**Where Have All the Research on Employers Gone?**

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on an apparent paradox in the employment relations literature. On one hand, the literature highlights a growth in neo-liberalism and deregulation and also a decline collective bargaining which together have facilitated an increase in employer-determined flexibility. On the other hand, there appears to have been a dearth of cross-sectional research on employer strategies, attitudes and behaviours. In its discussion of this paradox, the paper investigates the limited recent literature on managerial prerogatives and highlights how the literature is seldom based on detailed, comprehensive cross-sectional research. The paper’s second part presents our recent research on employers and their strategies, attitudes and behaviours in order to illustrate how employer associations and individual employers have been influential in decentralising employment relations and how that has shifted, in turn, employer attitudes further towards favouring individualised and ‘flexible’ forms of employment relations. It is also highlighted how research on small and medium sized employers (SMEs) can lead to new and more complex research findings in respect of key employment relations areas and workplace based processes.

**Introduction**

Since Pete Seeger’s song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” was a hit in the 1960s there has been a fundamental shift in employment relations in many OECD countries. Institutional employment relations have been reshaped through a decline in collective bargaining and union membership and a rise in employer prerogative and workplace employment relations (Marglin & Schor, 1990; Purcell, 1993). In spite of these changes, it has been a surprise to us how, at the various ILERA conferences, very few papers have focussed on employers, their attitudes and behaviours and how these have impacted on employment relations frameworks, issues and trends. For example, one of the rapporteurs bemoaned at the 2010 IIRA European Congress in Copenhagen the fact that there were no sections dedicated to employers. In this paper, we are trying both to highlight this apparent bias or paradox in the employment relations literature and to illustrate how research on employers can contribute to our understanding of the direction and significance of recent changes of employment relations processes and outcomes.

While many OECD countries have experienced a decline in collectivism, this paper will be based on our research on the so-called ‘New Zealand experiment’ (Kelsey, 1997; Dannin, 1997) and the role and attitudes of New Zealand employers in the recent transformation of employment relations (Foster et al., 2009, 2011 & 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2016). This transformation has delineated three recent legislative phases which have moved employment relations from a well-established conciliation and arbitration system to a prevalence of workplace based and individualised employment arrangements (Rasmussen, 2009 & 2016). Collective bargaining and union density have declined and even a more positive legislative framework has not been able to revive collectivism (Rasmussen, 2004 & 2010).

The paper highlights the influence of employers and their associations on the various legislative changes and how these changes have been implemented in the labour market. Furthermore, these changes have now taking on a life of their own. While employers and their associations have sought ‘more flexibility’ since the 1980s, the reduction of collective bargaining in the last two decades makes collective bargaining less of an experienced reality and this has created its own momentum (Foster et al., 2011). Our research on employer attitudes suggests that there has been a shift in employer attitudes with less acceptance of traditional institutional employment relations with its emphasis on collective bargaining, employee protection and predictable employment arrangements (Foster et al., 2012, Foster & Rasmussen, 2010). Finally, workplace based and individualised employment relations may have increased employer prerogative and employer-determined flexibility but, as our research on SMEs shows, there are considerable variation and complexity associated with employer approaches and actual implementation. This can lead to both softer and harder applications of the employer prerogative and workplace practices.

**What happened to the research on managerial prerogatives?**

Taking into consideration the diverse array of literature relating to employment relationships (including ILERA papers, the various national workplace employment relations studies, industry studies, and the literature on HRM), it is surprising to see so little attention being paid to the managerial thinking and actions in the literature on employment relations. That is, most literature describes – often in general terms - management practice or provides a criticism of management malpractice. However, there has been limited comprehensive attempt made, as far as we can discern, to conceptualise management behaviour or to bring it into the centre of IR or ER analysis.

Furthermore, there appears to be two related aspects of this apparent neglect. The *first* aspect relates to the lack of cross-sectional studies or any attempt to meta-theorise the findings of the actualities of management exposed in large numbers of case-studies (however, see the analysis of multiple case studies in Fortado (1991)). The best attempts of cross-sectional studies of management thinking and practices can be found in the various national workplace employment studies which also allow for longitudinal analyses to track changes over time (for example, see Forth et al., 2006). While these studies have highlighted a remarkable shift in institutionalised employment relations they have focused less on management thinking and the associated changes of management behaviours.

The *second* aspect relates to the lack of in-depth analyses of management practices. This pattern is even more clearly exposed when the field is narrowed down into seemingly neglected but key areas that are claimed to be central to any understanding of employment relations. Chief amongst these is *the role of managerial prerogatives* or its correlates, management power, control, rights, or autocratic tendencies. Our interest in this area is fuelled by literature reviews (see below) associated with conceptual and empirical research on the managerial prerogatives conducted as part of a PhD thesis in New Zealand (Sutcliffe, 2016).

Early literature, mostly written in the 1960s and 1970s did raise the topic and provided some interesting leads for inquiry. See, for example, Mills (1956) and Lane (1969). This was followed up and extended by Fox (1966, 1973, and 1974), Flanders (1975), Storey (1974 and 1976), Hyman (1975) and later by Purcell (1982 and 1983) writing about managerial prerogatives, and by Lukes (1974), Poole (1976), Purcell (1977) and Edwards (1980) writing about power. These writers continued to produce material during the 1980s but there was apparently little focused research, and limited theoretical advancement.

The advent of the Neo-liberalist assault in the 1990s seemed to provide an opportunity to rectify this neglect. There was a bourgeoning in the amount of literature that discussed managerial prerogatives, mainly along the lines that: (a) deregulation, (b) the emasculation of unions, and (c) the consequential outcomes of decentralised bargaining processes and individualisation (for example, see Beynon, 2014; Crouch, 2014; Bray and Underhill, 2009; Marginson, 2012; Smith, 2009). This literature tends to assert that the period witnessed a significant increase in management power and prerogatives, at the expense of workers and their interests. It is probably necessary to offer more evidence to demonstrating this generalised effect and, in particular, it is necessary to develop more counter-factual analyses. The latter would highlight what constraints there are on managerial prerogatives and their application across different types of workplaces. It could also help us explain why many employers and managers have a somewhat different perspective on this stereotypical image of unbridled management power and prerogatives (see our recent research on employer attitudes in section 3 below).

However, throughout the historical developments of the literature described above there have been - after the early wave of research into management and their prerogatives - few genuine attempts to develop robust conceptualisations of the relevant constructs. Although we find that Hill (1974 and 1981) and Macdonald (1985) made interesting starts, our literature searches also found that the momentum was not maintained. The findings of our extensive literature search can *provocatively* be summarised like this:

* There has been too little research of managerial prerogatives and employer attitudes and behaviours, compared to other areas of interest published in employment relations journals;
* There has been limited effort to ‘drill down’ into actual employment relations attitudes and behaviours of employers and managers and thereby seek to develop an understanding which includes the diversity, contradictory evidence and inconsistencies of workplace practices.
* The literature tends to focus on highly generalised practices rather than focusing upon the array of employer/management practices and it also too static rather than reflecting a more complex, diverse and dynamic reality.

As a result, it seems that we are still reliant upon inadequately developed views regarding the actual roles, preferences, practices and behaviours of employers and managers. To the extent that our review of the literature is accurate, effects of this neglect appears to be twofold. We have not adequately understood the complexities of employers and managers and their practices, and we have not managed to bring them into a position of equal theoretical significance with workers in formulating the shifting ‘frontiers of control’ in employment relationships (Goodrich 1921).

These results are both surprising and worrying and we are left wondering: *we are missing something?*

**Employers’ role in the transition to individualised, workplace-based employment relations**

For more than a decade, it has been apparent that there was a dearth of research on employers in New Zealand. This was already obvious following a conference organised by Massey University in 2003 and has become more evident as time as gone by. Since 2008, we have done two national, cross-sectional studies of employer attitudes: the first study focused on employer attitudes to collective bargaining and whether they conducted collective bargaining at their own workplace; the second study focused on employer attitudes to legislative changes which sought to facilitate further flexibility and constraints on union activities.

Our studies followed roughly the same format which combined survey data with interview data (for methodological details, see Foster et al., 2011 and Rasmussen et al., 2016). Based on several regional surveys a national coverage of private sector firms was constructed. While the response rates fluctuated across the various regional surveys and between the two national, cross-sectional surveys they tended to be around 16%-21%, with an on-line survey having lower response rates. The survey firms were sampled based on a commercially available database and our sampling ensured that industry coverage was in line with previous New Zealand surveys. We also interviewed subsequently some of the survey respondents in order to get more detailed answers to particular issues highlighted in our surveys. The interviews also allowed for a more distinct employer ‘voice’ on employer thinking and concerns.

The *first national study* dealt with many different aspects of collective bargaining though a major focus was on basic employer attitudes to collectivism and whether the experience of collective bargaining had a positive or negative influence on employer attitudes. We have presented our findings in other articles (for example, Foster et al., 2009 and 2011). Generally, we found a variety of opinions amongst employers though it was also possible to make a distinction between two groups of employers. In the first group, most employers had very little positive to say about collective bargaining. They were not interested in participating, could not see anything that could facilitate their firms’ people management or competitive/productive position, and they did not think that their employees were interested. These employers had little or no experience of collective bargaining. In the second group, a small minority of employers had experience of collective bargaining and they had more positive attitudes to collective bargaining and the benefits that collective bargaining could deliver to their firm. However, even this group of employers had some reservations about the positive impacts of collective bargaining, often influenced by their experiences of dealing with particular union representatives. With the recent decline in collective bargaining coverage in the private sector, it was concluded that the future of collective bargaining looked rather grim. It was also concluded that it would take rather drastic and comprehensive legal interventions to turn this situation around.

Our *second national study* focused on the post-2008 legislative changes which generally sought to facilitate further flexibility in employers’ dealings with new and existing employees, including some additional constraints on union activity (see Rasmussen, 2016 and Rasmussen et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, our study found that employers were in favour of these changes and they would prefer further moves to enhance their ability to deal directly with their employee. Employers also favoured reduced employee protection, particularly in terms of personal grievance rights. The latter featured strongly in our findings as personal grievance rights allow *all* employees to challenge what they perceive are unfair or discriminatory employer actions. Our study highlighted two somewhat puzzling findings. The first was that many employers had not implemented the full suite of practices allowed by the legislative changes (though again implementation of personal grievance changes featured strongly). This made us wonder to what degree employer support was driven by practical concerns or ideological thinking. The second puzzling finding was that most employers thought that the legislative approach was either favouring employees or evenly balance in terms of employers and employees. Thus, employers do not see that legislative settings as favouring them or allowing an unbridled managerial prerogative. Following our discussion of the literature on managerial prerogatives in the paper’s previous section, this is clearly something that we will need to look more closely into in our future research.

**Small employers and their employment relations systems, strategies and attitudes**

Our research on small employers forms one part of a larger research project to determine the *inter-relationship* of employment relations practices and occupational health and safety outcomes in small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) and in order to give empirical insights to the concepts of the ‘good employer ‘and ‘decent work’. The project addresses the lack of research on the inter-relationships between Employment Relations (ER) and OHS systems and practices, particularly in SMEs. The significance of the project lies in examining the complex relationships between management practices and systems, and how these influence the control of hazards and risks in the SME workplace. Although the literature review and research findings presented in this paper focuses on employee participation and influence in SMEs, the empirical research highlights many other aspects which will be dealt with in subsequent publications.

In order to investigate the concepts of the ‘good employer’ and ‘decent work’ in SMEs, we implemented a similar research process as the one used in previous research projects on employer attitudes and behaviours (see Foster et al., 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2016). Data collection was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. First, a survey was carried out by Massey University where surveys were mailed to a representative sample of 2500 organizations employing between 1 and 50 employees. The surveyed regions were in the Central North Island of New Zealand (Taranaki, Manawatu, Whanganui, Horowhenua, and Hawkes Bay). Although the survey sought information on a variety of employment relations and occupational health and safety practices within SMEs, for the purpose of this paper only ‘employment relations practices’ and ‘employee voice’ were examined, drawing out the relevant items such as the structure and terms and condition of the organisations employment agreements, working arrangements, consultation with staff and attitudes towards unions. A definition was supplied with particular questions so that the respondent was familiar with the terms, for example:

• Negotiate (allowing some form of bargaining before reaching a settlement)

• Consult (discuss with employees before making a decision)

• Inform (let employees know of your decision, no discussion)

• Not inform (e.g. employees may just get a pay increase).

Participants were also invited to partake in semi-structured interviews so as to extract any underlying issues that could not be gleaned from a questionnaire. We received 70 acceptances and a selected portion (25 interviews) was used to ensure that the participants covered the various regions industry and firm sizes in the survey. The interviews were conducted by telephone and taped.

Although researchers recognize the important contribution small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make to innovation, job creation and economic development, the plethora of literature focuses on finance, marketing and operational management in SMEs (Wilkinson, 1999). Researchers also draw attention to a dearth of information on employment management practices and issues in SMEs (eg. Forth, Bewley & Bryson 2006; Lamm, Massey & Perry, Wilkinson, 1999; Woodhams et al., 2007). The main assumption is that SME employers are paternalistic and favour an individualistic approach to managing the employment relationship and occupational health and safety (OHS) risk (Atkinson & Curtis, 2004: McDonald, 2005). The literature also suggests there may be some tension between employment practices in SMEs and the pluralist assumptions frequently embedded in legislative employment protections and this can undermine employee protections.

Although it is difficult to generalize employment relations practices, some studies have suggested personnel and OHS management practices are more likely to be informal and *ad hoc* compared with LEs (Coetzer et al., 2007; Legg, et al, 2009; Wilkinson, 1999). Where formal practices are present these are often related to the management of OHS. For example, Forth et al. (2006) found that though 35 percent of small enterprises (SEs) used written mechanisms such as emails, a suggestion box, and employee surveys that facilitate upward communication, the presence of a human resources (HR) administrator was not significantly associated with these arrangements in SEs. Furthermore, workforce meetings and team briefings were less common and less regular in SEs than in larger enterprises. Downward communication mechanisms such as using a management chain, newsletters, notice boards and company intranets were also less common in SEs.

Despite the presence of formal OHS practices, in some SEs there is concern that many employers are isolated, lack knowledge of OHS risks and legislative obligations, and lack the resources to implement effective OHS management systems (Champoux & Brun, 2003; Legg, et al, 2009). Moreover, few SE employers seek external advice. An additional concern in New Zealand is that few workplaces are large enough to sustain the formal structures necessary to achieve the standards set out in employment legislation, and international and national standards (Haynes, Marchington & Boxall, 2006; Waldergrave, Anderson & Wong, 2003). However, there may be a growing recognition that adopting formal practices is a means of reducing SME vulnerability to litigation (Harris, 2000, Kotey & Slade, 2005).

The findings from our survey indicate that some employers, across industry and size, demonstrate a willingness to engage in some forms of participation, but less so in other forms. There are some employers who are prepared to negotiate with individuals on their terms and conditions of work. Nevertheless, the majority of employers either consult but make the final decision or just inform employees of management decisions, suggesting that managerial prerogative still prevails. The survey found that the majority of employers provide only the minimum conditions required on KiwiSaver (pension fund contributions), annual leave and sick leave entitlements; these findings suggest that for many SME employees the minimum statutory requirements have become the maximum offered to employees. On the other hand, the regularity of meetings and reviewing employment agreements and pay, as well as the formality emerging in the flexibility policies and employment relations practices show that some of the surveyed employers are willing and able to adopt sustainable good practices exceeding their statutory duties. Still, across the surveyed employers, there is room for improvement (especially in consulting with employees when dealing with redundancy). Overall, it is unclear whether employment practices and employee voice will improve even though there is supportive legislation in the new Health and Safety at Work Act.

**Conclusion**

It has been puzzling to us how little traction broadly based research on employers has had. Most employment relations researchers are familiar with this theme: the decline in collective bargaining, neo-liberal inspired legislative reform and the continuous push for ‘more flexibility’ have facilitated individualised and workplace based employment relationships. This brings employer thinking and actions to the fore as a dominant influence in most – all? – workplaces. One would think that this would also be a dominant research theme in employment relations. However, in our experience, this has not been the case and the literature searches on managerial prerogatives also support this evaluation. Again, we are wondering: are we missing something?

Our research has highlighted that there is quite a variety of opinions amongst employers and this is further highlighted in our interviews. However, the ‘mainstream’ employer attitude has become more negative towards collective bargaining and this becomes embedded when collective bargaining is not an ‘experienced good’. As collective bargaining covers less than 10 percent of all employees in the private sector in New Zealand, the current employer quest for more flexibility focuses on legislative constraints whether they ar procedural fairness requirements, union activities or substantive legal minima. These changes will all enhance flexibility – and managerial prerogatives – but there is still a long way to go before employers find that the ‘right balance’ has been achieved. Thus, most employers would appear to be supportive of further changes which could facilitate ‘more flexibility’ and a stronger managerial prerogative.

Having illustrated the changes to employment relations and the important role played by the influence and attitudes of employers and their associations the dearth of cross-sectional research on employers’ strategies, attitudes and behaviours becomes even more inexplicable. The Pete Seeger song could probably be rephrased to: “Where have all the researchers gone? Gone to flowers, everyone. Oh, when will they ever learn?”

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