagement and feedback and strengthen recruitment, innovation or improvement. Some research looks at aspects of voice in project settings but this has not generated a wholesome theory that can be applied to PBOs
2. This study offers a conceptualisation of the determinants that condition project worker voice, extends employee voice theory to the realm of temporary employment and defines the theoretical agenda for empirical research with a framework and propositions regarding project worker voice
3. Practitioners can use the conceptual framework offered to understand the internal and external factors that can accommodate or silence voice in these organisations, and consequently, use it to design appropriate interventions to strengthen project worker voice in these settings

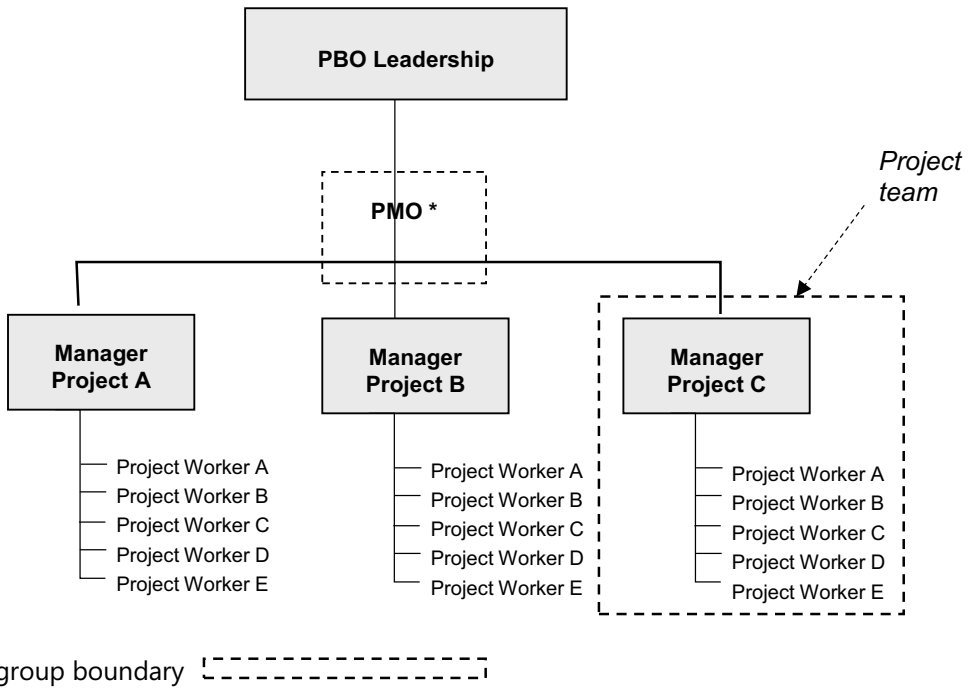
## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Projectification (i.e., the share of project work, as a production practice, in companies, industries or entire economies) is a rapidly developing trend (Burke & Morley, 2016) because it is a highly flexible and cost-effective work mode suited to achieve agility and innovation (Voelpel, Von Pierer, & Streb, 2006). The proportion of project work in advanced economies equates to roughly a third of all business activities and 22% of the world's gross domestic product (Schoper, Wald, Ingason, & Fridgeirsson, 2018) in the fields of construction, defence, aerospace, and engineering and expanding into sectors such as power, pharmaceuticals, Information & Communications Technology, Research & Development, art/culture and creative industries, and service industries (Lundin et al., 2015). The normalisation of temporary work modes creates new employment relationships and changes the design of human resource management (HRM) systems and processes as emphasised in several publications in HRM journals (e.g., Bredin & Söderlund, 2007, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Qian, Li, Song, & Wang, 2019).

Project-based organisations (PBOs) are organisations that (i) carry out their core operations mainly, or even exclusively, in project mode and through temporary employment (Melkonian & Picq, 2011) and (ii) reduce and devolve functional structures (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). PBOs are of two types (Melkonian & Picq, 2011). The first one is the 'single project organisation' that dissolves after the completion of one project. The second one is a heavyweight matrix organisational form that executes production mainly through a succession of projects and continue to exist in perpetuity (Maylor, 2010). In this study, we focus on the second type of PBOs (see Figure 1).

Research studies in PBOs first appeared in the mid-1960s and have seen a rapid increase in scholarly interest since 2000. Research in HRM issues that are surfacing in PBOs is still scarce. Given this fact, the growing importance of project-based organising as a work mode (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018) and PBOs as key employers in an increasing number of markets (Keegan, Ringhofer, & Huemann, 2018) show that this area is ripe for theoretical development from an HRM perspective. In this context, our targeted employee group of interest is project workers.

Project workers are engaged in direct employment relationships with PBOs, which explicitly state pre-determined durations and pre-specified deliverables (De Cuyper et al., 2008). Project workers are not agency workers or independent contractors; they are placed under the supervision and assessment processes of their PBO employers and enjoy a subset of the benefits of regular employees. They may have been employed previously by the same organisations and may be employed again by them after the conclusion of their specific projects. PBOs that are specialised in certain industries tend to use the same pools of project workers due to a scarcity of talent—



**FIGURE 1** The PBO organisational structure. PBO, project-based organisation; PMO, project management office. \*PMO indicates a group which coordinates the functional roles devolved to the project teams and collective activities across projects

which may cause project workers to appear permanently employed; however, in reality, they are engaged temporarily through a series of contracts, each one of which is for a different project.

During a review of the PBO literature, we identified a lack of clarity regarding the conceptualisation of project workers' voice. From the PBO's perspective, voice is a strategy to stimulate project worker engagement and feedback (e.g., Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013) and to strengthen recruitment, innovation or improvement. Yet, PBOs face a challenge in this area because they do not have integrative coordination systems for employee voice (Matthews, Stanley, & Davidson, 2018). Studies examine aspects of voice in project settings in a disconnected manner (e.g., Dainty, Raidén, & Neale, 2009; Ekrot, Rank, & Gemünden, 2016; Gemünden, Lehner, & Kock, 2018; Kaufmann, Kock, & Gemünden, 2020; Liang, Shu, & Farh, 2019; Qian et al., 2019) or indirectly study voice (e.g., Aaltonen, 2013; D'Armagnac, 2015; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018; Love, Teo, Davidson, Cumming, & Morrison, 2016). However, it is our view that the study of voice in PBOs is important for the following four challenges that PBOs face.

First, PBOs face significant knowledge sharing challenges, which are undermining their competitiveness (Zerjav, 2015). Second, PBOs are not engaging project workers enough (Dainty et al., 2009; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018) and the lack of feedback (direct voice) limits opportunities to improve processes (Love et al., 2016), solve problems (Ahern, Leavy, & Byrne, 2014) and gather ideas for planning (Dainty et al., 2009). Third, the retention of talent in PBOs is highly problematic partly because of the limited opportunities project workers have to express their career needs (Ekrot et al., 2016). Fourth, PBOs depend on networks to recruit, and their reputations as employers can grant or negate them access to critical skills, therefore it is in their best interest that project workers communicate positive working experiences externally (Grabher & Thiel, 2015). We consider that voice can help PBOs resolve these challenges by creating avenues for two-way communication, feedback and idea/knowledge sharing within the organisation.

Given the lack of conceptualisation of voice in PBOs, we pose the following question: *which systemic factors determine project worker voice in PBOs—and how does each factor determine voice?* In order to address this question, we adopt a systematic, integrative approach to capture the interrelated determinants and formulate how these may affect voice (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman, 2014) within a conceptual framework. Our approach is in line with other integrative approaches and frameworks (Kaufman, 2015; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015). In particular, we identified the determinants related to employee voice found in the PBO literature and we categorised them as being either external or internal to the PBO, while highlighting the interactions and effects observed to create a future research agenda. Because the voice concept is not commensurate across authors and fields (Kaufman, 2014), it is important to first clarify the dimensions of project worker voice in the next section.

## 1.1 | Project worker voice: Definition and conceptualisation

To define project worker voice and meaningful concept dimensions for theoretical analysis, we looked into both project and human resource (HR) literatures. Voice has been studied in a range of disciplines, such as HRM, industrial/employment relations (IR/ER), political science, economics, organisational behaviour (OB), psychology and law, and therefore presents several dimensions (Wilkinson et al., 2014) such as individual versus collective, decision-making, mutuality and cooperative relations (Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004). Particularly within the HRM, ER and OB fields, the debates relate to the meaning of voice. On the one hand, the HRM and ER perspectives argue that voice is about expressing dissatisfaction and complaint over workplace issues. On the other hand, the OB perspective argues that voice is a discretionary, prosocial behaviour targeted at benefiting the organisation (Wilkinson et al., 2014). Studies looking at aspects of voice in project settings support voice dimensions regarding its form (direct/indirect, formal/informal and internal/external, see Daymond & Rooney, 2018; Detert & Treviño, 2010; prohibitive/promotive, see Liang et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2019). There is also a discussion about the power/influence in feedback, communication and interaction between project leaders, the team members and the PBO in both the HRM and the PBO governance studies (e.g., Aaltonen, 2013; Ahern et al., 2014; D'Armagnac, 2015; Dainty et al., 2009; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018; Love et al., 2016).

As we want to adopt an integrative approach to capture the plurality of voice dimensions (Dundon et al., 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2014) and address the call to break down silo barriers between perspectives (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011), we adopt the following definition of voice: 'the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owners' (Wilkinson et al., 2014, p. 5). We adopt Kaufman's (2014) three principal dimensions of *form*, *agenda* and *influence* (Wilkinson et al., 2004), a composite measure that is a 'conceptually appropriate dependent variable for a general theory of voice' (Kaufman, 2014, p. 301). Voice form refers to whether voice is direct (individual, face-to-face), indirect (collective, representative) or both. Voice agenda refers to the nature of the issues negotiated between workers and employers; shared issues are integrative in nature and create a win-win situation for both parties, whereas a contested agenda implies issues of a distributive nature that create a win-lose situation between the two parties. Voice influence or 'muscle' (Wilkinson et al., 2004) is a composite of communication with the employer and influence over the decision, or as Kaufman (2014, p. 299) puts it 'being heard and making a difference'. It can range from simple communication ('talk but no action'; Kaufman, 2014, p. 299) to influence over issues leading to action taken with cost or benefit implications for the parties. Therefore, Wilkinson et al. (2004) argue that voice has both integrative/pie-growing and distributive/pie-sharing dimensions and takes place in highly variegated forms and settings. Voice can range from informal problem-solving discussions to collective bargaining and can occur through many forms and means of communication, such as emails, grievances and strikes. The three voice dimensions are summarised as follows (Kaufman, 2014, p. 299):

*Form*: direct versus indirect (individual, face-to-face vs. collective, representative).

*Agenda*: shared versus contested (integrative, win-win vs. distributive, win-lose).

*Influence*: communication versus influence (suggestion, complaint vs. cost or benefit action).

As Kaufman (2014) explained, each of these dimensions varies along a continuum with endpoints defined by polarities and with permutations in between. The polarities are direct/shared/communication on one end and indirect/contested/influence on the other end. This continuum is a 'menu of voice forms... arranged along a continuum from low-to-high in terms of structural breadth, depth and influence' (Kaufman, 2014, p. 300). Crucial to these voice dimensions is the fact that they are all embedded within all types of employment relationships, which subsumes all voice menu forms that can be found in temporary organisations as well.

The remaining sections provide an overview of the determinants affecting project worker voice in the PBOs' system and propose how these determinants are likely to affect the above voice dimensions.

## 2 | DETERMINANTS OF PROJECT WORKER VOICE IN PBOs

We present our conceptualisation of project worker voice determinants in PBOs in Figure 2. Our overview of the determinants stemmed from a systematic review and best-fit framework synthesis (see Figure 3) of peer-reviewed PBO studies published between 1970 and 2019.

The framework identifies *four sets of determinants* found in PBO studies as follows: (i) three network determinants, (ii) three governance conflicts, (iii) four HR challenges and (iv) three dimensions of the fragmented ER climate. In more detail, these are:

External determinants: (i) project workers' network position, ties and tie strength in professional, industry or stakeholder networks (Proposition 1a, b).

Internal determinants: (ii) governance conflicts arising from stakeholder influence on PBO operations, from the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure and from the PBOs' knowledge governance mechanisms (Proposition 2a-g); (iii) HR challenges in resourcing, competency, change/discontinuity and performance evaluation (Proposition 3a-g); (iv) three dimensions of the fragmented ER climate: employment climate, team climate and work environment climate (Proposition 4a-h).

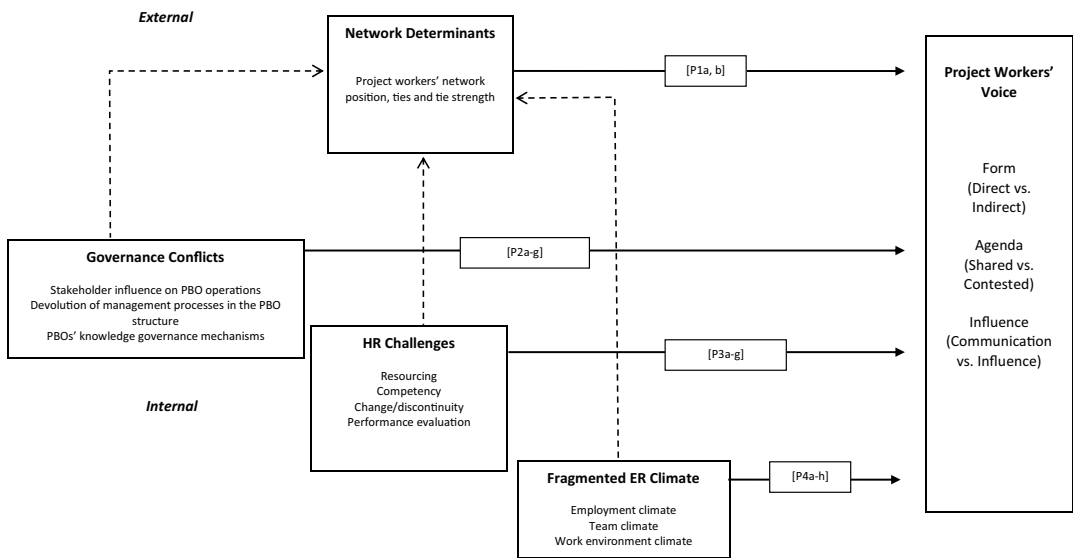
The sections that follow explain each determinant within this framework in more detail.

### 2.1 | External determinants

#### 2.1.1 | Network determinants

PBOs are nested in environments that involve interpersonal and inter-organisational networks, based on three types of reputation-driven relationships (Sedita, 2008): professional, stakeholder and industry networks. PBOs design their own ecosystems using the networks at their disposal through multiple interactions between agents, community and artefacts at the boundaries between the PBO, project teams and their stakeholders (Bellini & Canonico, 2008). Managing these boundaries is very important to PBOs as both the organisational and project boundaries are porous and allow for interference from networks (Zerjav, 2015).

Therefore, boundary management is important for two reasons. The first one is the need to reduce risk and deal with uncertainty (Ferreira, Braun, & Sydow, 2013). The PBOs' first objective is to buffer their projects and to minimise risk with the use of formal procedures (Aaltonen, 2013). The second one is knowledge sharing (Zerjav, 2015), which is also their weakness. PBOs cannot retain knowledge and expertise; thus, they have to constantly scout for workers (Bourouni, Noori, & Jafarim, 2014). Networks represent structured role systems (Bechky, 2006)



**FIGURE 2** A conceptual framework of determinants of project worker voice in PBOs. ER, employment relations; HR, human resources; PBOs, project-based organisations

that compensate for the lack of integrative knowledge systems and of internal training. Networks can supply project workers who are ready to perform (Bourouni et al., 2014). Networks also act as informal quasi-regulatory forces which define the professional roles espoused by employers and workers alike and the rules of informal and formal transactions and interactions (Sedita, 2008).

PBOs' network determinants are *project workers' network position, ties and tie strength in professional, industry or stakeholder networks* that link to cross-boundary coordination (Zerjav, 2015). The effect of these determinants on the performance of project workers depends on the relational competence of gatekeepers (Pauget & Wald, 2013). Therefore, network position and ties change, especially in situations of institutional distance and internal stakeholder multiplicity (Aaltonen, 2013), while project workers reframe professional knowledge and rules when they rebuild their networks (D'Armagnac, 2015).

To summarise, the literature affirms that PBOs need networks to recruit, innovate and improve; they need to monitor networks to scout and recruit the right talent and to use networks to upskill their workforce and provide updated knowledge on tasks, methods and intelligence on the external environment (Kwak, Sadatsafavi, Walewski, & Williams, 2015). This means that, on the one hand, PBOs rely on professional, stakeholder and institutional/industry networks to recruit skilled project workers. On the other hand, project workers can build a strong reputation through such networks, potentially becoming powerful advocates, or opponents, of the PBOs that employ them. Even in those industries (e.g., the film industry) in which there are collective institutions of voice for project workers, networks are still the route for workers and employers to manage their relationship (Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001). Therefore, project workers' network position, ties and tie strengths provide an alternative form of voice—*network voice*.

This is a significant shift of focus from internal voice forms, which are the primary concern of HRM research, to external voice forms. There is scarce HRM literature on how informal voice mechanisms, such as networks, can provide an alternative form of worker representation within the changing nature of organisational structures and employment relationships (Rubery, Earnshaw, Marchington, Cooke, & Vincent, 2002). However, their findings concur with some of the findings found in the PBO studies on network relations. For example, Saundry, Antcliff, and Stuart (2006) found that freelance workers mobilised influence from their affiliations in networks to support their terms and conditions or to express their frustrations. They argue that networks have the potential to provide an

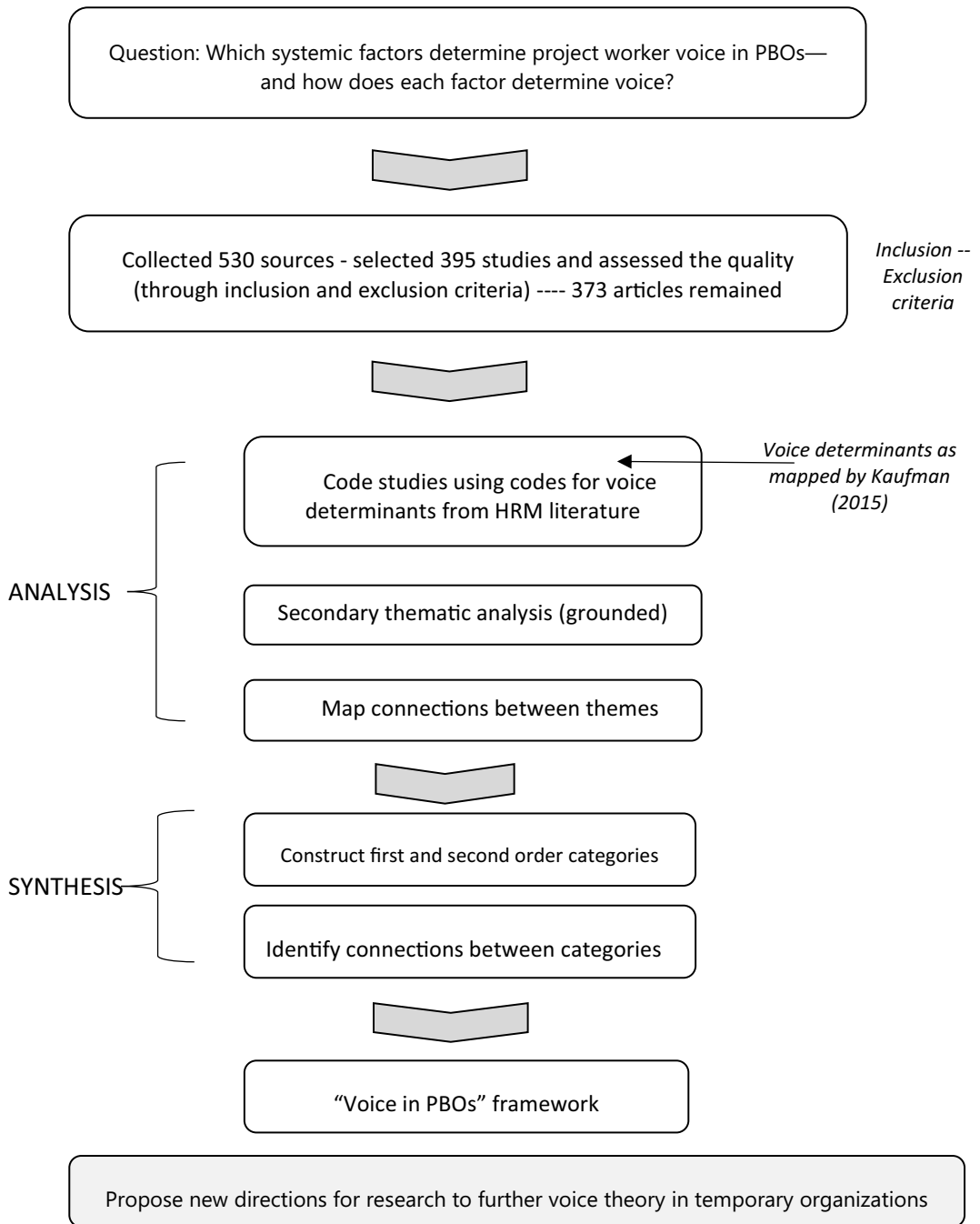


FIGURE 3 'Best-fit' framework synthesis protocol as it was conducted step-by-step. HRM, human resource management; PBOs, project-based organisations

alternative channel for representing workers' interests, for sharing information, articulating ideas and developing effective campaigns over specific issues. PBO studies take network voice into further detail as they provide more directions of how project workers avail themselves of some indirect/collective forms of voice through their guilds' networks. Depending on their network position, ties and tie strength in professional, industry or stakeholder

networks (Aaltonen, 2013; D'Armagnac, 2015) project workers may decide to use their influence. However, where they have no such influence, they are more likely to remain silent.

**Proposition 1a** *The stronger project workers' network positions, ties and tie strengths in professional, industry or stakeholder networks are, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 1b** *The stronger project workers' network positions, ties and tie strengths in professional, industry or stakeholder networks are, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be stronger.*

## 2.2 | Internal determinants

### 2.2.1 | Governance conflicts

PBOs structure their operations in a project mode (Figure 1) and they either consolidate their management functions (including HRM) in a centralised project management office (PMO) and/or devolve them within project teams (Bredin & Söderlund, 2010). PBOs, therefore, exert weak HRM functional coordination across projects (Hobday, 2000).

HRM functions are decentralised and located within four levels in PBOs (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011): (i) the PBO leadership that designs the project structures; (ii) the PMO that monitors project performance and reviews skill shortages and resources; (iii) project managers who manage the intake, allocation and performance of project workers; and (iv) project workers who are responsible for their own training and career development while performing certain tasks. This devolution of HRM functions is influenced by three governance conflicts in PBOs.

The first one relates to stakeholder influence. Stakeholders have a higher degree of direct influence over PBO operations than shareholders have over mainstream organisations. Hjelmbrekke, Klakegg, and Lohne (2017) revealed an 'efficiency versus benefit maximisation' conflict between the PBO leadership, the stakeholders and the teams (project workers). The end goal of PBO employers is to run project portfolios that align with their strategic goals successfully (Thiry & Deguire, 2007) at the lowest cost and risk. The project manager's end goal is the successful closure of a project; to this end, he/she has to negotiate with both the employer and the stakeholders about cost/time and output, risk, goal ambiguity, transaction payments and employment conditions (contracts; Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014). Project worker voice is one of the outcomes of these negotiations especially regarding evaluation and monitoring, task allocation (politics of the workload), resource support, performance and remuneration.

There is a noticeable divergence between the HRM and PBO literatures regarding the influence of voice in governance structures. Research in HRM and IR has indicated that conflicts of interest among workers and the organisation are inevitable, therefore, organisations create governance structures to provide workers with a varying degree of influence and opportunities for voice and participation to provide an outlet for these tensions (Gospel & Pendelton, 2010). However, these structures are weak or missing in PBOs (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011) and these tensions are exacerbated by the influence of stakeholders upon teams (Hjelmbrekke et al., 2017). Stakeholders have been found to influence project outcomes by increasing their salience (i.e., the degree to which project managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims) using a range of strategies. For example, by restricting or influencing the project's access to critical resources controlled by their perceived power, building alliances with other stakeholders to increase their perceived power or legitimacy or using different types of media to communicate and increase their perceived legitimacy and urgency of their claims (Aaltonen, Jaakko, & Tuomas, 2008). PBOs and project managers, therefore, prioritise the interests of the most influential stakeholders over the interests of project workers (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) because



stakeholders can severely obstruct the design and implementation of the project and increase the chance of project failure (Olander & Landin, 2005). In addition, project managers have been found to avoid speaking out about serious situations due to concerns about negative career-related effects (Ekrot et al., 2016) and are, therefore, less likely to provide project workers within their teams with significant internal channels and opportunities for voice and influence. The restricted opportunities for internal voice and influence can push project workers to remain silent or to seek to utilise external voice through networks (Saundry et al., 2006) where they have such networks available to them.

**Proposition 2a** *The stronger the presence of stakeholder influence on PBO operations, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 2b** *The stronger the presence of stakeholder influence on PBO operations, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

The second governance conflict relates to the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure. The PBO structure (including the PMO) is a system that tries to standardise project-related processes through regulated evaluation/control structures and certified practices and, as such, to control project dynamics (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). When PBO governance is too regimented, it generates tensions that transfer to the employment relationship (Martinsuo, 2011) because the project manager is the person with the responsibility to implement rigid standards and controls in the project processes. However, project workers' voice is highly dependent on the project manager's approach to encouraging voice within his/her team (Ekrot et al., 2016) and as a consequence when the project manager action is restricted, voice practices will be restricted too. Therefore, project workers' voice depends on their leader-member exchanges (Kong, Huang, Liu, & Zhao, 2017), the project leader and his/her leadership style (Duan, Li, Xu, & Wu, 2017). Research has also shown that project managers often exhibit deviant behaviour in activities they undertake with project workers, such as planning and scheduling, arising from a lack of trust (Pinto, 2014). In this point, PBO literature concurs with the argument from HRM research that management may seek to suppress voice if it is likely to challenge authority (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016). The most important effect of these tensions is the undermining of the trust-based informal team culture that encourages expressions of project worker voice (Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014). Therefore, project workers' internal direct voice forms will be informal and limited, pushing them towards either utilising external voice through networks (Saundry et al., 2006) or remaining silent where such networks are not available to them. Given the limitation in the use of formal internal voice mechanisms, voice influence is also likely to be low where project managers/leaders do not encourage voice because the managers might not want to communicate feedback upwards. Therefore, a lack of trust in the manager-worker relationship (Pinto, 2014) due to the arbitrary power of the manager over worker's voice, further implies that the voice agenda is likely to be of a contested nature.

**Proposition 2c** *The stronger the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 2d** *The stronger the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice agenda to be of a contested nature.*

**Proposition 2e** *The stronger the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

The third and final governance conflict is between the interest of the PBOs to retain expertise through knowledge governance mechanisms, such as feedback or engagement initiatives (Peltokorpi & Tsuyuki, 2006) and

the project workers' interest to retain their knowledge/expertise and not share it (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). PBOs aim at developing their competitive advantages by capturing expertise without re-employing project workers (Ahern et al., 2014). This external career orientation and loss of organisational identification (Bresnen, Goussevskaia, & Swan, 2005; Ekrot et al., 2016) mean that project worker participation in feedback schemes that serve knowledge management initiatives may often be superficial. At this point, there is an agreement between PBO and HRM literatures where these internal upward problem-solving or feedback mechanisms and initiatives usually end up as a series of exercises aimed at satisfying the stakeholders (Wilkinson et al., 2004) and do little to foster real dialogue. Therefore, they are not an effective internal voice form, nor do they enable project workers' voice influence (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018). This makes it more likely that project workers will use external voice through networks (Saundry et al., 2006) if this is an available option to them or otherwise may remain silent if such an option is not available.

**Proposition 2f** *The stronger the conflict in the PBOs' knowledge governance mechanisms, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 2g** *The stronger the conflict in the PBOs' knowledge governance mechanisms, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

## 2.2.2 | The temporary employment relationship

The 'new employment relationship' (Kaufman, 2015) due to projectification has been identified since the turn of the century (Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan, & Boswell, 2000) and leads to a disempowered workforce, where opportunism and exit take the place of internal labour markets and collective voice mechanisms.

Temporality imposes significant changes in employment relationships, in the project workers' professional lives (McDermott, Heffernan, & Beynon, 2013), and, ultimately, to their voice (Bechky, 2006). As there is no assurance of continuity, the parties invest only in the transaction. Opportunism leads to a loss of trust, employee identification and affective commitment (Ekrot et al., 2016). Lack of identification gives rise to goal conflicts, information asymmetry and lack of citizenship behaviours (Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014). Bresnen et al. (2005) wrote about the struggle of identity, particularly under the pressures associated with work intensification, deskilling and the radical changes in the psychological contract. As a result, studies have focused on the relational mechanisms found in the interactions between project workers with team leaders. Other articles reported that identification and belongingness may be transferred from employment relationships to networks (Ferreira et al., 2013; Huemann, Keegan, & Turner, 2007). The project workers' career strategy involves remaining employable and developing their skill sets, portfolios and professional contacts by frequently moving from one employer to another; they therefore rely more on their professional networks (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). The temporary employment relationship is characterised by the following four HRM challenges that determine project worker voice.

### *HRM challenges affecting voice*

First, the *resourcing* challenge. High project worker turnover is part of the PBO model (Lee, Hom, Eberly, & Li, 2017). Due to the project workers' multi-employment, lack of affective commitment and lack of an internal recruitment pool, PBOs continuously scout for talent in external labour markets (Ekrot et al., 2016). Regardless of this constant need to scout for talent, research has found (Raiden, Dainty, & Neale, 2004) that project managers do not always consider individual project worker needs when planning for recruitment, suggesting limited involvement of project workers in the resourcing process.

The resourcing challenge is closely linked to a second challenge, that of *change and discontinuity* in skills. Most positions in PBOs do not have hierarchical career ladders in the traditional sense (Huemann et al., 2007; Keegan & Turner, 2003). Continuous change and discontinuity in the demand for certain skills means that PBOs do not invest in a stable internal labour market, and their HR strategy is, at best, short-term and reactive. This lack of investment in an internal labour market weakens project workers' position in skills planning (Raiden et al., 2004). This reactive and informal nature of the resourcing process, and the constant change and discontinuity in recruitment in PBOs, limits the formal forms of voice available to project workers; consequently their input does not enter the resourcing and skills planning process and does not influence such decisions (Raiden et al., 2004).

**Proposition 3a** *The greater the resourcing challenge and the change and discontinuity in skills present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an informal/direct nature.*

**Proposition 3b** *The greater the resourcing challenge and the change and discontinuity in skills present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

Third, the *competency challenge*. PBOs need to manage knowledge, creativity and innovation. Because of the high labour turnover in PBOs (Lee et al., 2017), project workers have to be ready for employment by requiring little to no training. Career development is the workers' own responsibility; project workers rely on their own knowledge to create market niches for themselves and it is for this reason that they are oriented towards external labour markets (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). Therefore, HR does not develop internal labour pools, but rather integrates and synchronises job roles and tasks based on the talent it can recruit. This lack in investment in developing project workers implies that formal voice forms in PBOs are unlikely to exist for listening and acting on workers' training and development needs or issues, and consequently, project workers' voice influence in such issues is likely to be weak.

**Proposition 3c** *The greater the competency challenge present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an informal/direct nature.*

**Proposition 3d** *The greater the competency challenge present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

Fourth, the *performance evaluation challenge*. Project performance appraisals are considered an important medium for project worker voice; however, in PBOs, they are outcome-based (Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013) and have been found to reduce job satisfaction (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018). They have also been found to lack senior management support while project workers perceive them as of little relevance to their day-to-day activities (Cheng, Dainty, & Moore, 2007). Project workers are often engaged with different projects at the same time and report to different project managers, senior managers and stakeholders. Performance can become made difficult by the frequent imposition of impossible requirements that are often vague or changeable. PBO HR specialists often struggle to implement transparent and equitable appraisal processes (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018) leading to many contested issues in performance. Therefore, the way performance evaluations are implemented in PBOs are less likely to offer a formal/direct voice form that project workers can use to raise issues and plan their future performance. It is also unlikely that performance evaluations provide an effective communication mechanism (Cheng et al., 2007), thus limiting project workers' influence over decisions for planning future performance or for resolving disagreements over performance evaluations.

**Proposition 3e** *The greater the performance evaluation challenge present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers voice form to be of an informal/direct nature.*

**Proposition 3f** *The greater the performance evaluation challenge present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for the project workers' voice agenda to be of a contested nature.*

**Proposition 3g** *The greater the evaluation challenge present in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

The four HRM challenges mentioned above highlight the fact that extensive PBO investment in HRM practices aimed at facilitating voice is not standard practice. On the contrary, the literature in PBOs so far shows that, because HRM functions are mainly devolved within teams (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011), project workers' informal/direct forms of voice are likely to be narrow in scope and low in influence, which makes HRM practices in PBOs more operational than strategic (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). This has negative implications, as HRM research has indicated (Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher, & Hope-Hailey, 2011), on the employee–line manager relationship, trust in senior management and ultimately on organisational commitment. As trust declines, the voice agenda will more likely be of a contested nature.

### 2.2.3 | The fragmented ER climate

Given project worker mobility and the presence of multiple team subcultures that are not interconnected, we can infer that projectified structures often create a *fragmented ER climate*; we define this as *a climate that is not consistent across the organisation or experienced in the same way by all project workers*. This *fragmented ER climate* has three main dimensions: (i) *employment climate*, (ii) *team climate* and (iii) *work environment climate*.

First, the *employment climate* in PBOs is not homogeneous. Project workers have different perceptions of the value of their contract deal. Their individual perceptions depend on their employment contract and status in the project (Dainty et al., 2009). When the employment contract is precarious in nature, there is a distant, impersonal relationship between employer and worker, with limited formal voice forms (Kroon & Paauwe, 2014) and voice influence. Project workers' willingness to use voice is contingent upon their form of employment (Soltani, Liao, Gholami, & Iqbal, 2018) with many on precarious contracts forced into silence (Perlow & Williams, 2003).

**Proposition 4a** *The more precarious the employment climate is in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an informal/direct nature.*

**Proposition 4b** *The more precarious the employment climate is in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

Second, *team climate* is formed by project worker perceptions of the quality of interpersonal relations with the project leader and colleagues (Kong et al., 2017). Perceptions of leadership depend on how competent the leader is perceived to be and on the experience of interacting with him/her (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). Team climate is highly dependent on the PBO governance mechanisms, particularly the devolution of management processes in the PBO structure. Because HRM responsibility is devolved to project managers, the experience that project workers have with voice is contingent on the manager's approach to voice (Duan et al., 2017). HRM research has also indicated that leadership affects subordinates' assessments over speaking up at work (Detert & Burris, 2007). Therefore, the idiosyncrasy of the manager plays a pivotal role in whether informal/direct voice will be available and effective. When informal/direct voice is not possible or effective, it is likely that project workers will choose to use external voice through networks (Saundry et al., 2006) in the absence of other alternatives or otherwise remain silent. Consequently, where managers do not encourage voice, project workers' voice

influence is also likely to be low. This lack of trust in the manager–worker relationship also points to a contested voice agenda (Pinto, 2014).

**Proposition 4c** *The more the team climate is inhibiting voice in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 4d** *The more the team climate is inhibiting voice in PBOs, the more likely it will be for the project workers' voice agenda to be of a contested nature.*

**Proposition 4e** *The more the team climate is inhibiting voice in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

Third, *work environment climate* relates to team climate and reflects the aspirations of project workers in relation to specific working conditions, particularly their participation in decision-making (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). Project workers having a say in planning their workload will eventually lead to a degree of autonomy, job significance and perceptions of impact at work (Ekrot et al., 2016). However, research on precarious employment, such as the employment of project workers in PBOs, has shown that such employment suffers from poor working conditions (Kalleberg, 2000) and little access to voice about such issues (Booth & Francesconi, 2003). Therefore, the more precarious the work environment climate is the less likely it will be for project workers to have access to formal direct/indirect voice channels, and consequently, their voice influence is also likely to be weak. Project workers may look to external networks for voice or may be led to silence if these networks are not available to them. In addition, working conditions, task allocation, resource support and general workload issues are under constant negotiation (Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014) and are more likely to become contested issues in a precarious work environment climate.

**Proposition 4f** *The more the work environment climate is precarious in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice form to be of an external network nature.*

**Proposition 4g** *The more the work environment climate is precarious in PBOs, the more likely it will be for the project workers' voice agenda to be of a contested nature.*

**Proposition 4h** *The more the work environment climate is precarious in PBOs, the more likely it will be for project workers' voice influence to be weak.*

### 3 | CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH OF VOICE IN PBOs

This work contributes with a conceptualisation of the determinants that condition project worker voice. It extends employee voice theory to the realm of temporary employment and defines the theoretical agenda for empirical research with a framework and propositions regarding project worker voice.

The 'voice in PBOs' framework (Figure 2) offers a holistic view of voice determinants as found in PBO literature. The framework groups individual determinants into four sets: (i) three network determinants, (ii) three governance conflicts, (iii) four HR challenges and (iv) three dimensions of the fragmented ER climate. The determinants are also categorised in external/internal sets.

Based on the interactions between determinants as suggested in the 'voice in PBOs' framework, we highlight four major directions for future research. First direction is the migration of voice from being collective/indirect or individual/direct towards external network voice forms. New studies need to explore the nature and characteristics

of project workers' external network voice and how such external networks can create a different type of voice form, agenda and influence. This is different from the direction in employee voice models in the HRM and OB literatures (e.g., Kaufman, 2015; Morrison, 2011; Mowbray et al., 2015) that consider voice as occurring mainly internally in the organisation. In order to disentangle the relation between internal/external determinants, one needs to look into the collective voice strategies that rely upon mobilising network influence to connect the individual project worker with the informal 'institutions' and the employer.

Second direction is the relation between the three governance conflicts, especially PBO knowledge governance systems and a project climate that limits project worker voice by creating a contested voice agenda, limiting voice influence and externalising the form of voice.

Third direction is the connection between significant HRM challenges, the fragmented ER climate and the nature and use of network voice forms, their impact on the shared or contested nature of the voice agenda and their overall effectiveness in shaping project workers' influence.

Finally, the interactions between the three internal sets of determinants and their configurational effect on voice dimensions through the mediation of network forms of voice. Future research should address the boundary and network dynamics between the actors and the institutions in the PBO ecosystem.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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