

## **The Adoption and Retention of Joint Participation Programs: Preliminary Evidence from New Zealand**

**Clive H.J. Gilson\*, Terry H. Wagar\*\*, and Michelle Brown\*\*\***

*This paper reports on the incidence of adoption and retention of joint participation programs (JPP) in 307 organizations, size 50 and over, in New Zealand between 1995 and 1999. We report an overall survival rate of 75 percent. Using multinomial logit regression the authors demonstrate that JPPs are positively correlated with the maintenance of other HRM bundles of practices in general. JPPs also reflect functional rather than corporate strategic intent. Workforce reduction is a negative association when JPPs have been sustained for the entire period under study. Union status of the organization is not a significant factor in the model. In parallel with this finding, there is no evidence that JPPs are used as a method of union avoidance, even though the New Zealand labour market and legislative context strongly suggests the emergence of a non-union environment. We argue that irrespective of legislative context New Zealand employers appear to be developing their own HRM agenda, which inter alia, includes JPPs.*

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the longitudinal incidence of Joint Participation Programs (JPP) in New Zealand and more specifically identifies factors which assist in understanding their adoption and retention from 1995 to 1999. The adoption of JPPs can be seen as evidence of managerial initiative to give voice to workers, perhaps springing from a consultative perspective that is informed by human resource management (HRM) techniques (Eaton 1994). This is particularly interesting within the context of New Zealand because this country has, until the late 1980s, dealt with labour market issues by way of traditional centralised bargaining and compulsory conciliation industrial relations mechanisms. The passing of the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) of 1991 reversed this method of regulation in favour of decentralised workplace decision-making. The Act made no mention of trade unions nor were there any managerial incentives to engage in formal bargaining with workers. Thus, New Zealand has been a prime laboratory for investigating the rise of HRM. This is particularly so given the significant body of literature which suggests low survival rates of participation programs in general (Drago, 1988; Goodman 1980; Rankin, 1986).

\* University of Waikato, \*\* St Mary's University, \*\*\* University of Melbourne

The supplanting of traditional industrial relations with HRM in discourse and practice is of no recent date outside the New Zealand context. It is commonly assumed that bundles of HRM practices can be directly responsible for improvements in firm performance (MacDuffie, 1995). From an industrial relations point of view it may be considered that HRM initiatives essentially replace collective perspectives on the employment relationship in favour of more individually crafted policies and programs. Unions have often seen these developments in antagonistic terms and frequently as methods to avoid or remove their influence (Juravich et al., 1993). Even if their existence is not in question, unions may be reduced to reacting to managerial agendas upon terrain not of their own choosing.

Unions then, not surprisingly, prefer bargaining to consultation (Kochan and Dyer, 1976). If conditions and circumstances permit, the opportunity to engage in a vigorous form of collective bargaining at the enterprise level is likely to be seen as a significant contribution to effectively representing worker aspirations. Where unions are well organised and strong enough to make their intentions heard, some employers embrace, albeit uneasily, union involvement in negotiating workplace terms and conditions of employment. However, unions are invariably faced with parallel HRM initiatives that emphasise joint problem-solving and consultative processes outside a traditional bargaining arena. JPPs stand at the cross-roads for unions, in that they offer inclusion in some aspects of decision-making but upon an ideological platform which has no access to traditional grievance mechanisms (Goodman, 1980). The assumption of Ajointness@ potentially precludes the formation of vigorous oppositional characteristics in unionised settings and may also be put in place in non-union-settings in order to preclude institutionalised collective activity.

Historically, JPPs have therefore been characterised as potential union avoidance or retrenchment strategies. The New Zealand context is apposite to this discussion since, the legislative regime brought in by the ECA encouraged a move away from unions and collectivism in favour of asserting managerial prerogatives – fertile ground for a plethora of HRM initiatives.

### **The New Zealand labour market and legislative framework**

Death and destruction have been the apocalyptic words used to describe the passing of the New Zealand Employment Contracts Act of 1991. Indeed, the "Source book of New Zealand Trade Unions and Employee Organizations" contains a substantial section entitled "Union Obituaries" (Harbridge and Hince 1994). The failure of the ECA to even mention trade unions at all provides a stark contrast with the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1894 which for nearly a century buttressed union security and the central regulation of broad employment conditions. Indeed for many years New Zealand employers complained bitterly that they did not have sufficient leverage or flexibility to calibrate their labour practices with de-regulated capital and trade markets.

The ECA was specifically designed to provide for labour market efficiencies by freeing up regulatory processes which hitherto resided in award and arbitration structures. One of the aims of the Act was to create a more flexible labour market, encouraging faster market clearing. This has been seen as an inducement to employers to shed unwanted labour (Wagar and Gilson, 1996). Workforce reduction is therefore an important contextual variable when reviewing workplace change (Cooke, 1990).

Hince describes the ECA as a move from "conciliation to contracts" that envisaged individual contracts as opposed to collective ones (Hince, 1993). Although the latter were not precluded the Act did little to provide guidance for those who might wish to engage in collective negotiations at the enterprise level. Thus the ECA is almost silent, and deliberately so, on issues of methods of bargaining representation, impasse at the point of breakdowns in negotiations and a whole plethora of structures that might otherwise inform the parties who might wish to pursue a collective employment contract.

Several sections of the ECA serve to underscore the bias towards individual contracts. Section 9 introduces the choice concerning "an individual employment contract or a collective employment contract, with the type of contract and the contents of the contract being, in each case, a matter for negotiation". This means that even if a majority of employees wish to negotiate a collective agreement, the employer can cite s.9 of the ECA and argue for individual contracts. Not only is this de-stabilising, the International Labour Office (ILO) saw this as being a repudiation of New Zealand's membership of the ILO, since this clause, along with s.18, fails to promote collective bargaining. Additionally, s.19(1) of the ECA states that without an applicable collective contract "each employee and the employer may enter into such individual employment contract as they think fit", and further encouragement towards individual contracting is proffered upon expiry of a collective contract by s.19(4) where in the absence of a new contract the parties will "be bound by an individual employment contract based on the expired collective employment contract".

The Act is also essentially ambiguous with respect to bargaining representation. Sections 12(2) and 20(3) are written in such a way that employers may recognise a bargaining agent, but not necessarily go through the procedure of negotiations (Dannin and Gilson, 1996). Unlike most certification procedures in North American labour law, where certified unions are generally recognised to have achieved bargaining status with an employer, the ECA's ambivalence provides ample opportunity for judge-made law to cast different interpretations as to the intent behind s.20 (see *Adams v Alliance Textiles* [1992] 1 E.R.N.Z. 982, 986-87). The net effect of this is to de-stabilise the independent representation of workers. Indeed we may theorise that the very architecture of the ECA is likely to have a significant impact upon the morphology and management of the workplace.

Since the 1991 Act, much evidence has been collected to demonstrate the impact that the ECA has had on bargaining structures (i.e. the collapse of multi-employer bargaining), union representation and of course union density and contract coverage (Harbridge and Hince, 1994; Harbridge, Honeybone and Keily, 1993; Harbridge 1993). Put simply, the ECA could be seen as the ultimate de-regulatory labour market laboratory. It is within this context that JPPs have evolved. With a terrain less contested it appears that employers have the opportunity to establish their own consultative processes alongside many other HRM practices (Ng and Maki, 1994). At the same time, unions may feel substantial pressure to demonstrate their commitment to firm survival, finding themselves participating in elaborate codes of managerialism inclusive of discussion groups or more formal processes of a consultative nature. In this light, JPPs could be seen as employer strategies which seek to colonise the hearts and minds of union members as well as more overt strategies that lay open the possibility of union avoidance (Eaton and Voos, 1992). Such employer JPP initiatives, on the >soft= side of the HRM equation, presuppose degrees of shared goals and mutual interests that transcend the so-called traditional adversarial bargaining model. Arguably, a consultation model of employee relations, rather than a contractual one, might have more currency when attempting to account for post 1991 workplace developments in New Zealand (Boxall, 1993).

The longitudinal nature of our data enables us to observe how JPPs evolve over time. Dannin argues that the ECA environment, by encouraging the termination and replacement of workers at will, is so employer friendly that organizations need not go to the expense of establishing HRM programs (Dannin, 1995a). If this is so then it should be possible to see such a pattern emerge in the data. This means that at the very least we should discover a decline in the use of JPPs over time and a concomitant rise in command and control practices. Moreover, employers who have adopted or retained JPPs from 1995-1999 may exhibit characteristics different from employers who have never engaged in this activity. In these cases JPPs are more likely to be found alongside other HRM practices, indicating a more strategic approach towards employees (Marchington et al., 1993).

## Method

The data for this study, which is part of a larger research project involving not only New Zealand but Canada and Australia as well, was obtained by means of two surveys sent to chief executive officers or managing directors in New Zealand. The mailing list was obtained from New Zealand Post. Although we only sampled establishments with a minimum of 50 employees as identified on the mailing list, a few respondents that had dropped below the 50 employee level are included in the analysis. It should be noted that the unit of analysis in our study is the establishment; in other words, a respondent establishment may be part of a larger organization.

The first wave of data was collected during 1995. After one follow-up mail-out, we received 782 responses from employers in New Zealand (for a response rate of 51 percent). In 1999, we re-surveyed all participants from the 1995 study. Although the 1999 survey retained most of the questions asked in 1995, some changes were made to address specific current issues. We received 350 responses to the 1999 survey.

Because this paper addresses factors relating to the adoption and survival of JPPs within private sector establishments, it was necessary to eliminate participants in the non-profit sector. In addition, a small number of responses were deleted due to missing data on at least one of the variables or because we were unable to match the 1995 and 1999 surveys – in a handful of cases, the matching identification codes were deleted from the survey by the participant. As a result, the findings reported in this paper are based on 307 responses.

Our dependent variable addresses the adoption and survival of JPPs. In both the 1995 and 1999 surveys we asked respondents a series of questions about human resource management activities. Included in the surveys were a set of questions examining the use of quality circles, quality of work life programs, the use of work teams and other employee/management joint programs. While respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of employees involved in each of the programs, in this paper our focus is on the presence of such programs and thus we re-coded the data to reflect whether such programs were present in both 1995 and 1999.

In creating our dependent variable, we coded the data to reflect whether the establishment had any of the programs mentioned above in 1995 and 1999. Combining this information, we created a variable which we call "JPPs". This variable has 4 categories – no joint programs in 1995 and no joint programs in 1999 (coded 0), at least one joint program in 1995 but no joint programs in 1999 (coded 1), no joint programs in 1995 but at least one joint program in 1999 (coded 2), and at least one joint program in both 1995 and 1999.

In addition to investigating the adoption and survival of JPPs, we also interested in exploring whether selected establishment characteristics (our independent variables) were related to the status of such programs. Consistent with the growing emphasis on HRM systems and "bundles" of practices (Osterman, 1994; Becker and Gerhart, 1996), we explored whether the status of JPPs was associated with the conducting of employee attitude surveys, the sharing of business information with employees, the presence of a formal performance appraisal system, profit sharing, and the existence of a total quality management (or similar) program. For each of these variables, presence of the particular program or activity was coded 1 and absence was coded 0.

New Zealand organizations have been experiencing considerable change and restructuring, however, there is little research investigating the survival of participation

programs and workforce reduction. Survey participants were asked to indicate whether their establishment permanently reduced the workforce over the 1995 to 1999 period (coded 1 if such a reduction took place and 0 otherwise).

A set of questions on the survey addressed the issue of restructuring. Cameron (1994) has classified downsizing strategies into three categories – workforce reduction, work redesign, and systematic change. We were particularly interested in exploring the degree to which establishments had been undergoing systematic change. As Cameron notes, systematic change is a long-term approach in which the organization's culture and the attitudes and values of employees are changed so that they are congruent with the organization's goals of reducing costs and improving quality. The systematic change strategy takes a considerable time and resource commitment to implement and the objective of continuous improvement is furthered by requiring workers to assume greater responsibility for finding ways of cutting costs and improving methods and practices.

Contained within the restructuring section of the survey were two questions that asked respondents to indicate the extent to which their establishment had made every employee accountable for finding improvement and accountable for reducing costs (measured using a six point scale with the anchors 1 = none and 6 = a lot). We averaged the responses to these two questions and called this variable "employee responsibility". The Cronbach's coefficient alpha was 0.83.

In our statistical analysis, we controlled for a number of establishment characteristics. These included the market demand for the establishment's primary product or service (measured on a 6 point scale with 1 indicating a substantial increase and 6 representing a substantial decline in demand for the employer's primary product or service, the level of investment in new technology (six point scale; 1 = none and 6 = substantial), number of employees (natural logarithm), number of years the establishment had been operating (natural logarithm), industry sector (1 = manufacturing and 0 = service), and union status (1 = unionised and 0 = nonunion).

## Results

Descriptive statistics relating to the sample are reported in Table 1. There was considerable variation in size among respondents (as measured by the number of employees) with 29 percent of establishments having less than 100 employees, 34 percent having between 100 and 249 employees, 18 percent having between 250 and 499 employees, and 19 percent having 500 employees or more. About 43 percent of the employers were in manufacturing, 59 percent were unionised, and the average number of years an establishment had been in operation was 58.

As indicated in Table 1, 49 percent of respondents reported conducting an employee attitude survey, 84 percent shared business information with employees, and the vast majority (90 percent) had a formal performance appraisal system. Some type of profit-sharing program existed for 40 percent of participants and just over 60 percent had a total quality management (or similar) program. Half of the respondents permanently reduced their workforce over the four-year period from 1995 to 1999. When examining the extent to which establishments made each employee accountable for finding improvements and reducing costs, the mean score of 3.61 was just above the midpoint on the 6 point scale – while some establishments are adapting Cameron's systematic change strategy, it appears that many have not made much progress in this area. An examination of the frequency distribution for this variable revealed that less than 10 percent of participants reported a score greater than 5.0.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	S.D.
Primary Independent Variables:		
Employee Survey	0.49	0.50
Information Sharing	0.84	0.37
Performance Appraisal	0.90	0.30
Profit Sharing	0.40	0.49
TQM Program	0.61	0.49
Employee Responsibility	3.61	1.33
Permanent Reduction	0.50	0.50
Control Variables:		
Market Demand	3.11	0.98
New Technology	4.32	1.08
Number of Employees (nat'l log)	5.28	1.23
Years in Operation (nat'l log)	3.62	1.00
Manufacturing	0.43	0.50
Union Status	0.59	0.49

As noted earlier in the paper, one of our objectives was to document the adoption and survival of JPPs. About 63.5 percent of establishments reported having at least one of the JPPs in 1995 and by 1999, the number had increased to 70.0 percent. Thus it appears that there has been some increase in joint participation efforts over the past four

years. Additional analysis on the breakdown of participation programs indicated that 14.3 percent of respondents reported no joint programs in 1995 and 1999, 15.6 percent indicated having a program in 1995 but not in 1999, 22.1 percent reported having no program in 1995 but having a program by 1999, and 47.9 percent indicated that they had a program in 1995 and 1999.

When comparing program survival, 147 of the 195 establishments reporting the presence of a joint program in 1995 also indicated having a joint program in 1999 (for a survival rate of 75.6 percent). This result does not differ dramatically from the findings of Eaton (1994); in her study of the survival of employee participation programs in unionised settings, Eaton indicated that 68 percent of union representatives and 80 percent of employer respondents indicated that the employee participation program survived over a three year period.

The dependent variable, JPPs, was comprised of four discrete categories. Consequently, multinomial logit was an appropriate approximation technique (Greene, 1993). In Table 2, each column provides the multinomial logit coefficients associated with the likelihood of choosing that particular category, with the category "no joint program in 1995 and 1999 being the reference group@.

When considering Column 1 (joint program in 1995 but not in 1999 – composed of establishments in which JPPs did not survive over the four year period), the results revealed that none of the independent variables were significant. In other words, establishments in both the reference group and the joint program in 1995 but not in 1999 group did not significantly differ in terms of the characteristics examined in this study.

The comparison of establishments that had not introduced JPPs in either 1995 and 1999 with those that did not have any programs in 1995 but had introduced joint programs by 1999 is contained in Column 2 of Table 2. The results revealed that the establishments introducing a program by 1999 were more likely to indicate that they conducted employee attitude surveys ( $p < .05$ ), shared business information with employees ( $p < .10$ ) and had a total quality management or similar program ( $p < .01$ ). While the coefficient on permanent workforce reduction was negative (suggesting a lower probability of permanently reducing the workforce), it was not significant. However, employers with programs in 1999 were significantly more likely ( $p < .01$ ) to place responsibility on employees for finding improvements and reducing costs.

Lastly, Column 3 provides the contrast between the reference group (no JPPs in 1995 and 1999) and establishments that had joint programs in both 1995 and 1999. Employers who had programs in both time periods were more likely to conduct employee attitude surveys ( $p < .10$ ), engage in information sharing with employees ( $p < .05$ ), have a total quality management program ( $p < .01$ ), and make every employee responsible for cost reduction and finding improvements. While these findings are very



Table 2: Multinomial Logit Results

Variable	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
<b>Primary Independent Variables:</b>			
Employee Survey	-0.02 (0.49)	0.97 ** (0.46)	0.74 * (0.42)
Information Sharing	0.16 (0.51)	1.00 * (0.60)	1.26 ** (0.50)
Performance Appraisal	0.76 (0.62)	0.82 (0.71)	0.66 (0.57)
Profit Sharing	0.05 (0.47)	0.09 (0.46)	0.16 (0.41)
TQM Program	0.58 (0.45)	1.56 *** (0.45)	1.33 *** (0.40)
Employee Responsibility	0.00 (0.17)	0.52 *** (0.17)	0.38 ** (0.16)
Permanent Reduction	-0.20 (0.46)	-0.19 (0.46)	-1.08 *** (0.41)
<b>Control Variables:</b>			
Market Demand	0.04 (0.26)	0.07 (0.25)	0.29 (0.22)
New Technology	-0.01 (0.23)	0.01 (0.23)	-0.27 (0.20)
Number of Employees (nat'l log)	-0.16 (0.20)	-0.21 (0.19)	0.05 (0.16)
Years in Operation (nat'l log)	0.35 (0.23)	0.39 * (0.21)	0.21 (0.18)
Manufacturing	0.64 (0.49)	0.35 (0.50)	0.48 (0.44)
Union Status	-0.23 (0.48)	-0.02 (0.48)	0.10 (0.42)
Constant	-1.44 (2.08)	-4.84 ** (2.10)	-3.27 (1.83)
Log-Likelihood	-334.08		
Chi-Square Test	102.43 ***		
Sample Size	307		

\* p < 10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

similar to those found when comparing establishments with no programs and those that introduced programs in 1999, one major finding was the highly significant ( $p < .01$ ) negative coefficient on the permanent workforce reduction variable. In other words, establishments with joint programs over the 1995 and 1999 period were much more unlikely to have engaged in a permanent reduction of the workforce over that period. This supports the notion that JPPs are often very fragile and may often fail in times of dramatic change.

Based on this analysis, we can conclude that there are no significant differences between the referent group and those organizations which had failed to maintain their JPP from 1995 to 1999. In addition, JPPs are significantly associated with other HRM practices and activities, such as TQM programs, employee surveys, information sharing and devolving cost responsibilities to employees. Additionally we can state that workforce reductions will tend to fetter the ability of organizations to sustain their JPP initiatives.

### **Union avoidance and strategic issues**

As part of our exploratory analysis, we were interested in examining whether the presence of JPPs was associated with the establishment's approach to union avoidance, corporate strategy, and human resource management strategy. Although we have not included the tables relating to these estimations, they are available from the authors. Also note that each of the models was run with all of the control variables entered into the estimations.

In examining an establishment's union avoidance strategy we asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that maintaining the nonunion status of nonunion employees is very important to the employer (using a six-point scale with the anchors 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). The multinomial logit results indicated that there was no significant relationship between the reference category (no joint programs in 1995 and 1999) and the other three groups. This finding suggests that the adoption of joint programs may not be motivated by the basic desire to operate union-free. Our additional analysis demonstrates that the union avoidance variable is not in any way related to the adoption of JPPs. Based on the control variable of union status there is no evidence that non-union firms adopt JPPs to keep unions out.

When considering the corporate strategy of the establishment, we categorized employers as defenders, analysers or prospectors (Miles and Snow, 1984). Again, there was no relationship between the presence of JPPs and the corporate strategy of the establishment. We further investigated whether the adoption and survival of JPPs was related to the human resource management strategy of the establishment. We measured human resource management strategy using a six-item scale adapted from Huang (1998). Each of the six items was measured using a six-point scale. Sample measures

include "to what extent is the HR function involved in major strategic decisions made in the organization" and "to what extent is human resource management determined by explicit, formal planning procedures". The Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.78. The relationship between establishments with no joint program in 1995 and 1999 and establishments that had a program in 1995 but not in 1999 was not significant. However, establishments in the no program in 1995 but a program in 1999 were more likely to have a higher score on the human resource management strategy scale ( $p < .05$ ) while establishments with a participation program in both 1995 and 1999 had the highest scores (on average) on the HRM strategy scale ( $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

Although the findings reported here are modest in terms of the modelling around JPPs, we can state with some clarity that there are some HRM variables which are associated with sustaining JPP initiatives. Although this might not seem surprising what we have also been illustrate is that JPPs are not related, ideologically or otherwise, to the exclusion of a union presence. This finding is of some importance in the New Zealand context, given the labour market and legislative framework. Although employers have every incentive to removing the perceived shackles of organised labour, they do not appear to be using a HRM strategy to achieve this. There is no support here for the long-held view that the development of HRM practices are designed to supplant union influence and presence. Indeed, despite the presence of the ECA, a majority of the organizations in the study remain unionised. Nor has this inhibited the development of HRM practices such as JPPs whose frequency has increased between 1995 and 1999. Moreover it is apparent that JPPs, are part of functional HRM strategies which operate somewhat independently from other forms of institutional regulations that relate specifically to union presence.

It could be argued that JPPs are merely a facet of HRM developments more broadly and that the measures of association we have reported are hardly stunning. However, we argue that the New Zealand context is less tolerant of measures of association which elsewhere appear as revealed wisdom (Ichniowski, 1989). The almost virulent anti-union legislation and labour market conditions strenuously test obvious assumptions. Through the use of panel data, available through this study, and used in New Zealand for the first time, we have been able to demonstrate that employers and their agents are less influenced by labour legislation than they are with their own crafting of HRM initiatives. JPPs in particular are the potential flash-point between consultation and bargaining, yet we have no evidence that the former is being used to avoid the latter. We speculate that concentration on HRM as a functional strategy is related to firm performance, a research question worthy of further pursuit.

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