

# The Desire for Workers' Participation: Conflicting Forces in the Workplace

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Résumé de l'article

On s'attend à ce que la participation des travailleurs aux prises de décision dans l'entreprise augmente le rendement de la main-d'œuvre et de l'établissement, à ce qu'elle diminue les sentiments d'insatisfaction, d'aliénation et de tension parmi les salariés et à ce qu'elle améliore les relations professionnelles. L'expérience de la participation démontre que de tels mécanismes sont très exigeants puisque cette activité réclame un temps précieux et non rétribuée, un grand effort et un engagement profond lesquels peuvent expliquer les piètres résultats de beaucoup de programmes de participation des travailleurs. Des études récentes révèlent que le désir de participation chez les salariés est ambigu et qu'il ne doit pas être considéré comme acquis d'avance. Toutefois, les témoignages d'insatisfaction ou de désillusion concernant ces mécanismes n'ont pas été suffisamment expliqués et les facteurs sous-tendant de semblables réactions sont sous-estimés. En conséquence, l'opinion soutenue dans le présent article, c'est que la participation ouvrière est très coûteuse et qu'elle exige comme condition préalable un acquiescement de l'esprit. Donc, le désir de participation se manifestera lorsqu'il y a insatisfaction au travail, ce qui le rend attrayant malgré son coût cependant que l'adhésion de l'esprit le rend opérationnel au plan de l'usine. L'auteur a vérifié cette hypothèse par des entrevues fouillées auprès de 248 travailleurs non qualifiés et spécialisés d'une entreprise moyenne de produits alimentaires. L'étude révèle deux résultats importants. En premier lieu, on remarque un affaiblissement du désir de participation lorsqu'il y a satisfaction au travail. Le sexe, l'origine ethnique, le degré de scolarité et l'ancienneté ne modifient pas le standard de base. En particulier, l'hypothèse selon laquelle ce standard serait plus marqué parmi les groupes de travailleurs les plus démunis ne s'avère pas suffisamment étayée. En second lieu, on a découvert que, de toute manière, on trouvait un désir bien ancré de participation qui allait s'accroissant lorsqu'il s'accompagnait d'une véritable adhésion de l'esprit. En conséquence, le manque de satisfaction au travail et une forte incitation à la participation contribuent à l'instauration d'un fort désir de participer, alors que la satisfaction totale au travail et le défaut d'acquiescement de l'esprit, sans nécessairement l'annihiler, entraînent l'affaiblissement de ce désir.

# ***The Desire for Workers' Participation Conflicting Forces in the Workplace***

**Aviad Bar-Haim**

*The desire to participate in managerial affairs on the workers' part among unskilled and semi-skilled workers in a food factory is hypothesized here to be contingent on two factors: rewards' satisfaction (RS) and ideology toward participation (OP).*

«More workers' participation» is currently a debated issue among employers, trade unions, political parties, government agencies and the press (Brown, 1972; Barkin, 1978; IDE, 1979). Proponents of the participative issue believe that through participation in managerial decision-making at all levels, workers' attachment to their work and workplace will increase, and feelings of dissatisfaction, alienation and stress will decrease (Likert, 1961; Patchen, 1964, 1965; Blumberg, 1968; Susman, 1972; Mitchell, 1972). Also it is assumed that, through participative methods, several workplace and workforce performances will be improved directly or indirectly. For example, expected results are higher productivity, better labor relations and lower rates of absenteeism and turnover (Walker, 1974; Aram *et al.*, 1971; Bridges *et al.*, 1968; French *et al.*, 1966, 1960).

Scientific evidence has not yet confirmed most of the above expectations despite some fragmented positive results in few workplaces, which have introduced participative methods (Strauss and Rosenstein, 1970; Derber, 1970; Franke, 1972; Dunn, 1972; Koch and Fox, 1978). What is more intriguing are the signs of disappointment and disillusionment with the nature of the participation process itself, once the barriers of communication and fears of workers and managers have been removed (Rus, 1970; Obradovic, 1970, 1972; Ramondt, 1979). Actual experience with participation shows that it is a very demanding process for the workers, since participative activities absorb scarce and unpaid time. Also problematic is the sustenance of other inputs of human effort and commitment in terms of

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educational and training investments on the workers' part to participate effectively in the process of managerial decision-making (Adizes, 1971; Mulder, 1971, 1972). Another concern is the indirect and weak relationships between the participation process in one form or another of collective action and the results in terms of benefits to the individual workers. This is evident especially in representative schemes, which constitute the majority of participation programs. In these programs, even in the advanced ones, there is no direct feedback to the individual worker. Participation takes place in the Works Council or management board, but the operative results are remote in time and in process from the personal involvement of the rank and file (Kavcic *et al.*, 1971; Lammers, 1967; Miller, 1978; Child, 1976). The participation literature in recent years reveals that the desire for participation on the workers' side is ambiguous and should not be taken for granted. Earlier studies (Holter, 1965; French *et al.*, 1960; Tabb and Goldfarb, 1969) and some more recent ones (Alluto and Belanco, 1972; Ramsay, 1976; Hepe and Wall, 1976; Hilgendorf and Irving, 1976) point to the differences in the strength of the desire to participate in different groups of workers. Thus, there is enough evidence to suggest that the desire to participate would evolve under very specific conditions (Rosow, 1982). But this treatment of the desire to participate as a dependent variable is uncommon and fragmented.

Studies of participation recently have emphasized the disappointment and disillusionment with the participation processes and results rather than analysing and predicting these responses. It seems that there is a great underestimation of the costs of these processes to the workers in terms of time, involvement and responsibilities, which are extra to workers' duties and commitments in the workplace. The desire to participate is not independent from other desires in the workplace, and particularly the desire to get rewards, material and social, for the work done. Thus, the participation option has, at least from the cost/benefit point of view, an alternative in the existing reward structure. However, the current utilitarian considerations are not the sole source of workers' desires. They may hope, ideologically, to change the basic relationships between labor and management as a way to improve their quality of working life in a different societal equilibrium of costs/rewards level.

Thus, the general thesis of this paper is that a desire to participate on the workers' side would emerge in the presence of two basic conditions: the lack of rewards' satisfaction which makes the participation option attractive and instrumental ideology of participation, which translates this option to operative action in workplace. This pattern of relationships is explored

in different groups of workers according to sex, ethnic origin, education and seniority as social background. The basic pattern of the assumed relationships is postulated in the following hypotheses.

### **HYPOTHESES AND THEIR RATIONALE**

- (1) The desire of workers to participate in management affairs will correlate negatively with the satisfaction with rewards, or in other words: the desire for participation will prevail among dissatisfied workers more than among satisfied ones.

*Rationale:* Even though workers may be unhappy with several dimensions of their work and work environment, they are not likely to turn to participative solutions except as a secondary option to existing rewards' mechanisms, because of the high costs of participation in terms of time, skills, social and other personal resources. However, serious dissatisfaction with rewards will breed such desire.

- (2) The desire of workers to participate will increase insofar as they see it as a means to increase either their rewards (e.g. profit-sharing), or their involvement in managerial decision-making.

*Rationale:* Workers strive to promote their basic interests in the workplace both in material terms of their power position. Perceiving opportunities to do so via participative measures will increase the desire to apply these participative solutions.

- (3) The effects of rewards' satisfaction and the orientation toward participation on the desire to participate are additive. However, it is not expected to have an interaction effect between satisfaction with rewards and orientation toward participation.

*Rationale:* It may appear that the first two hypotheses act in opposite directions: more satisfaction with rewards decreases the desire to participate. More power attached to participation, however, increases the same desire. The possible negative correlation between satisfaction with rewards and the orientation toward participation is *not* assumed. The reason for this supposition is that satisfaction with rewards emerges from the internal experience of the workers in the workplace, while the orientation toward participation is crystallized in a wider and different context of social, political and psychological environment.

- (4) The above pattern of relationships is examined in different groups according to their social background on the assumption that the above pattern will be clearer and more significant among the more deprived

groups of workers, as women, the less educated and the less senior workers who have less opportunities to materialize alternative options to improve their quality of working life.

## **SAMPLE AND METHOD**

A representative sample of 248 unskilled and semi-skilled workers (men and women in equal numbers), from a medium sized Israeli factory was investigated by means of extensive interviews. The factory is a leading one in its field (food manufacture), and has a monopoly in a wide range of products. Formal participation of workers in management has never been tried in this factory, but the issue was raised, together with other demands, by the workers in a long strike which the factory experienced a year before the study. This demand had not materialized, but both workers and management had been extensively exposed to and were supposedly aware of the participation issue.

## **THE DESIRE FOR PARTICIPATION (DP)**

This variable was measured by the following item:

«Do you feel personally that you are participating in the decision of the company or do you want to participate more in it?»

Respondents were classified into two groups: (a) those who were not interested in participation; (b) those who expressed interest in participation either in decisions concerning work and working conditions, or decisions concerning the management of the company in general. 53% expressed interest in some form of participation. However, 47% were not interested in participation at all. This figure is much higher than a similar figure of Ramsay's study (1976). He reports only 10% of uninterested workers in his sample. He notes, however, that his sample was drawn from organizations that claimed to have paid some attention to the question of participation.

## **SATISFACTION WITH REWARDS SCALE (RS)**

Three overall measures of satisfaction with rewards were used: (a) job satisfaction («does your job give you satisfaction?»); (b) workplace satisfaction («in general, what is your feeling about the factory?»); (c) pay satisfaction («in general, are you satisfied with your present wages?»). The above items were dichotomized and used to form a unidimensional index of RS by means of the Guttman Scale technique, as shown in Table. 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Guttman Scale of Three Items of Satisfaction with Rewards**

Scale levels	Pay Sat	Workplace Sat.	Job. Sat.	Frequencies	
				%	N
0	-	-	-	23%	51
1	-	-	+	30%	68
2	-	+	+	30%	68
3	+	+	+	17%	38
Item-tota correlation	.84	.51	.48	100%	225

Reproducibility: 0.89; Scalability: .70

(-) = Dissatisfied (+) = Satisfied

An unidimensional patterns scale emerges by combining the three dichotomies and is found to be internally consistent and reliable according to the coefficients of reproductibility and scalability (Nie *et al.*, 1975, 529-533). It is interesting to note that pay satisfaction is the predictor item, that is to say, that only those who are satisfied with their pay are also satisfied with the workplace and their job, but not vice versa. It is also noteworthy that 23% are totally dissatisfied, 17% are completely satisfied over all the scale items, 30% are satisfied only with their job, and another 30% are satisfied with their job and the workplace.

#### ORIENTATION TOWARDS PARTICIPATION (OP)

This variable was measured by an open question as follows: «What is workers' participation and how is it expressed?» Responses were categorized into three groups: (a) those who did not know or could not define what workers' participation meant; (b) those who defined workers' participation in terms of involvement on the workers' part, personally or collectively, in managerial decision-making at work and/or in other management levels, including information sharing; (c) those who defined workers' participation as profit sharing or other remuneration methods.

41% have no idea about workers' participation; 36% have a «participation in management» orientation, that is a 'power sharing' orientation; 23% expressed a 'profit sharing' orientation, that is a 'materialistic' one.

## RESULTS

The raw data set for testing the first two hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

The data in the first column of the table is for the whole sample and displays the percentages of positive desire to participate in the different categories of rewards' satisfaction and ideological orientation. The Chi-Square test rejects the null possibility that there are no relationships between DP and either RS or OP.

Thus, the trend for rewards' satisfaction is clear and significant: the more that workers were satisfied with rewards, the less enthusiastic they were about workers' participation. The finding is sharper and unequivocal at the extremes of the RS scale, that is, high positive desire to participate for the least satisfied (71%), and low positive desire for the most satisfied (39%). However, the general trend is preserved over the entire scale as well.

The hypothesis for the ideological orientation is also confirmed: the more the workers defined a specific orientation toward participation (either power or materialistic), the more they express a desire to participate. Here the main difference is between the unoriented workers (42% of positive desire) and the oriented ones (57% and 63% respectively).

This overall pattern is preserved more or less in all subgroups but not to the same power or significance (see column 2-9 in Table 2).

The negative correlation between DP and RS holds well for males, of Oriental origin, less educated and less senior in the plant. It is less clear for females, of Western origin and the more educated, and probably does not hold for the more senior workers in the sample.

The positive correlation between DP and OP is the most significant and the clearest for the less educated and less senior workers. It is less significant for the other subgroups although the raw differences does not contradict the original hypothesis.

Part of the decrease in the significance level of the correlation between DP and the two explanatory variables is due to the break down of the sample to smaller subgroups<sup>1</sup>.

However, there is also some real differences among the subgroups. The less senior, less educated and the Orientals are more sensitive to changes in their rewards' satisfaction. They express stronger desires to participate

<sup>1</sup> This may explain why significant differences of DP across OP for the whole sample, turns to a non significant when breaking it according to sex and ethnicity.

TABLE 2  
The Distribution of Positive Desire to Participation According to Rewards' Satisfaction  
and Ideological Orientation in Several Sub-groups

	Sex			Ethnic Origin			Education		Seniority	
	(1) All	(2) Males	(3) Females	(4) Oriental Origin	(5) Western Origin	(6) Up to 8 years	(7) 9 years +	(8) Up to 11 years	(9) 12 years +	
Average Positive Desire	53%	56%	50%	53%	52%	56%	48%	51%	54%	
Rewards' Satisfaction (RS)	(*)	(*)		(*)		(*)		(*)		
0 - None	71%	88%	61%	68%	79%	72%	67%	88%	58%	
1 - Job Sat	52%	57%	44%	55%	45%	42%	59%	49%	55%	
2 - Job + WPL Sat	50%	50%	50%	48%	50%	64%	31%	42%	62%	
3 - Job + WPL + Pay Sat	39%	38%	40%	13%	48%	39%	39%	44%	27%	
Ideological Orientation (Op)	(*)					(*)		(*)		
0 - None	42%	42%	41%	45%	41%	40%	44%	38%	43%	
1 - Power Sharing	57%	67%	50%	51%	61%	64%	50%	61%	54%	
2 - Profit Sharing	63%	60%	69%	67%	58%	68%	68%	53%	61%	

(\*) Differences between positive and negative desire are significant according to  $\chi^2$  test ( $p < .05$ ).



when in a low level of satisfaction, and much weaker desires when in high levels. These groups are also more responsive to the ideological variable: when have a definite orientation toward participation, they express more than others a positive desire to participate.

The Westerners, the more educated and the more senior workers display less dramatic changes on the RS scale, and also the gap between the ideologically oriented and the unoriented workers in these groups is smaller.

Female workers, although more deprived in this particular plant (earn less, occupy lower jobs etc.), are not responsive to RS and OP as was expected in the fourth hypothesis. On the contrary, we found that the male workers were those who displayed the negative correlation between RS and DP. Thus, while the gap in the desire to participate between the most satisfied men and the least satisfied ones is 50%, for women the gap is only 21%.

Up to now the simple crosstabulation of the desire to participation by the rewards' satisfaction and orientation toward participation confirms the thesis that this attitude is eroded by the alternative reward mechanism in the workplace and flourishes in the presence of explicit ideological orientations. The inter-group differences are not consistent enough to confirm the deprivation thesis, especially in regard to the response pattern of female versus male workers.

A more elaborate examination is now made by employing a regression analysis for all the variables.

The purpose of this analysis is to assess in an integrated way the weight of each independent variable (RS, OP, sex, ethnicity, education, seniority) in predicting the response in the independent variable DP. All the background variables and the dependent variable were coded as dummy variables with zero and one values. The range of values for RS is 0-3 and OP is 0-2.

The final analysis emphasizes the basic pattern by assigning the most important weights ( $\beta$ 's) to the rewards' satisfaction and the ideological orientation as predictors of the desire to participate. It also confirms the third hypothesis by the almost zero correlation between RS and OP, and finally it further shows that the background indices do not change the basic relationship except for education, which contributes something to the prediction power of the model and acts as a minor suppressor of the RS and OP.

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Analysis of the Desire to Participate on 6 Independent Variables**

Predictors	Dependent: Desire to Participate				<i>r</i> among predictors	
	<i>R</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>r</i>		
RS	.19	-.10	-.21	-.19	RS	*
OP	.24	.11	.17	.14	OP	.02
Education	.27	-.14	-.14	-.12	Education	.01 .01

Not entered (non-significant *b*,  $p < .05$ ): sex, ethnicity, seniority

*R* = multiple correlation

*B* = raw regression coefficient

*b* = standardized regression coefficient

*r* = simple Pearson correlation

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The study reveals two important phenomena in relation to the desire on the workers' part to participate in managerial affairs. First, there is a consistent erosion of the desire to participate in the presence of positive rewards' satisfaction in the workplace. This trend is not invariant according to several background indices, but the variation does not change the basic pattern and is not consistent according to the deprivation thesis.

Second, independently from the effect of the rewards' satisfaction, a «core» attitude of a positive desire to participate *anyway* was also found, which increased when supported by the presence of ideological commitments. Thus, we can say with some confidence that where the conditions of a lack of rewards in the workplace and high stress on participation as a means to achieve material or power-sharing goals prevail, it will lead to a high positive desire to participate, while full satisfaction and a lack of any definite orientation toward participation will decrease the same desire (but not necessary extinguish it). There are weak and insufficient indications in this study that some, but not all, of the deprived groups in the workplace will find themselves near to the former situation.

From the practical point of view, it seems that there is an alternative to workers' participation at least from the point of view of «the client».

However, we should remember that failure of the workplace to sufficiently remunerate unskilled or semi-skilled workers is an endemic feature in a large part of the industrial sector. Therefore, it seems not unrealistic to try participation with its known costs and risks when other routes to improve work life are practically blocked.

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### *Le désir de participation des travailleurs*

On s'attend à ce que la participation des travailleurs aux prises de décision dans l'entreprise augmente le rendement de la main-d'oeuvre et de l'établissement, à ce qu'elle diminue les sentiments d'insatisfaction, d'aliénation et de tension parmi les salariés et à ce qu'elle améliore les relations professionnelles. L'expérience de la participation démontre que de tels mécanismes sont très exigeants puisque cette activité réclame un temps précieux et non rétribué, un grand effort et un engagement profond lesquels peuvent expliquer les piètres résultats de beaucoup de programmes de participation des travailleurs. Des études récentes révèlent que le désir de participation chez les salariés est ambigu et qu'il ne doit pas être considéré comme acquis d'avance. Toutefois, les témoignages d'insatisfaction ou de désillusion concernant ces mécanismes n'ont pas été suffisamment expliqués et les facteurs sous-tendant de semblables réactions sont sous-estimés. En conséquence, l'opinion soutenue dans le présent article, c'est que la participation ouvrière est très coûteuse et qu'elle exige comme condition préalable un acquiescement de l'esprit. Donc, le désir de participation se manifestera lorsqu'il y a insatisfaction au travail, ce qui le rend attrayant malgré son coût cependant que l'adhésion de l'esprit le rend opérationnel au plan de l'usine.

L'auteur a vérifié cette hypothèse par des entrevues fouillées auprès de 248 travailleurs non qualifiés et spécialisés d'une entreprise moyenne de produits alimentaires. L'étude révèle deux résultats importants. En premier lieu, on remarque un affaiblissement du désir de participation lorsqu'il y a satisfaction au travail. Le sexe, l'origine ethnique, le degré de scolarité et l'ancienneté ne modifient pas le standard de base. En particulier, l'hypothèse selon laquelle ce standard serait plus marqué parmi les groupes de travailleurs les plus démunis ne s'avère pas suffisamment étayée. En second lieu, on a découvert que, de toute manière, on trouvait un désir bien ancré de participation qui allait s'accroissant lorsqu'il s'accompagnait d'une véritable adhésion de l'esprit.

En conséquence, le manque de satisfaction au travail et une forte incitation à la participation contribuent à l'instauration d'un fort désir de participer, alors que la satisfaction totale au travail et le défaut d'acquiescement de l'esprit, sans nécessairement l'annihiler, entraînent l'affaiblissement de ce désir.