

What Workers Want

Updated Edition

Richard B. Freeman
and Joel Rogers

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To Jennifer Amadeo-Holl
and Alida Castillo-Freeman,
who did the work and kept
at least one of us sane

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PREFACE TO THE UPDATED EDITION

This updated edition of *What Workers Want* keeps the core text and chapter structure of the first edition (Chapters 1–7 in the current book), while eliminating its appendices. The appendices reported the methodology, telephone questionnaires, and written materials used in the two waves of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS), all of which is now available online at www.nber.org/~freeman/wrps.html. That site also offers an integrated dataset of all findings, ready for download by interested researchers, and links to other national surveys, modeled on the WRPS, conducted since.

New to the updated edition are a new introduction and conclusion. The Introduction examines how our original findings stand up in light of survey research that others have done since the WRPS. The Conclusion offers suggestions on how to reform our labor relations system so that it delivers to workers what they want in the form of workplace representation and participation.

Our thanks to Fran Benson of Cornell University Press for suggesting this updated edition and seeing it through production, and to Pablo Mitnik, of the University of Wisconsin graduate program in sociology, for research assistance. We also thank those many colleagues, too numerous to name here, who commented on the earlier work and those who did new surveys on which we draw in this one. Special thanks to Geoff Garin, of Hart Research Associates (HRA), who generously shared some of HRA's proprietary data.

RBF and JR
Cambridge, Mass., and Madison, Wisc.
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Introduction to the Updated Edition

The first edition of *What Workers Want* analyzed a large survey of private-sector U.S. workers and managers, the Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS), which we designed to find out how American workers felt about their influence on decisions at the workplace and about possible ways to improve their role in workplace governance. The survey was conducted in the fall and spring of 1994–95. As described in the chapters that follow, finding out what American workers thought about workplace issues was complicated and sometimes vexed by politics; opinion surveys also have their intrinsic limits. But the WRPS was sufficiently successful that scholars in the other major English-speaking countries and in Germany, Japan, and Korea have since completed comparable surveys. These implicitly endorse our general approach and allow analysts to differentiate patterns specific to the United States from those that apply more generally to advanced capitalist economies. The WRPS yielded three main findings for the United States.

First, it uncovered a large gap between the kind and extent of representation and participation workers had and what they desired. This representation/participation gap existed across diverse groups of workers (men and women, different races, skilled and unskilled, etc.) and across many issues (compensation, supervision, training, availability of information on firm plans, use of new technology, etc.). Even workers whose management had instituted employee involvement committees to consult with them on workplace decisions wanted more voice and power in the process. Only a minority of workers — 10 percent to 15 percent, depending on the particular questions — did not want more collective voice at the workplace.

Second, the survey found that workers preferred cooperative relations with management to adversarial ones, where a cooperative relation meant both mutual respect and some degree of power sharing. They believed that greater representation and voice at their workplace would be good for their

firm as well as for them. They identified management unwillingness to share power as a major cause for the gap between the representation and voice they wanted and what they had, particularly with respect to efforts to unionize.

Third, workers were open to different paths for increasing their representation and participation at their workplace. Many more wanted unions and collective bargaining than had union representation. The vast majority of union members wanted to keep their unions, though they were cognizant and critical of union weaknesses. Most nonunion employees wanted some kind of elected workplace committee to consult regularly with management, perhaps with third-party arbitration of disputes, and welcomed the idea of workplace committees to aid in workplace regulation in areas like occupational safety and health. In resolving individual disputes, most employees also preferred arbitration to going to court but wanted to make that choice themselves; they were against surrendering their legal rights to a company-based arbitration system. Union members also supported workplace committees, presumably working in conjunction with their union.

The bottom line of the first edition of *What Workers Want* was that the U.S. system of workplace governance had failed the country. It had not delivered to American workers the role in firm decision-making that they wanted and the diverse set of institutions they sought to deal with management at their workplace. Instead, it offered a single choice — collective bargaining, which management often opposed — or no independent representation or participation at their workplace.

With the exception of this Introduction and a new concluding chapter, this updated edition of *What Workers Want* is essentially unchanged from the first. We have made a few very minor corrections to the seven chapters of the first edition, now sandwiched by these additions. That we have limited our revisions to two chapters and not revised the main text may seem odd or reflect indolence on our part. After all, the United States has changed in many ways since the WRPS was completed a decade ago, and it is possible that much of what we found is now outdated.

At the time of the survey, Bill Clinton was in the White House, the Democratic Party controlled Congress, and the AFL-CIO had elected a new leadership to rejuvenate the union movement. In 2005, George Bush is president, the Republicans control Congress, and the labor movement has split into two groups. At the time of the survey, the country was debating

NAFTA and the risk of losing manufacturing jobs due to increased trade with Mexico. In 2005, the country is concerned with the shift of manufacturing jobs to China and the offshoring of service jobs to India, two countries with massively larger workforces and lower wages than Mexico. From 1995 through 2000, the country enjoyed an exceptional period of growth in output and employment and rising wages for all workers, which produced a federal budget surplus that offered opportunities to strengthen the national economy. From 2000 to 2005, average wages stagnated despite continued productivity gains. Following deep tax cuts for the better-off, the federal deficit has returned. New issues figure in our politics. In 2001, terrorists attacked the United States. Shortly afterward, the United States invaded Afghanistan and then, in 2003, Iraq. More recently, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.

With all the important events and changes since the WRPS, readers of this updated edition of *What Workers Want* might naturally ask: “Isn’t this stuff out of date? Shouldn’t you guys be conducting a new survey and revising the entire book?”

Our short answer is “no.” Of course, if worker attitudes had changed in the period or if the country had reformed the labor relations system, we would have redone the survey, producing WRPS II. But our review of surveys conducted by groups and public opinion polling organizations in this Introduction shows that, perhaps surprisingly, the main findings of the first edition still stand. Much has changed in the economy and politics, but the disconnect between what workers want in the form of influence at their workplaces and what they have remains sizable.

We base this conclusion on a detailed examination of dozens of post-WRPS opinion surveys on the issues that the WRPS survey and Chapters 1–7 of this book cover.¹ The post-WRPS surveys often focus on a particular issue such as job satisfaction, attitudes toward unionization, or attitudes toward employers, rather than on the full spectrum of workplace issues that the WRPS covered. Some surveys adopted our strategy of asking questions in different ways to make sure that the findings did not depend on particular wordings. Some replicated our questions. Others posed the issues in different ways than we did. While the post-WRPS surveys and polls are invariably shorter and less complete than the WRPS, taken together they provide information on almost all the main issues with which the WRPS dealt and give a clear picture of what workers think about workplace governance today.

The new survey results show that workers continue to want to have greater say at the workplace than the U.S. labor relations system offers them. In some cases, the newer studies show that since the WRPS the gap between what workers want and what they have in representation and participation has grown. This is particularly the case for the proportion of workers who say that they want unions to represent them. The post-WRPS surveys also show increased concern about the representation and participation gap and reduced confidence in business leadership. It is because the newer surveys confirm the basic message of the first edition of *What Workers Want* that we have left the core text of the previous edition intact. In addition, we believe that the story it tells — of how we developed the survey and tried to meet the differing concerns and criticisms of unions and management in a highly charged political atmosphere — should still interest students of survey or other applied social science research as they proceed with their own research. The rest of this Introduction reviews the post-WRPS survey findings, organized around our three broad earlier conclusions.

Broad Conclusion I: Attitudes Toward Work and Representation/Participation Gaps

Many opinion surveys ask about job satisfaction with questions like: “how satisfied are you with your job?” and variants thereof. Concerned with worker attitudes toward improving workplace decisions, we focused on more specific issues, such as the state of labor-management relations and worker desires to influence decisions in particular areas, such as provision of benefits, use of new machinery, training, and the like. A worker who was satisfied with his or her job but who wanted greater influence on decisions about training at the workplace was, from our perspective, more interesting or important than a worker who was dissatisfied with his or her job but did not have any thoughts about making the workplace better. However, we did ask respondents one broad satisfaction style question: if, on the average day, they usually looked forward to going to work (66 percent did); wished they didn’t have to go (25 percent), or didn’t care one way or the other (9 percent). Responses to this question, as well as to diverse others summarized in Chapter 2, lead us to conclude that about two-thirds of workers were contented at their job while about a third were discontented.

The pattern of responses to generic job satisfaction questions in post-

WRPS surveys shows that our decision to avoid the job satisfaction terrain was a good one. The surveys that ask broad satisfaction questions yield considerable variation in reported levels and trends.

Two major surveys show low and virtually constant levels of job dissatisfaction. From 1972 to the present, the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked workers, “On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do — would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?” The results show 14 percent of workers reporting that they were a little or very dissatisfied and 86 percent reporting moderate to high satisfaction, with no trend over time and almost no year-to-year variation.² The Gallup Poll also routinely asks a job satisfaction question: “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your job?” For the period 1997–2005, 86 percent of workers report being satisfied and 14 percent dissatisfied, again with little yearly variation.

At first blush, you might think that the General Social Survey and Gallup had uncovered what social science rarely finds, a scientific law with a universal constant in the form of the 86/14 division of answers to the job satisfaction question. But polls conducted over the same period that probed about workplace specifics find much higher and in some cases increasing levels of job dissatisfaction.

The most widely publicized job satisfaction surveys subsequent to the WRPS were the 1995 and 2004 surveys conducted by the business research group the Conference Board. The 1995 Conference Board survey found that about 60 percent of workers were broadly satisfied with their jobs, similar to the figure reported in the WRPS. The 2004 Conference Board reported a 10 percentage point drop in worker satisfaction. Just 50 percent of workers were satisfied with their job in that survey, the lowest we have ever seen in a job satisfaction analysis. The decline in satisfaction occurred among all age groups and household income levels and was largest among workers near the center of the age and income distribution.³ Over the same period neither the GSS nor Gallup showed any trend in job satisfaction.

In 2005, the Harris polling firm found levels of dissatisfaction comparable to those in the Conference Board study and larger than those found in the WRPS. In the Harris Poll, 59 percent of workers were extremely/somewhat/slightly satisfied with their jobs, while 41 percent were not. In addition, Harris found considerable discontent in responses to an innovative set of questions that went beyond the generic “are you satisfied?” design. It found that only 44 percent of workers were glad they had chosen to work

for their current employer over others, that one-third felt they were at a dead end in their job, and that 42 percent were trying to cope with feelings of burnout.⁴

The surveys that come closest in spirit to the WRPS focus on particular aspects of the workplace and compensation package as opposed to job satisfaction broadly defined. A particularly valuable set of surveys are the Health Pulse of America surveys conducted by Stony Brook University in New York. While, per their name, the health pulse surveys are focused largely on health issues, they ask about satisfaction with diverse aspects of a person's job. Exhibit I.1 shows that nearly one-fourth (23 percent) of workers were dissatisfied with their salary, while much larger proportions were dissatisfied with or had no health-care benefits (40 percent) nor retirement benefits (46 percent). Despite all the media attention to job insecurity, that issue drew the least amount of dissatisfaction.⁵

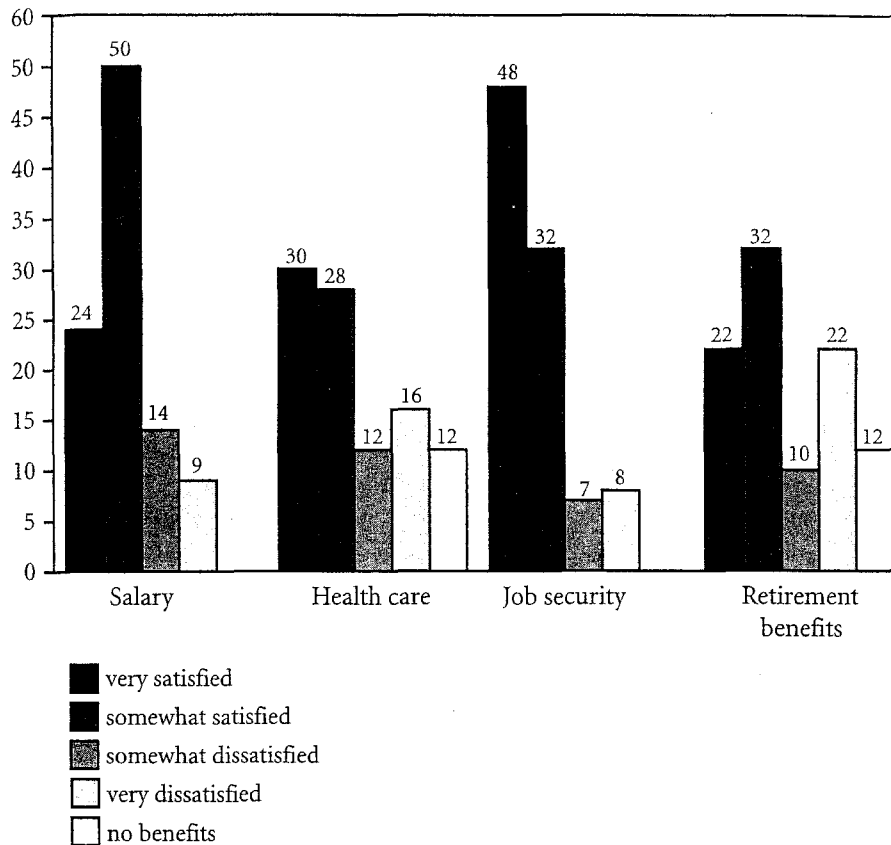
We examined other surveys of job satisfaction, whose estimated levels of discontent ranged widely from levels comparable to the GSS and Gallup toward the 1/3rd dissatisfied portion in the WRPS. The variation in results with the standard satisfaction question suggests that responses to this question are less reliable than at first appears to be the case from the near-constant division between the satisfied and dissatisfied found in the GSS and Gallup polls. The analysis in Chapter 3, where we show that the response to questions about wanting influence at workplaces varies considerably depending on whether or not respondents have been previously asked about specific issues and thus have them in the forefront of their consciousness, may apply here as well. In any case, the fact that the surveys that come closest in design or spirit to the WRPS gave results comparable to ours or found higher and rising levels of job dissatisfaction confirms our decision to focus on attitudes toward specific features of the work relationship rather than on satisfaction broadly conceived.

Loyalty and Attitudes toward Management

A key result from the WRPS was that workers had greater loyalty to their firm than they felt the firm had to them. Specifically, while 56 percent of workers reported that they felt a lot of "loyalty" to their employer only 38 percent trusted management "a lot" to keep its promises to them — a gap of 18 percentage points between workers' sense of loyalty and their trust in management.

Post WRPS surveys have found either larger or similar gaps. A 2005 on-

EXHIBIT I.1. Percentage of workers satisfied or dissatisfied with particular aspects of current job.



Source: Stony Brook University, Health Pulse of America, Survey June 2004, reported in ws.cc.stonybrook.edu/surveys/HPAJuly04.htm.

line poll commissioned by Randstad North America reported that 59 percent of workers were loyal to their firm but that only 26 percent thought that management was loyal to them — a 33 percentage point gap.⁶ A 2002 *Christian Science Monitor* poll reported that 63 percent were very loyal to their firm, whereas 40 percent believed the firm was loyal to them — a 23 point gap.⁷ A 2004 Gallup poll showed a divergence similar to that found in the WRPS: 85 percent of workers professed strong loyalty to their firm, whereas just 67 percent thought the company they worked for had a strong sense of loyalty to them — an 18 percentage point gap.⁸ Finally, the 2005 Harris Poll shows a similar pattern of worker distrust toward management. Sixty-three percent of workers reported that they disagreed with the state-

ment that “top management displays integrity and morality.” Seventy-one percent did not think that management “is committed to advancing the skills of employees” — a particularly important concern of all but the oldest workers — and an important factor in gaining employee trust and loyalty.

Another way to examine how workers view their relationship with management is to ask whether labor-management relations at the workplace are good, bad, or in-between. The WRPS found that 18 percent viewed relations as excellent, 49 percent saw them as good, 29 percent viewed them as only fair (22 percent) or poor (7 percent). From 1996 to 2005, the survey research firm Peter D. Hart Research Associates asked a more nuanced set of questions about the relationship between management and workers.⁹ It asked the public whether management had too much power compared to workers, or workers had too much power compared to management, or if there was a pretty fair balance of power between management and workers. The percentage that said management had too much power increased from 47 percent in 1996 to 53 percent in 2005, while those judging the relationship to be a “pretty fair” balance declined from 41 percent to 36 percent. Just 7 percent thought workers had too much power in both periods. In its 2005 poll, Hart used a split sample design, substituting the word “corporations” for “management” for half the sample. For this half, 63 percent of respondents said corporations had too much power, 28 percent found that the balance with workers was “pretty fair,” while just 4 percent thought workers had too much power. The more negative response to use of the term “corporations” probably reflects people’s warmer feelings toward management, which consists of real people, than toward the artificial “person” of the corporation, which is just a legal structure. In any case, and consistent with the rising belief that corporations have too much power, in 2002, 58 percent of Americans thought that big business had too much influence on the Bush administration, compared to 22 percent who thought they had the right amount and 8 percent who thought that big business had too little influence.¹⁰

In the wake of the scandals at Enron, WorldCom, and other major companies, moreover, confidence in business leadership broadly fell. A 2002 CBS news poll reported that only 27 percent of the public believed that most corporate executives were honest, compared to 32 percent who thought that in 1985. Gallup’s Social Series 2005 polls show that less than 7 percent of the public reported that they were “very satisfied” with the size and influence of major corporations and that 60 percent wanted the influ-

ence of corporations reduced in that year.¹¹ While the public has never had great confidence in union leadership, in May 2005, a larger proportion of the public said they had a great deal of confidence in organized labor (12 percent) than in big business (8 percent), and a smaller proportion said they had very little or no confidence in labor (25 percent) than in business (31 percent). In short, presumably as a result of the economic and business developments in the 2000s, public support for business has fallen, which has the potential to create greater worker desire for representation and participation to protect employees' interests.

What Matters to Workers

The WRPS found substantial gaps between workers' desire for influence on decisions and their actual influence in several important features of workplaces (Chapter 3). The greatest gap was associated with "bread and butter" issues relating to benefits and pay, followed by training issues, while the smallest gap was between what workers wanted and had in deciding how to organize their work, because in that area most had substantial independence.

In succeeding years, the polls have asked workers how they view employer performance on these and related workplace issues. A 2001 Hart poll asked respondents how important different workplace "rights" were to them and then used the WRPS design of asking them to assign a school letter grade from A to F on how employers were doing in providing that right. In many cases, what the survey called "rights" do not exist in law and are more accurately described as employer fair treatment of workers. Terminology aside, Exhibit I.2 shows substantial gaps between the importance of rights to workers and employer performance, with wide variation among the categories covered in the survey. Differences in questions make it hard to assess whether the Hart results show larger or smaller gaps than those in the WRPS. What is clear is the Hart survey finds large gaps, as did the WRPS.

To see if workers' views changed over time, we rely on a different Hart question, which the survey asked in 1999 and 2005:

Thinking generally about companies and other employers and the way they treat employees, let me mention some different aspects of work, and please tell me how well employers are doing on each item. Are employers doing very well, doing fairly well, falling somewhat short, or falling very short when it comes to . . . [different issues]

Exhibit I.2. Employer performance on the provision of workplace “rights.”

	Share of workers thinking the right “essential” or “very important” (A)	Doing well (B)	Gap ratio (A)-(B)
A living wage that provides an income above the poverty line for a full-time worker	87	47	40
Training and assistance if a job moves to another country	81	55	26
Job security unless good cause for termination	85	58	27
Opportunities for education and training	82	59	23
Overtime pay over 40 hrs/week	87	72	15
Personal privacy on the job	82	59	23
Respect from one’s employer	94	63	31
Sick leave without losing one’s job	90	65	25
Time off to care for a new baby or sick family member without losing one’s job	90	66	24
A safe and healthy workplace	98	70	28
Equal treatment, regardless of age	92	55	37
Equal pay for women	95	57	38
Reasonable accommodations for disabled	88	61	27
Equal racial and ethnic treatment	97	63	24
Freedom from sexual harassment	96	73	23

Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Study no. 7704 (August 2005).

Exhibit I.3 summarizes the responses in terms of the proportion of workers who said employers were doing well or falling short and indicates the difference between these responses. To facilitate analysis, we also give the average response for the items in each category. In 1999, there are moderate differences between the proportions who report employers doing well and the proportion who report them falling short on most issues: an average of 5 points for bread-and-butter issues, and 2 points for issues relating to work conditions and future opportunities. The biggest gap is 17 points on workplace relations due to the huge number of workers who felt that companies were not sharing profits with them. The 2005 statistics show an increase in the gap in all categories. The difference between the proportion reporting that employers did well and poorly on the bread-and-butter

Exhibit I.3. Workers' assessment of employer performance on workplace issues.

	Year	Doing well (A)	Falling short (B)	Gap (A-B)
Bread-and-butter issues				
Providing regular cost-of-living raises to employees	1999	43	52	-9
	2005	27	70	-43
Providing adequate and secure retirement benefits	1999	44	52	-8
	2005	31	65	-34
Providing permanent jobs that offer good benefits and job security	1999	50	46	4
	2005	35	62	-27
Paying a fair share of employees' health care costs*	2002	44	50	-6
	2005	38	57	-19
<i>Average of four items</i>	1999*	45	50	-5
	2005	33	64	-31
Future opportunities/Work conditions				
Providing opportunities for advancement	1999	54	41	13
	2005	44	52	-8
Adopting policies that help working parents	1999	39	56	-17
	2005	35	55	-20
Investing in their employees by giving them the training and education that they need	1999	51	47	4
	2005	50	45	5
Providing women with equal pay	1999	48	54	-6
	2005	42	48	-6
<i>Average of four items</i>	1999	48	50	-2
	2005	43	50	-7
Workplace relations				
Being loyal to long-term employees	1999	44	53	-9
	2005	32	64	-32
Showing concern for employees, not just for the financial bottom line	1999	39	58	-19
	2005	31	65	-34
Listening to employees' ideas and concerns	1999	46	51	-5
	2005	45	50	-5
Sharing profits with average employees when the company does well	1999	29	66	-37
	2005	24	67	-33
<i>Average of four items</i>	1999	40	57	-17
	2005	33	62	-29

Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Study no. 7704 (August 2005).

* 2002 data used for the share of health costs.

issues rose on all four items, producing an average gap of -31 points. The differences between employers doing well and poorly in the future opportunities/work conditions domain rose more modestly, by an average of -7. The difference between doing well and falling short in workplace relations, which was already large, rose to reach an average of -29 points. Since 1999 was a booming year in the job market, while 2005 was a weaker year, the changes between the years presumably reflect the impact of the weak recovery from the 2001 recession, as well as structural or secular change in attitudes.

Other Hart surveys that ask somewhat different questions tell a similar story. A February 2005 survey asked workers to name one or two aspects of their job on which they would most like to see improvement and compared the results to those in 1990s Hart surveys. In both the 2005 and 1990s surveys, 18 percent of workers cited job security as one of the two areas they wanted to see improve. Over the same period, the proportion that cited health-care benefits rose from 25 to 39 percent of workers, while the proportion looking for improved wages and salaries increased from 42 to 45 percent and the proportion looking for improved retirement benefits rose from 25 to 29 percent.¹² With a slightly changed question, offering options in response — “which one or two . . . do you feel are the biggest problems facing workplace people today?” — an August 2005 Hart survey gave the following list of top issues: health-care costs (35 percent), jobs going overseas (31 percent), rising gas prices (29 percent), raises that don’t keep up with the cost of living (23 percent), lack of retirement security (14 percent), and work schedules interfering with family responsibilities (10 percent).¹³ Again, material issues dominate.

In sum, while worker opinions vary across issues, the general pattern is for rising gaps between what firms deliver at workplaces and what workers want. Worker views on specific issues are not constant, as in some of the satisfaction surveys, but change over time as labor market conditions and firm behavior changes.

Broad Conclusion II: Collective Action for Cooperative Workplace Relations

On the WRPS, 63 percent of employees said that they wanted *more* influence than they had over decisions at their workplace compared to 35 percent who preferred to keep things the way they are now. As detailed in Chapters 3 and 5, the survey probed the areas in which workers sought

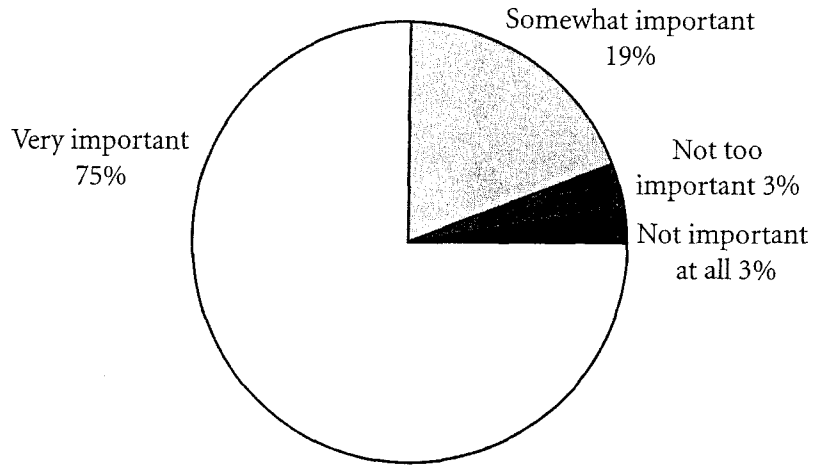
influence and the extent to which workers felt that they needed collective voice to gain influence and resolve workplace problems.

The evidence from ensuing surveys supports the finding that workers want more say in decisions and suggests that the desire for *more* influence has, if anything, increased since we did our survey. The most cogent evidence comes from the California Workforce Survey conducted by the University of California at Berkeley in 2001–2. This asked workers how important it was to them personally to have *more* respect and fair treatment on the job and how important it was for them to have *more* say in workplace decisions. While asking the question about influence differently from us, by using the word “more” in its questions this survey directed attention to the desire for change, rather than satisfaction with the status quo. Answers to the California survey reflect a gap between what people want and what they have, even though the survey did not ask them, as we did, to independently lay out both sides of the gap. In any case, Exhibit I.4 shows that 75 percent of workers on the California survey said that it was very important to have *more* respect and fair treatment on the job. It also shows that 51 percent said it was very important and 38 percent said it was somewhat important to have *more* say in workplace decisions. The sum of these last numbers, 89 percent, exceeds the 63 percent who wanted more influence on the WRPS, though whether this reflects differences in questionnaire design or a trend is unclear.

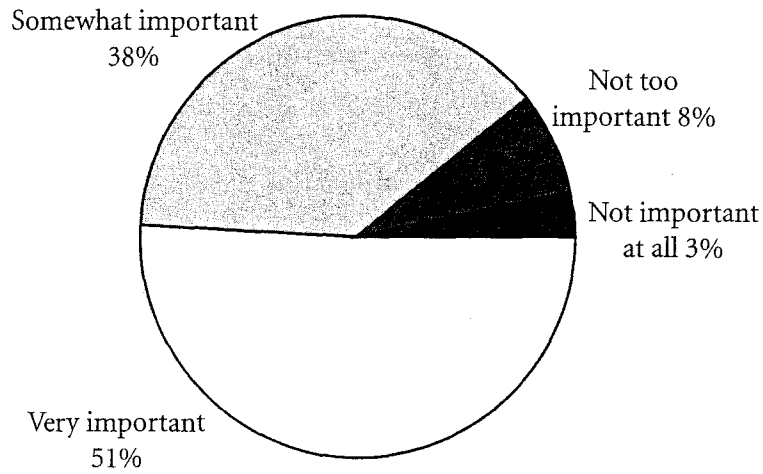
Turning to the value of collective action, the WRPS found that 43 percent to 56 percent of workers favored collective activity over individual efforts to deal with workplace problems, depending on how we worded the question. Employees differentiated sharply between areas where they sought group support and areas in which they preferred to deal with problems as individuals. The Hart organization asked workers in 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2001 whether group organization or individual action “comes closer to your view about what it takes to improve their situation at work?” As the upper panel of Exhibit I.5 shows, on average 47 percent of persons favored group activity compared to 39 percent who favored relying on themselves, with little variation across years. In 1985, 1993, 2001, and 2003, Hart posed a different question about the efficacy of collective versus individual voice: “Do you think that employees are more successful in getting problems resolved at work when they bring these problems up as a group or when they bring them up as individuals?” The lower panel of Exhibit I.5 gives the responses for 1993, 2001, and 2003. It shows

EXHIBIT I.4. The importance of fair treatment and workplace influence.

How important to you personally is more respect and fair treatment on the job?



How important to you personally is having more say in workplace decisions?



Source: California Workplace Survey was in the field July 2001–January 2002. Data are available at sda.berkeley.edu:7502/archive.htm.
