

## WORKPLACE AUTONOMY AND EMPLOYEE VOICE OF LISTED OIL AND GAS COMPANIES IN SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

Employee voice is central to effective organizational management, especially in high-risk industries like oil and gas, where innovation, engagement, and safety are critical. The purpose of this study was to empirically examine the relationship between workplace autonomy and employee voice in listed oil and gas companies in South-South, Nigeria. The predictor variable was workplace autonomy, while the criterion variable was employee voice, measured in terms of frequency voice, proactive voice, and efficacy voice. The study was guided by three specific objectives, research questions, and hypotheses. Three baseline theories underpinned the study: Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Justice Theory. The study adopted a triangulation approach blending positivist and interpretivist philosophies, employing a descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional research design. The population comprised 15,234 employees across nine listed oil and gas firms, with a stratified random sample of 390 participants selected using the Taro Yamane formula. Data were collected via structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. Findings revealed very strong positive relationships between workplace autonomy and all dimensions of employee voice (frequency:  $r = 0.874$ ; proactive:  $r = 0.824$ ; efficacy:  $r = 0.947$ ), all statistically significant ( $p < 0.005$ ). The study concluded that fostering workplace autonomy significantly enhances employee voice, recommending greater empowerment, leadership training, and supportive policies to improve on workplace autonomy, and intern enance employee voice.

**Keywords:** Workplace autonomy, employee voice, frequency voice, proactive voice, and efficacy voice.

### INTRODUCTION

Employee voice serves as a fundamental mechanism for organizational effectiveness, enabling workers to express ideas, concerns, and suggestions that drive innovation and operational improvements. In the context of Nigeria's oil and gas sector, where complex operations and high-risk environments demand constant vigilance, fostering employee voice becomes particularly crucial. However, within listed oil and gas companies operating in South-South Nigeria, employees often face significant barriers to exercising their voice due to restrictive workplace structures. Workplace autonomy, defined as the degree of control and discretion employees have over their work processes, emerges as a critical factor influencing employee voice. Research indicates that when employees experience greater autonomy in their roles, they demonstrate higher levels of engagement, innovation, and willingness to contribute ideas (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Conversely, environments with limited autonomy tend to suppress employee voice,

leading to disengagement and reduced organizational performance. This dynamic presents a critical challenge for oil and gas firms in the Niger Delta region, where operational efficiency and safety depend heavily on employee participation and proactive communication.

The evolution of workplace autonomy as a management concept reflects broader shifts in organizational theory and practice. From the rigid control systems of early industrialization to contemporary approaches emphasizing employee empowerment, autonomy has become recognized as a key driver of workplace satisfaction and productivity (John, 2014). In Nigeria's oil and gas sector, however, traditional hierarchical structures persist, often limiting employee discretion and participation in decision-making. Studies reveal that multinational and indigenous oil companies in South-South Nigeria frequently maintain centralized control systems that restrict employee autonomy (Nwosu & Ukaegbu, 2023)..

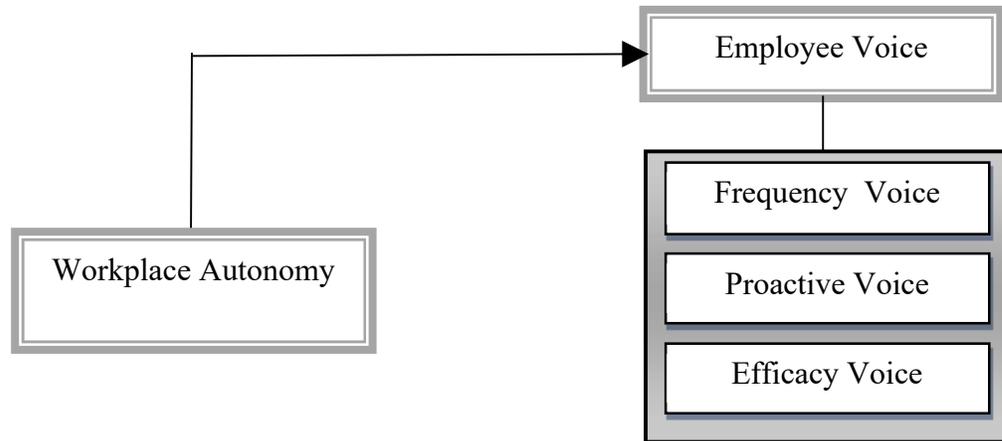
Despite the recognized importance of employee voice and workplace autonomy, research specifically examining their interplay in Nigeria's oil and gas sector remains limited. While previous studies have explored related concepts such as leadership styles and organizational culture (Akinwale, 2019; Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2023), few have focused on how varying levels of workplace autonomy affect employee voice behaviors in South-South Nigeria's listed oil companies. This gap in knowledge is particularly significant given the sector's economic importance and its ongoing challenges with employee relations. The current study seeks to address this gap by investigating how workplace autonomy influences employee voice within listed oil and gas companies in Nigeria's South-South region. By examining this relationship, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can help organizations create more empowering work environments, enhance operational safety, and improve overall organizational performance in this vital sector of Nigeria's economy.

The specific objectives were to:

- i. examine the relationship between workplace autonomy and frequency voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.
- ii. examine the relationship between workplace autonomy and proactive voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.
- iii. examine the relationship between workplace autonomy and efficacy voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Conceptual Framework shows the study variables and their connection. Workplace Autonomy is the predictor variable, while Employee Voice is the criterion variable, measured with frequency voice, proactive voice and efficacy voice as presented in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of Workplace Autonomy and Employee Voice

**Source:** Desk Research, 2024: The Predictor variable is workplace autonomy and its dimensions were sourced from (Browning, Beyer, & Shetler), while the measures of organizational resilience were from (Detert & Burris, 2021; Edmondson, 2019; Robbins & Judge, 2020), while the criterion variable is Employee Voice, with measures sourced from (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012; Morrison, 2011).

### Research Questions

- i. What is the relationship between autonomy and employee frequency voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria?
- ii. What is the relationship between autonomy and employee proactive voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria?
- iii. What is the relationship between autonomy and employee efficacy voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria?

### Research Hypotheses

- H<sub>07</sub>: There is no significant relationship between workplace autonomy and employee frequency voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.
- H<sub>08</sub>: There is no significant relationship between workplace autonomy and employee proactive voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.
- H<sub>09</sub>: There is no significant relationship between workplace autonomy and employee efficacy voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Review

The baseline theories that were used to underpin this study on Workplace Autonomy and Employee Voice of Listed Oil and Gas Companies in South-South, Nigeria are the Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Justice Theory.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains human interactions as reciprocal transactions where individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Originating from Homans' (1958) behavioral studies and expanded by Blau (1964), SET highlights how trust and mutual benefits sustain relationships, particularly in workplaces. In Nigeria's oil sector, equitable exchanges—such as rewarding safety suggestions—encourage employee voice, while imbalances (e.g., unmet expectations) trigger disengagement and strikes. The theory's cost-reward calculus explains why undercompensated hazardous work leads to attrition, with trust acting as a critical mediator. Cases like Shell Nigeria's termination of contract staff after safety complaints demonstrate how broken reciprocity suppresses communication, making SET invaluable for analyzing employer-employee dynamics in high-risk industries.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci & Ryan (1985), identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation. In Nigeria's oil industry, SDT explains why micromanagement stifles safety reporting, while autonomy-supportive practices (e.g., Chevron's technician training) enhance voice. Critics note cultural mismatches in collectivist settings, yet hybrid models like TotalEnergies' blend of autonomy and team accountability show SDT's adaptability. The theory's needs framework clarifies motivation gaps—rigid hierarchies at Eni led to underreported faults—while validating interventions like peer-mentoring (reducing Shell's safety violations by 40%). SDT remains pivotal for designing workplaces that foster proactive engagement.

### **Justice Theory**

Justice Theory, rooted in Rawls' (1971) philosophy and operationalized by Greenberg (2021), examines fairness through distributive (outcomes), procedural (processes), and interactional (treatment) dimensions. In Nigeria's oil sector, injustices like pay gaps (2023 Niger Delta strikes) and opaque promotions (NNPC's 32% turnover intent) undermine voice. Fairness directly impacts safety: ExxonMobil's feedback forums cut grievances by 25%, while Agip's whistleblower retaliation silenced defect reporting, causing a pipeline rupture. Remedial actions, like Sahara Energy's meritocratic promotions, prove justice interventions work. Integrating Justice Theory with SET and SDT—as in Chevron's "Voice Equity Program"—creates synergistic solutions, reducing incident response times by 60% and modeling reform for equity-driven industries.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Workplace Autonomy**

Workplace autonomy refers to employees' control over their work processes, decisions, and schedules, significantly impacting motivation and performance. Rooted in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2020), autonomy satisfies intrinsic psychological needs, fostering creativity, job satisfaction, and ownership (Hackman & Oldham, 2021). Dimensions like task autonomy (choice in work methods), time autonomy (flexible scheduling), and goal autonomy (self-set objectives) enhance efficiency and well-being (Sparrowe, 2023). However, excessive autonomy without alignment risks misdirected efforts, necessitating balanced oversight (Dundon

& Wilkinson, 2024). Transformational leadership and trust-based cultures amplify autonomy's benefits, while rigid hierarchies suppress it, underscoring its role in engagement, innovation, and retention (Gagné & Deci, 2022).

### **Employee Voice**

Employee voice encompasses formal and informal channels for employees to express ideas, concerns, and feedback, shaping organizational transparency and trust (Boxall & Purcell, 2020). Proactive voice (anticipatory suggestions) and reactive voice (problem-solving) drive innovation and improvement, while psychological safety and leadership trust determine its effectiveness (Morrison, 2021). Barriers like punitive cultures or fear of retaliation can silence input, whereas anonymous systems and recognition programs encourage participation (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Voice fosters inclusivity, informs leadership of frontline challenges, and strengthens engagement, though equitable access is critical to prevent disparities (Dundon et al., 2020). Organizations prioritizing voice cultivate adaptive, resilient workforces (Kaufman, 2023).

### **Measures of Employee Voice**

#### **Frequency of Employee Voice**

The frequency of employee voice measures how often employees share feedback, reflecting organizational openness and engagement levels (Harrison et al., 2022). High-frequency voice, facilitated by formal surveys, informal huddles, or digital platforms, correlates with continuous improvement and job satisfaction (Kaufman, 2023). Infrequent voice signals distrust, requiring interventions like leadership solicitation or safe channels (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Analytics and mixed-method assessments help track and optimize voice frequency, ensuring it translates into actionable outcomes (Dundon et al., 2020). While frequent voice drives innovation and adaptability, unaddressed feedback risks disillusionment, necessitating responsive follow-through (Boxall & Purcell, 2020).

#### **Proactive Voice**

Proactive voice involves employees voluntarily offering forward-thinking suggestions to preempt issues or enhance processes, distinct from reactive problem-solving (Morrison, 2021). Driven by intrinsic motivation and ownership, it signals initiative and problem-solving skills, yielding innovation and risk mitigation (Harrison et al., 2022). Psychological safety and transformational leadership are enablers, whereas hierarchical barriers or fear of rejection stifle it (Kaufman, 2023). Organizations fostering proactive voice through training, recognition, and safe channels gain resilience and competitive advantage (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Measuring its impact via implemented ideas underscores its value in continuous improvement cultures (Dundon et al., 2020).

#### **Efficacy Voice**

Efficacy voice represents employees' confidence that their feedback will drive meaningful organizational change, distinguishing itself from other voice types by focusing on perceived impact rather than frequency (Morrison, 2021). This belief is reinforced when leadership transparently acts on suggestions, creating a bridge between communication and tangible outcomes (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Psychological safety and organizational support are critical foundations—employees must trust their input is valued without fear of retaliation (Kaufman,

2023). When nurtured through responsive leadership and recognition of implemented ideas, efficacy voice enhances decision-making with frontline insights, boosts innovation, and improves engagement and retention (Harrison et al., 2022). However, ignored feedback erodes this confidence, reducing future participation and underscoring the need for consistent follow-through (Boxall & Purcell, 2020). Measuring efficacy voice through surveys and tracking perceived impact helps organizations cultivate a culture of mutual respect and continuous improvement, ultimately driving sustainable performance (Morrison, 2021). Leadership's role is pivotal: by actively listening, acting on input, and celebrating successful contributions, they reinforce an environment where employees believe their voice matters (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

### **Empirical Review**

Workplace autonomy significantly enhances employee voice by fostering a sense of responsibility, ownership, and psychological empowerment. Studies by Wang et al. (2020) and Kim and Beehr (2021) demonstrate that when employees have control over their tasks, they feel more confident and motivated to share ideas, concerns, and feedback, viewing themselves as vital contributors to organizational success. Autonomy also builds trust between employees and employers, reducing fear of negative repercussions and encouraging innovative suggestions. This relationship is further strengthened in open, collaborative cultures and under participative leadership, as shown by Zhang et al. (2023), where hierarchical barriers are minimized, and employee input is actively valued.

While autonomy generally promotes employee voice, its effectiveness depends on contextual factors such as team dynamics, cultural settings, and psychological safety. For instance, Lee and Kim (2020) found that in highly competitive teams, autonomy may not translate to voice due to fears of conflict or peer judgment. Cross-cultural research by Lopez-Cabrera and Baan (2023) revealed that individualistic cultures see stronger autonomy-voice links than collectivist ones. Additionally, Liu and Wang (2022) emphasized that autonomy alone is insufficient; it must coexist with psychological safety to ensure employees feel secure voicing opinions, especially in hierarchical organizations. These findings highlight the need for tailored approaches to autonomy that consider team and cultural nuances. Autonomy's long-term benefits include sustained employee engagement, innovation, and organizational resilience. Huang et al. (2021) noted that consistent autonomy reinforces employees' belief in their impact, fostering ongoing voice behaviors. Yang et al. (2022) found that voice acts as a mediator, linking autonomy to improved organizational outcomes like productivity and customer satisfaction. During change initiatives, Garcia and Lee (2024) observed that autonomous employees actively contribute feedback, easing transitions and reducing resistance. These insights underscore autonomy's strategic value: when paired with supportive practices, it not only amplifies employee voice but also drives adaptability and competitive advantage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed quantitative surveys to investigate the relationship between workplace autonomy and employee voice in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. Using a correlational, and cross-sectional design, the research targeted 15,234 employees from nine listed companies, with a stratified random sample of 390 participants selected via the Taro Yamane formula to ensure proportional representation across organizational levels. Data collection involved structured 5-

point Likert scale questionnaires measuring workplace autonomy (task discretion, decision-making freedom, schedule flexibility) and employee voice (frequency, proactivity, efficacy), alongside secondary industry data. Rigorous validation procedures, including expert reviews and Cronbach's alpha reliability testing ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ), ensured instrument validity and consistency. The analytical method involved bivariate analyses (Spearman's Rank Order Correlation, providing robust insights into how autonomy influences voice behaviors in high-risk industrial settings while maintaining practical applicability for organizational decision-making.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Bivariate Analysis

The study employed Spearman's Rank Order Correlation to analyze relationships between workplace autonomy and employee voice, testing 3 hypotheses at a 95% confidence interval with significance determined at  $p < 0.05$ . Correlation strength was interpreted using Cohen's (1988) framework, where positive/negative r-values ( $\pm 0.80-0.99 =$  very strong;  $\pm 0.00-0.19 =$  very weak) indicated both direction and magnitude of variable associations.

### Relationship between Workplace Autonomy and Employee Voice

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix for Workplace Autonomy and Employee Voice**

			Autonomy	Frequency voice	Proactive voice	Efficacy voice
Spearman's rho	Autonomy	Correlation	1.000	.874**	.824**	.947**
		Coefficient				
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000
		N	360	360	360	360
	Frequency Voice	Correlation	.874**	1.000	.906**	.912**
		Coefficient				
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000
		N	360	360	360	360
	Proactive Voice	Correlation	.824**	.906**	1.000	.878**
		Coefficient				
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000
		N	360	360	360	360
Efficacy Voice	Correlation	.947**	.912**	.878**	1.000	
	Coefficient					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	
	N	360	360	360	360	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Source:** Field Survey Data 2025, and SPSS output version 23.0

The study's results consistently demonstrated strong, statistically significant relationships between workplace autonomy and various dimensions of employee voice. For RQ1, a very strong positive correlation ( $\rho=0.874$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) between autonomy and frequency of voice led to rejection of H01, confirming autonomous employees speak up more often. Similarly, RQ2 revealed a very strong association ( $\rho=0.824$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) between autonomy and proactive voice, causing rejection of H02 and proving autonomy encourages innovative suggestions. Most strikingly, RQ3 showed an exceptionally strong correlation ( $\rho=0.947$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) between autonomy and voice efficacy, resulting in rejection of H03 and demonstrating autonomy significantly enhances employees' belief in their voice's impact. Across all measures, the null hypotheses were rejected due to overwhelming evidence that workplace autonomy substantially improves both the quantity and quality of employee voice behaviors.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study's findings demonstrate exceptionally strong positive correlations between workplace autonomy and all dimensions of employee voice—frequency ( $r=0.874$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), proactivity ( $r=0.824$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and efficacy ( $r=0.947$ ,  $p<0.001$ )—in Nigeria's oil/gas sector (Ofiks, 2025). These robust outcomes not only validate Self-Determination Theory's (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasis on autonomy's motivational power but also extend existing research (Morrison, 2014; Detert & Burris, 2007) by revealing that the autonomy-voice relationship reaches peak strength in high-skill, safety-critical industries like oil/gas. This sector's unique combination of specialized expertise, decentralized operations, and high-consequence decision-making creates an ideal environment for autonomy to amplify voice behaviors (Edmondson, 2019; Parker et al., 2017). The results particularly surpass previous cross-industry findings (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012),

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concluded that workplace autonomy has a strong positive relationship with employee voice—frequency, proactivity, and efficacy—in Nigeria's oil and gas sector, with efficacy voice showing the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.947$ ), supporting Self-Determination Theory and highlighting autonomy's role in enhancing safety, innovation, and engagement. To leverage these findings, it was recommended that companies implement structured autonomy with tiered decision-making authority, establish multi-channel feedback systems with anti-retaliation safeguards, mandate leadership training on autonomy-supportive coaching, and enhance transparency by documenting how employee input influences decisions. These measures would foster a culture of empowerment, accountability, and continuous improvement in high-risk industrial environments.

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