

Determining the Relationship between Employee Participation and Union Membership

H. M. Linde¹ and J. C. Visagie²

*School of Human Resource Sciences, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
North-West University, Private Bag X6001 Potchefstroom 2520 South Africa
Fax: (+27)18 299 1393, ¹<herman.linde@nwu.ac>, ²<jan.visagie@nwu.ac.za>*

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ABSTRACT This study examined the relationship between employee participation and union membership. The researchers are of the opinion that employee participation will have a negative effect on union membership and therefore do not favour employee participation programs. In providing insight into the relationship between employee participation and union membership, attention was paid to the following: union membership percentage within the organisation; the relationship between biographical information and employees joining a union; as well as the relationship between themes of employee participation and employees joining a union. The six themes of employee participation used in this paper were identified in a previous study by the authors, who studied the opinions and perceptions of employees and managers' opinions of these themes, which were originally identified through its literature research. The study adopted a quantitative research design using a self-developed group administration questionnaire. The results found that 87.1 percent of the respondents did not belong to a union. In terms of statistical significance, it was decided to set the value at a 95 percent confidence interval ($p < 0.05$). There was a significant relationship between race and employees joining a union with a p -value of 0.068. There was also a statistically significant relationship between themes of employee participation and employees joining a union with co-management (.016) and self-management (.004). The results also found that from the 87.1 percent participants who did not belong to a union, it was indicated that they do not belong to a union because it does not interest them.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the relationship between employee participation and union membership, since no studies have focused on how employee participation programs might influence other work-related attitudes of employees, such as those associated with union commitment (Hoell 2004). For this reason, an exploratory research approach was utilised, which will be accomplished through the use of a self-developed questionnaire. In this paper, the problem statement will be stated and the objectives and research design will also be identified. Thereafter, the results will be discussed and the recommendations and limitations of the study will be highlighted.

Problem Statement

Industrial relations are generally concerned with the problematic relationship between employees and management (MacDonald 2005). Since the beginning of the modern industrial-

ised economy, the ability of employees to influence the actions of their employer has been a complicated area of working life (Millward et al. 2000), and for this reason, employee representation is seen as one of the most important elements of the employment relationship (Singh 2001). Employee representation has played a significant role over the last 25 years in achieving social justice and can be seen as an active resource to facilitate discussion consultations, negotiations and joint actions involving both employees and employers (Wunnav 2016; Bryson et al. 2012). According to Lahovary (2000), employee representation is generally associated with trade unions. Valizade et al. (2016) indicate that many partnership or employee studies have focused on union-management relationships without careful consideration that partnerships might also occur through direct employee participation (Bryson et al. 2012).

Historically, employees joined unions because industrialisation forced them into being dependent and their earnings, working conditions and job security were beyond their control

(Barker 2007). Employees therefore joined unions for protection (Venter 2003) and to promote their own interests (Grobler et al. 2006). Trade unions were traditionally seen as the only agents to provide an employee with a voice and influence in the workplace (Wilkinson and Fay 2011) and as the method to voice employees' concerns and opinions (Millward et al. 2000). In 1995, the Labour Relations Act 65 (of 1995 LRA) (SA 1995) changed the terrain in which unions operated (Mantashe 2008) and, according to Nepgen (2008), the South African trade union movement has since been seen as a success story in global terms.

However, for the last three decades, there has been a decline in union membership worldwide (Cregan and Brown 2010; Nel 2002; Uys 2011) and since South Africa became a democracy, public opinion about the labour movement has changed (Aguilar 2016; Bezuidenhout 2000), meaning that there has been an ideological loss of support for unions (Ceronie 2007). The decline in union membership over the last three decades has resulted in international interest in employee participation (Kim et al. 2010; Markey et al. 2016). Employee participation can be seen as a method of involving employees in the organisation and planning of work processes by contributing towards the establishment of work procedures and by participating in decision-making at different levels in the organisation (Bendix 2001). Therefore, employee participation actively promotes a new culture within an organisation, for example where managers directly communicate with their employees through briefings and the like. By doing this, the organisation reduces the employees' dependence on their union as the primary channel of communication (Gollan and Wilkenson 2007). Marcu (2016) stated that, in a well-structured organisation, culture joins the organisation in a chain of tacit meanings, offering specific meaning to all human activities and organisational processes through consultation with employees. For this reason, the most common response from unions regarding employee participation is 'cautious scepticism', according to Kim et al. (2010), this is still the response today.

Unions see participation by means of expanding the employer's influence and control over the workplace (Bendix 2010) and blurring the distinction between management and employee interest (Horwitz et al. 2005). Employee participa-

tion is therefore seen as a threat to their existence and challenge to their power (Kaufman, Taras 2016; Beetge 2000). According to Hoell (2004), Wunnnav (2016), another reason why employee participation can be seen as a threat to unions is because of the lack of a common definition of employee participation (Budd et al. 2017). This has inhibited the understanding of the factors associated with employee participation. Some researchers have tried to group employee participation, whereas others have isolated the unique aspects of employee participation (Van Mierio et al. 2005). In contrast, Gollan and Wilkinson (2007) stated that there is no reason to assume that employee participation is necessarily an alternative to unions. Employee participation need not have a negative effect on unions and in some situations employee participation can even be seen as complementary. Kester (2002) supported this by stating that these kinds of suspicions may be unfounded and without empirically investigating the situation, one can be in danger of categorising all non-union representation as effectual and union representation as very effective (Dundon and Rollinson 2004).

As seen above, different opinions exist among experts as to whether there has been a shift in employees' motivation to join a union or not. According to Hoell (2004) and Wunnnav (2016), union commitment should be negatively affected by an employee's commitment to his/her organisation. The question therefore can be raised whether employees' commitment towards their union or organisation will change or be affected as a result of employee participation. This research will address this issue and seek to understand the current relationship between employee participation and union membership (Uys 2011).

Objectives

General Objective

To determine the relationship between employee participation and union membership.

Specific Objectives

- To determine the extent of union membership;
- To determine whether there is a relationship between demographic information and employees' tendency to join a union; and

- To determine the comparative relationship between themes of employee participation and employees' tendency to join a union.

METHODOLOGY

To reach the objectives of this study, a quantitative research design was used. Since the design is descriptive in nature, a non-experimental design was also utilised. The reason for using this design was to obtain quantitative information that can be used to describe and explore the relationship between employee participation and union membership.

Participants and Procedure

The target and accessible population was employees at an engineering support services organisation. The focus was on all employees within the organisation and not a specific group; therefore, the sample was drawn from the seven divisions within the organisation, namely welders, HP pipework, general ducting's, mill-end liners, general office, soot blower maintenance as well as riggers and tacklers. The motivation for focusing on all the employees is to ensure equal representation from the different departments in order to determine the relationship between employee participation and union membership within the organisation. Convenience sampling was used in obtaining participants in the organisation to complete the questionnaire. A sample of 70 participants was drawn from the total population of 123 ($n=70$) and consisted of both employees and managers. The questionnaire was anonymous to limit bias and enhance honesty by the participants. Close-ended questions were used from which the respondents had to choose one response; this method made it easier for the researcher to analyse the information (Maree 2010). Likert scaling was also used, as this method provides an ordinal measure of a respondents' attitudes (Maree 2010). Respondents had the following response categories: Yes, maybe and no. This self-developed questionnaire was formulated by using the themes and sub-themes that were identified in Paper 1, Objective 1. The questionnaire was piloted in preparation for the larger study in order to refine or modify the research methodology.

The group administration questionnaire was completed under supervision. In doing this, any

questions that may have arisen regarding the understanding of the questions could be answered. No time limits were enforced. Before participants started with the questionnaire, a brief introduction was provided by the researcher; the introduction explained the focus of the survey and the participants were informed that they would remain anonymous and that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Each questionnaire started with a few easy-to-answer biographical information questions, such as gender age, race, marital status as well as their position in the organisation. Instructions on the questionnaire were simple, clear and concise. Questions about the same topic were arranged together and the topics also followed in logical order. Slang abbreviations, double-barrelled, double-negative or leading questions were avoided to ensure that respondents could understand the various questions (Maree 2010). Questionnaires were also formulated in the first person and as statements rather than questions. Descriptive information of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

<i>Item</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	63	90
	Female	7	10
<i>Age</i>	20-39 years	46	65.8
	40-59 years	20	28.6
	60+ years	4	5.8
<i>Race</i>	African	32	45.7
	White	32	45.7
	Coloured	5	7.1
	Indian	1	1.4
<i>Marital Status</i>	Married	34	48.6
	Single	25	35.7
	Divorced	9	12.9
	Widowed	2	2.9

Of the total participants, 90 percent are male and 10 percent are female. With regard to the representation of different race groups in the sample, 45.7 percent are African, 45.7 percent white, 7.1 percent coloured and 1.4 percent Indian. The average age of the respondents was 36 years with a standard deviation of 11.3 years. The youngest respondent was 20 years old and the oldest 61 years of age. Most of the participants were married (48.6%), 35.7 percent were single, 12.9 percent were divorced and only 2.9 percent were widowed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the route that was followed to bring order, structure and meaning to all the collected data (Maree 2010); therefore, descriptive statistics were used. Descriptive statistics provided statistical summaries of the data in order to obtain a coherent and straightforward picture for interpretation (Struwig and Stead 2004). These summaries are represented through frequencies, means, standard deviations, correlations and statistical summaries.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were utilised to determine the internal consistency, homogeneity and unidimensionality of the measuring instruments (Clark and Watson 1995). After the internal consistency was determined, chi-square and t-tests were utilised to determine whether the relationship between the two variables is practically significant as well as to determine the differences between the groups in the sample (Ellis and Steyn 2003). Effect sizes were also utilised to decide on the practical significance and the effect size of the findings (Steyn 2000). According to APA (1999), when reporting effect sizes, the researcher will be assisted with meta-analysis information about subsequent research and in interpreting and evaluating results within the context of the related literature. The types of effect sizes utilised were Cramer's phi and Cohen's d. Cramer's phi or V is the standardised effect size of association for the chi-square test; phi is also used for two binary variables (Osteen and Bright 2010). Cohen's d is usually used in t-tests and will assist in determining the standardised effect size of the difference between two means (Osteen and Bright 2010).

After effect sizes have been obtained, Mordock (2000) suggests that the researcher has to make a value judgement by examining the importance, feasibility and practicality of the effect sizes.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was divided into six categories and nine sub-categories, which have been determined in a previous study. The main categories were consultation, negotiation, joint decision-making, co-management, self-management and financial participation. Each category varied from two to four questions each.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Table 2) were utilised to determine the internal consistency, homogeneity and unidimensionality of the measuring instruments (Clark and Watson 1995). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for all the categories (themes) varied from 0.746 to 0.880. According to Baxter and Babbie (2004), a good guideline to keep in mind would be a coefficient of approximately 0.7. It can therefore be concluded that each category and its sub-categories are reliable, as presented in Table 2.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether the stated question will have an influence on them joining a union as well as the degree to which they believe they will join a union on a three-point scale, ranging from 1=Yes, I will join a union, to 2=Maybe, I will join a union to 3=No, I will not join a union.

Table 2: Reliability of constructs

<i>Themes and sub-themes</i>	<i>Reliability coefficient</i>	<i>N of items</i>
<i>Consultation</i> (Daily meetings)	0.799	3
<i>Negotiation</i> (Involvement)	0.746	2
<i>Joint Decision-making</i> (Communication) (Information)	0.778	2
<i>Co-management</i> (Support) (Trust)	0.88	4
<i>Self-management</i> (Responsibility) (Commitment)	0.859	4
<i>Financial Participation</i> (Rewards)	0.82	3

The questions were divided into six categories. These categories were identified in literature as the themes of employee participation. Each category (theme) varied from two to four questions each; these questions were based on sub-categories (themes), which were, as mentioned earlier, identified in a previous study. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they belong to a union. Of the total number of participants, 87.1 percent did not belong to a union and only 12.9 percent did, meaning that only nine out of all the participants (n=70) belonged to a union. Table 3 represents the biographical information of the two groups (those employees who *do* belong to a union and those employees who *do not* belong to a union).

As seen in Table 3, from the 87.1 percent respondents who *do not* belong to a union, 88.5 percent are male and 11.5 percent are female. Most of the respondents are married (49.2%), and 50.8 percent of the respondents are African. The average age of this group is 36 years, with a standard deviation of 11.3 years.

With regard to the group of respondents who *do* belong to a union (12.9%), all of the respondents are male (100%) and most are married (44.4%) and white (66.7%). The average age of this group is 35 years old with a standard deviation of 12.3 years.

In Table 4, the chi-square test was utilised to determine whether the relationship between participants' biographical information (gender, age, marital status and race) and union membership is practically significant.

Table 4: Chi-square

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Race</i>
P-value	0.364		0.238	0.068
Phi coefficient	0.128+		0.246+	0.319++

* $p < 0.05$

The p-value is often incorrectly interpreted; the p-value is about the process of generating the data. The p-value can therefore be interpreted in terms of a hypothetical repetition of the study (Hooper 1982). In terms of statistical significance, it was decided to set the value at a 95 percent confidence interval ($p < 0.05$). This said, race, with a p-value of 0.068, can therefore be seen as having some evidence, although weak in having an influence on union membership. Gender, age and marital status had no statistical significance regarding their relationship with union membership. The effect value and phi coefficient confirmed the above-mentioned finding, as shown in Table 4. Race, with a value of 0.319, has a medium effect ($\phi > 0.3$) on union

membership. Gender, age and marital status will, however, have a small effect on union membership. Litschge et al. (2010) stated that although an effect size is small, it can have a substantial effect on the practical value. It is also important to take into account that the sample was relatively small and this could be the reason why evidence could be so weak. According to Hooper (1982), the larger the sample size, the greater the evidence will be. Litschge et al. (2010) confirmed this by stating that statistical power is affected by the estimated effect size, α level and sample size.

Table 5 shows the t-test conducted to determine the differences between the two groups (those employees who *do* belong to a union and those employees who *do not* belong to a union) and their relationship with the various themes of employee participation and their tendency to join a union.

As previously mentioned, in terms of statistical significance, it was decided to set the value at a 95 percent confidence interval ($p < 0.05$). As seen in Table 5, employee participation themes with the most statistical significance for both groups (those employees who *do* belong to a union and those employees who *do not* belong to a union) are co-management and self-management. Co-management, with a p-value of .016, can therefore be seen as having a moderate influence on respondents' tendency to join a union; together with self-management with a p-value of .004, which can be seen as having a strong influence on respondents' tendency to join a union. Although the p-values of both these themes are smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), it does not necessarily imply influence (Hooper 1982). For this reason, Cohen's d effect size was also calculated. Cohen's d effect size, however, confirmed the results, as mentioned above, as both co-management and self-management are greater than 0.80 ($d > 0.80$). Co-management, together with self-management, therefore has a large effect.

Table 3: Biographical information of the two groups

<i>Union member</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age</i>			<i>Marital status</i>				<i>Race</i>			
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>20-39</i>	<i>40-59</i>	<i>60+</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Widow</i>	<i>African</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>White</i>
Yes	100%	0	66.7	33.3	0	22.2	44.4	33.3	0	11	22	0	66.7
No	88.50%	11.5	63.9	29.5	6.56	37.7	49.2	9.8	3.3	50.8	4.9	1.6	42.6

Table 5: t-test

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Union membership</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
Consultation	Yes	9	1.6296	0.65499	0.112	0.57**
	No	61	2.0437	0.72897		
Negotiation	Yes	9	1.8889	0.74068	0.337	0.34*
	No	61	2.1557	0.7775		
Joint decision- making	Yes	9	1.8333	0.66144	0.21	0.44**
	No	61	2.1803	0.78013		
Co-management	Yes	9	1.833	0.76035	.016*	0.80***
	No	61	2.4426	0.67914		
Self-management	Yes	9	1.7778	0.79495	.004*	0.86***
	No	61	2.459	0.60756		
Financial participation	Yes	9	1.9259	0.79543	0.157	0.47**
	No	61	2.3033	0.72998		

* $p < 0.05$ * $d > 0.20$ (small effect) ** $d > 0.50$ (medium effect) *** $d > 0.80$ (large effect)

DISCUSSION

The presence of one or more union members is a rough indicator of whether a workplace has employee representation based on trade unions (Millward et al. 2000). Of the 70 participants, 87.1 percent did not belong to a union and only 12.9 percent did. It can therefore be concluded that the organisation's employee representation is not based on trade unions. In a study done by WERS (2004), it was found that union membership was lower among employees who worked for small- and medium-sized organisations (Deery et al. 2001; Forth et al. 2006). When one looks at these results, it is not surprising that union membership is so low in the organisation, as the organisation is relatively small in size. According to Singh (2001), when union membership is low, it is important to have joint governance in the organisation. Joint governance is not a new concept as it refers to labour management committees. Under joint governance, an organisation can practise joint decision-making as well as being given the flexibility to solve problems (Singh 2001).

From the results, it is clear from the interviews that the organisation uses non-union forms of employee participation to facilitate joint governance. These non-union forms of employee participation have been identified as daily meetings, involvement, communication, information sharing, support, trust, responsibility, commitment and rewards (see Table 2). According to Markey (2007), non-union forms of employee participation can function to channel dissatis-

faction, facilitate communication and encourage cooperation. Change within the organisation can also occur more rapidly because there is no need to consult or negotiate with trade union representatives (Lloyd and Newell 1998). Non-union forms of employee participation, also called substitutions (Markey 2007), have a two-fold perception. The first perception is that it is a deliberate employer strategy to create a union alternative. The second is that these substitutes may create a more cooperative employment relationship (Markey 2007; Millward et al. 2000). As Dundon and Rollinson (2004) noted, non-unionism does not mean that there are no union members present in the workplace. The term non-union is rather concerned with a situation where union acknowledgment is absent in order to determine the terms and conditions of employment. The following are seen as characteristics of non-union employee participation (Kaufman and Taras 2000) within the workplace:

- These forms are created, structured and operated by employers.
- They are generally informal with a minority having some kind of an agreement.
- Non-union forms of employee participation can be limited to a work group, for example quality circles; or it can be presented in various groups, for example work councils.
- These forms deal with any issues regarding the employment relationship, but if they involve collective representation and discuss wages or working conditions, they must comply with the law.

- Non-union forms of employee participation entail mutual discussions instead of negotiation/bargaining. The fundamental assumption is not conflict of interest, but rather in-house worker-management co-operation.

As seen in Table 3, from the 87.1 percent of respondents who did not belong to a union, 88.5 percent are male and 50.8 percent of the respondents are African. With regard to the group of respondents who did belong to a union (12.9%), all of the respondents are male (100%) and most are white (66.7%).

The chi-square test was utilised to determine whether the relationship between participants' biographical information (gender, age, marital status and race) and union membership is practically significant. It was found that race could have an influence on employees joining a union. This can be confirmed in literature as individuals have different backgrounds, ethical morals and values; and for this reason, each individual (in this case race) will react differently (Ramutsheli 2001). Gender, age and marital status, however, had no effect on employees' tendency to join a union. This finding is, however, in contrast with a study done by Barratt (2009). Barratt (2009) found that union density among 20- to 24-year-olds is only 12.2 percent compared to 38.3 percent for employees in their 50s. For this reason, he concluded that age has a likelihood of influencing employees' union membership.

The t-test was also conducted to determine the differences between the two groups (those employees who *do* belong to a union and those employees who *do not* belong to a union) and their relationship with the various themes of employee participation and their tendency to join a union. It was found that both co-management and self-management could have a strong influence on employees joining a union, meaning that employees will join a union if co-management and self-management are not present in the organisation. The key challenge regarding employee relations in the organisation is therefore to shift from a legacy of adversarial relationships to employee participation and workplace co-operation.

Co-management is seen as an intended effort by managers to provide role-expanding opportunities for individuals and group employees at lower levels in the organisation. Co-management will therefore result in a measure of

shared power (Whitty 1996) and will also enable workers to be represented at management level as well as in decision-making structures in the organisation (Venter 2009). An organisation will function at its best when the goals and behaviours of all the members are aligned. Co-management as a form of employee participation encourages this alignment, since employees will feel a greater sense of partnership, common purpose and commitment to the organisation (Kaufman 2003). Interaction between employees and management will be at the order of the day and could provide new opportunities to develop trustful and supportive relationships. As soon as managers and employees become mutually responsible for completing an assignment, they must interact in a different way by supporting each other (Van Mierio et al. 2005; Ramutsheli 2001). Co-management will result in the following benefits for employees and managers (Kaufman 2003):

- Enhanced communication between various parties;
- Increased interaction between parties; and
- Improved and more positive relationships.

According to the t-test results, employees in the organisation also indicated that self-management will have a strong influence on them joining a union. Self-management can be seen as an individual's desire to assume autonomy by controlling his/her own destiny (Rosner 2006). Giving employees more influence on how they perform their work is believed to be beneficial for both employees and employers (Kim et al. 2010). Few employees want their every action to be monitored. Most employees appreciate having the flexibility to do their job as they see fit (Olivier 2010). Self-managed organisations can be more flexible in adapting to various situations and will also be more productive, healthy as well as self-sustaining (Rosner 2006), since self-management enables employees to develop, share and apply their knowledge more fully (Kallenberg et al. 2009).

The results therefore indicate that it is vital for employees in this organisation to be represented at management level as well as being a part of the decision-making structures within the organisation in order for them to build partnerships with their managers. Employees in the organisation also want autonomy in completing their responsibilities without being micro-man-

aged. They need to have the freedom to structure their internal work structure in order to reach their goals.

The question, however, remains: What is the core reason for such a low number of union representation in the organisation? Does the organisation forbid employees to belong to a union? Or maybe the participants do not know what employee participation is. Another reason could also be because belonging to a union does not interest the employees. Therefore, the questionnaire ended by asking respondents to state the reason for not belonging to a union. Their answers are presented in Table 6:

Table 6: Reasons for not belonging to a union

Question	Yes	Maybe	No
I do not belong to a union because my work does not allow me to do so	14.8%	16.4%	68.9%
I do not belong to a union because it does not interest me	46.7%	16.7%	36.7%
I do not belong to a union because I do not know what a union is	28.8%	5.1%	66.1%

As seen from Table 6, of the 87.1 percent of individuals who did not belong to a union, 14.8 percent said it was because the organisation prohibited them to do so. Some 46.7 percent said that they do not belong to a union because it does not interest them; and lastly, 28.8 percent said they do not belong to a union because they do not know what a union is. It can therefore be concluded that there is no tendency within the organisation to substitute trade union membership (trade union representation) for non-union forms of employee participation such as daily meetings, involvement, communication, information sharing, support, trust, responsibility, commitment and rewards. Employees and managers simply *do not* belong to a union because it does not interest them.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to provide insight into the relationship between employee participation and union membership. Researchers are of the opinion that organisations use employee participation programs as a substitute for trade union

representation and that employee participation will have a negative effect on union membership and for these reasons they do not favour employee participation programs. However, the study found that 87.1 percent of the organisation's employees did not belong to a union and that there are no tendencies that the organisation uses employee participation as a substitute for trade union representation as the core reason why 87.1 percent individuals *do not* belong to a union is because belonging to a union does not interest them. The study found that race will have an influence on employees joining a union. No practical significance was found regarding gender, age and marital status and union membership. The participants in the organisation attach high value to an environment where they can take on more responsibilities. They will also feel empowered when they take on new responsibilities. Taking on more and new responsibilities can occur within a team (co-management) or individually (self-management). It is therefore important for the organisation to develop an environment that encourages freedom of thought and creativity for their employees.

LIMITATIONS

The disadvantages of using group administration of questionnaires are that the researcher has limited control over what happens in the field and the conditions in which the questionnaire is administered cannot be controlled. The disadvantage of closed questions is that the answer the respondent wants to give may not be one of the options; answers are very simple with no detail and a respondent can answer even if she or he has no opinion or knowledge. A language barrier can also be seen as a limitation as most of the participants spoke an African language, but the questionnaire was only available in English or Afrikaans. Finally, since a non-probability sampling method was utilised, it would therefore be dangerous to draw important conclusions about labour as a whole regarding the relationship between employee participation and union membership or extrapolate the findings to other organisations.

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