Speaking Up, Speaking Out, and Making Movements: How Employee Activists Raise Social, Political, and Moral Concerns at Work

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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN MANAGEMENT

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

May 2024

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Submitted to the Department of Management on May 3, 2024 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT:
This dissertation explores how employee activists raise social, political, and moral concerns at work. To do this, I draw on interviews with employee activists, an archival database of white-collar employee activism events between 2018-2022, a three-day participant observation in employee activism training, and employee activist documents. In the first chapter, I examine how employee activists experienced the voice processes inside of their organizations as they attempted to raise social, political, and moral concerns. Despite describing companies that valued openness and leaders that encouraged employee voice, employee activists believed internal, individual voice channels were insufficient in addressing their concerns, prompting them to instead engage in collective action and public protests. I explore how internal voice processes broke down when activist raised social, political, and moral concerns as well as the types of social, political, and moral issues activists felt compelled to express. Finally, I examine how societal factors, including political polarization and pressure for companies to grow, fueled this phenomenon. In the second chapter, I explore how employee activists used internal communications tools to mobilize for collective action and to amplify their noisy exits from firms. Here, I describe how employee activists mobilized large-scale collective action quickly, often shortening the time leaders had to respond to their movements. I also examine how employee activists used internal communications tools and external social media to amplify their noisy exit messages, creating artifacts of dissent within their organizations, attracting mainstream media attention, and at times, laying the groundwork for future movements. Finally, I consider how organizational leaders responded to employee activists’ use of internal communication tools by placing new restrictions on these platforms. In the third chapter, I consider the direct effects and secondary consequences of employee activism by exploring how employee activists framed leaders’ responses to their contentious activism in ways that either constrained or fueled their movement’s momentum. Here, I examine three categories of outcomes: big wins—when organizational leaders acquiesced to all activist demands, partial wins—when organizational leaders offered some concessions or made meaningful gestures to acknowledge activists’ concerns, and losses—when leaders rejected activists’ demands and doubled down on the business practice in question. Finally, I show that regardless of a movement’s outcome, employee activists sought to build lasting capacity across movements and organizations by using internet technologies to improve resource mobilization for future employee activists.

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Acknowledgements

When I began my MBA studies, I did not imagine that I would pursue a PhD, and I certainly would not be here if I had not encountered two remarkable professors at the time. Adam Grant suggested that I consider a career in academia shortly after we met. As I spent the next year or so pondering his advice, he persistently encouraged me and simultaneously provided some of my most intellectually rewarding experiences at Wharton, in his classroom and research lab. In the past eight years, Adam has pushed me to think faster and more creatively than I knew possible, and I am in awe of how he embraces challenges and encourages dissent. Mary Hunter (Mae) McDonnell made a gentler suggestion that I might enjoy a career in academia at the end of my favorite MBA course (hers). She was the role model I needed to believe I could do it. Mae balances producing phenomenal research with a busy family life; she is brilliant, kind, and generous with her advice. You both changed my career trajectory.

I made the decision to attend MIT to study with Kate Kellogg. From our first phone call, I could not imagine a better advisor. After I read her book, I was sold. It might be one of the best professional decisions I have ever made. Kate has developed me not just as a scholar, but as a person, in ways that I both knew and did not know I needed. I cannot imagine a better supervisor, mentor, advisor, thinker, writer, researcher, or person to have in my corner. I also could not be more grateful to Erin Kelly for advising and supporting me. Erin is a perfect mix of reassuring and challenging. She has gently guided me to consider different viewpoints and taught me how to lead by allowing me to observe her example. In moments of feeling stuck, overwhelmed, or underwhelmed by my own work, there is no one I would rather ask for help. I am deeply thankful for you both and I look forward to learning from you for years to come.

I am incredibly grateful to several other MIT faculty members who have improved my scholarship in the past several years as well. Susan Silbey is a qualitative methods mastermind. Beyond teaching me how to design and review research, she has never ceased to impress me with her keen insights about the world. More than just her intellect, Susan has shared hard won lessons as a woman in academia and cared about me personally. Jared Curhan and Emilio Castilla have also contributed to my development with their uplifting natures, ongoing encouragement, and patience answering questions. I consider myself beyond lucky that Basima Tewfik joined the faculty at MIT around the same time I arrived as a PhD student. She is unfailingly generous with her time and support; her ability to create a cohesive and comprehensive narrative is impressive. I am also thankful for Wanda Orlikowski, Cat Turco, Ray Reagans, John Carroll, Nate Wilmers, and Jackson Lu, as they have each offered support, feedback, and ideas throughout my PhD experience. Perhaps the aspect of my MIT education I cherish the most is how each of these faculty members sought to improve my research, clarify my findings, and refine my contributions, all while not just allowing me to, but encouraging me to investigate the phenomenon and settings that piqued my interest.

I have also benefitted immensely from faculty outside of MIT. Nancy Rothbard joined my first paper as a co-author and while working with her, I learned a tremendous amount about how to write in a way that better connects data back to a theoretical contribution. Kate Odziemkowska went out of her way to identify opportunities for me and to mentor me. She had an indelible impact on my final years as a PhD student. Melissa Mazmanian, Ruthanne
Huising, Beth Bechky, Anne-Laure Fayard, and Hila Lifshitz-Assaf hosted a weeklong qualitative methods conference where they provided more than a crash course in collecting, analyzing, and theorizing qualitative data. They patiently offered feedback on my early-stage dissertation ideas and advice for navigating academia, all with inspiring style and humor. Moreover, Forrest Briscoe, Brayden King, Emily Block, Mike Pratt, Matt Lee, Bobbi Thomason, and Madeleine Rauch have taken the time to read my draft papers at conferences and workshops, provide feedback, send citations, advance my thinking, and make important introductions for me. Additionally, Steve Vallas and Michel Anteby invited me into their classrooms; Steve forever broadened my perspective on how we view work.

I owe tremendous thanks to my MIT peers and a few Sloan alumni. I was incredibly lucky to share an office with Vanessa Conzon and Summer Jackson in my first few years. Both Vanessa and Summer offered more insights and advice than I can recount. I admire their scholarship and the incredibly caring people they are. I have watched them both persevere through trying circumstances and balance their work with motherhood, all while maintaining their grace and drive. Jenna Myers, Arrow Minster, and Eppa Rixey have all been tremendous friends and colleagues during my time at Sloan; they have each offered feedback on my work, exceptional comradery, and gone above and beyond to support me personally. I also learned from Brittany Bond, Ethan Poskanzer, Carolyn Fu, and James Riley who graduated a few years before me. Furthermore, Julia DiBenigno, Arvind Karunakaran, and Emily Truelove generously shared advice and resources with me. Additionally, I am thankful for the current PhD students—James Mellody, Brad Turner, Audrey Mang, Di Tong, Mikaela Springstein, Victoria Zhang, Hajar El Fatihi, MacKenzie Scott, and Laura Wang—who supported me this year during practice job talks and my dissertation defense.

I also appreciate my undergraduate research assistants, the administrative support staff at Sloan, my informal writing group, and other PhD friends. I worked with several undergraduate research assistants on this project; they all helped me with essential, but at times unglamorous tasks, and made this process a bit less isolating by creating a team atmosphere. I am especially thankful for the three creative, hard-working undergrads who worked with me for several terms: Elizabeth Bitman, Sonia Seliger, and Sara Manos. I cannot wait to see the amazing things you go on to achieve! Virginia Geiger, an incredible administrative assistant, has stepped in to rescue me numerous times as I fumbled bureaucratic processes, as have Hillary Ross and Davin Schnappauf in the PhD office. Micah Rajunov invited me to participate in a writing group where he, Alan Zhang, Elisabeth Yang, and Luke Hedden engaged with various drafts of my work. Luke also went above and beyond to answer every question I had during the job market and provided tremendous encouragement along the way, all while balancing his own work and family. Genevieve (Vivi) Gregorich and Jacob Levitt have also been wonderful colleagues outside of MIT, exchanging ideas with me, commiserating, and making this entire process a bit more fun.

I am endlessly grateful to have an incredible group of friends (Jadzia, Maggie, Sloane, Leigh-Ann, Julia, and Shannon, to name just a few) that I have known since college or earlier. They have expressed a genuine interest in my research and listened to me discuss it more than most people would tolerate. More importantly, they have celebrated, laughed, cried, ranted, and sat in the silence with me for many, many years through personal and professional highs and
lows. During this PhD process, they made sure I had fun, planning trips from Nashville to Napa while analyzing every Taylor Swift lyric with me. I will never be sure how I found these amazing humans and I am in constant admiration of their hearts, humor, and minds.

Most importantly, I cannot thank my family enough. My mom (Debra) has never stopped encouraging me to learn, from selling encyclopedias when I was a child so I would have a set to read to the pride she has shown at every educational and career milestone. She has made countless dinners, worked on a million school projects, read even more storybooks, listened to me brainstorm, and never doubted my abilities even when I did. My dad (Gary) is perhaps the hardest working and most family-centered person I know. There has never been a time when I needed him, and he did not find a way to rush to my side. His humor and unconditional love make hard days a little easier. My siblings, Marilyn (Isabella) and Grant are hilarious, smart, and loyal companions who are far cooler than I will ever be. I take being their older sister very seriously and will never tire of long road trips with Isa or long phone conversations with Grant. They are the best gifts I have ever received. My two nephews—Clark and Jack—who are not old enough to understand that I have been working on a dissertation, have given me the most wonderful break from being an academic. There is nothing I would not do to make them giggle. To my grandmother and namesake, Raquel, and to my extended family members who have supported me at every turn, including through losing two grandparents while writing this dissertation, I love you endlessly. Jordana and Sophia, in particular, you are the “big sisters” this oldest daughter always needed, and I could not have done this without you.

To every one of the activists who generously spoke to me as I collected the data for this dissertation, thank you. I am keenly aware that your willingness to share your story with me was a gift, one that can be too easily taken for granted. I hope as readers consider your experiences—whether they embrace your cause and your approach, or not—will develop a deep empathy and appreciation for the courage speaking up at work requires.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, James Grant Sr., and my grandmother, Beulah Kessinger, who both passed away while I was working on it. I miss you both every single day.
CHAPTER 1—SPEAKING UP AND SPEAKING OUT: HOW EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS RAISE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND MORAL CONCERNS AT WORK

Abstract: In this paper, I examine how employee activists experienced the voice processes inside of their organizations as they attempted to raise social, political, and moral concerns. Despite describing companies that valued openness and leaders that encouraged employee voice, employee activists believed internal, individual voice channels were insufficient in addressing their concerns, prompting them to instead engage in collective action and/or individual public protests. Here, I explore how internal voice processes broke down when employee activists raised social, political, and moral concerns as well as the types of social, political, and moral issues they felt compelled to express. Finally, I examine how societal factors, including political polarization and pressure for companies to grow, fueled this phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many organizational leaders have sought to foster open, psychologically safe cultures, encouraging employees to raise ideas and concerns freely within their firms (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Turco, 2016; Edmondson, 2018; Coutifaris & Grant, 2021). For example, in 2009, Netflix leaders first published the company’s now famous “culture code.” The document outlined the “behaviors and skills that are valued in employees.” Two of the nine behaviors leaders encouraged were courage and honesty; in the slide deck, leaders offered specific guidance such as “say what you think, even when it is controversial,” “question actions inconsistent with our values,” and “[be] known for candor and directness.” Similarly, in 2015, internal Google researchers published a report explaining that “psychological safety was far and away the most important dynamic” on successful Google teams; the company’s People Operations department then created “tailored developmental resources” to improve psychological safety on teams (Rozovsky, 2015).

This trend is not surprising as scholars have shown that when leaders encourage employees to speak up and create avenues for them to do so, organizations benefit as they are able to prevent errors and fuel creativity and innovation (Edmondson, 1999; 2018; Detert & Trevino, 2010; Grant, 2013; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2013; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Furthermore, researchers have shown that organizational leaders can encourage employees to speak up within their firms by creating and perpetuating informal, flat organizational cultures (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ross, 2004; Turco, 2016), by adding voice to firm values (Burris, 2012; Turco, 2016; Leigh & Melwani, 2019), and by creating formal grievance procedures for employees to raise concerns (Saunders, et al., 1992; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken, et al., 2003; Kochan, et al., 2019). Leaders can also encourage employees to speak up by creating private meeting spaces for employees and their supervisors (e.g., Saunders, et.al., 1992; Burris, 2012; Turco, 2016) and granting employees audiences with upper management (e.g., Ashford, et. al., 1998; Detert & Trevino, 2010). While current research explains how creating and perpetuating open, psychologically safe cultures may benefit organizations and existing research examines how leaders can encourage employees to raise ideas and concerns at work, current studies do not consider the challenges both employees and leaders may face as employees seek to raise social, political, and moral
concerns at work. Indeed, employee voice scholars have recognized this gap and called for more research on “ethical voice” (e.g., Chen & Trevino, 2022; Morrison, 2023).

In this paper, I explore the barriers employee activists encountered when they attempted to raise social, political, and moral concerns inside their organizations (see Figure 1). The employee activists I studied generally believed firm leaders valued their input when it was work product or process related, and hoped leaders would respond similarly to social, political, and moral concerns. However, when employee activists attempted to raise social, political, moral concerns, they lost faith in their organization’s internal voice processes. I examine the types of social, political, and moral concerns employee activists felt compelled to raise (see Figure 2); additionally, I show how political polarization and pressure for companies to grow fueled the breakdown of openness and psychological safety around these issues and prompted employee activists to instead turn to collective action and public demonstrations to express their concerns. This research has important practical implications for leaders who seek to encourage employees to raise ideas in their organizations even as political polarization persists and they continue to face pressure to grow company revenues.

ENCOURAGING EMPLOYEES TO RAISE IDEAS AND CONCERNS INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

Many organizational leaders have attempted to foster open, psychologically safe cultures where they encourage employees to raise ideas and concerns freely (e.g., Edmondson, 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Turco, 2016; Edmondson, 2018; Coutifaris & Grant, 2021). Turco (2016) explains that the senior leaders at the technology firm she studied embraced “radical openness,” claiming “it’s good business…[and] more profitable in the long run.” She says that other companies, including Facebook, Google, “hundreds” of “emerging high-tech firms in Silicon Valley,” and “more traditional firms” also embraced this idea of promoting openness and voice among employees. Edmondson (2018) describes how leaders at several of the companies that she studied encouraged employees to speak up as they sought to increase innovation and learning; for instance, she explained that one finance company touted values of “radical transparency” and “extreme candor.” Coutifaris and Grant (2021) show that some organizational leaders even engaged in critical self-disclosure, openly sharing their own areas for improvement, to encourage employees to speak up internally.

This trend is not surprising considering that researchers have demonstrated that encouraging employees to speak up inside their organization can promote innovation and learning, improve work processes, lead to error correction, reduce illegal or immoral behavior, and prevent crises (Morrison & Milliken 2000; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Detert & Trevino, 2010; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008, 2012; Liang et al., 2012; Grant, 2013). Scholars have also found it benefits leaders to encourage employees to speak up internally, even when employees’ interests do not align with managers’, such as on topics of pay and working conditions, as it may preclude public complaints or costly legal battles (e.g., Edelman, et al., 1993; Albiston, et al., 2016; Kochan, et al., 2019).

Employee voice researchers have shown that leaders can encourage employees to speak up internally by sending signals about how welcome employee input is and how effective it will be, and by creating formal or informal mechanisms for employees to raise ideas and concerns (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Burris, 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Kochan, et al., 2019). In particular,
organizational leaders can promote employee voice within their firm by creating and perpetuating transparent, informal, flat organizational cultures (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ross, 2004; Turco, 2016), by adding it to firm values (Ross, 2004; Burris, 2012; Turco, 2016; Leigh & Melwani, 2019), and by creating formal structures—such as ombudsmen or Human Resources grievance procedures—for employees to raise concerns (Saunders, et al., 1992; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken, et al., 2003; Vallas, 2006; Albiston, et al., 2016; Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Kochan, et al., 2019). Leaders can also promote internal employee voice by creating private meeting spaces for employees and their supervisors (e.g., Saunders, et.al., 1992; Kellogg, 2009; Burris, 2012; Turco, 2016) and granting employees audiences with upper management (e.g., Ashford, et. al., 1998; Ross, 2004; Detert & Trevino, 2008; Turco, 2016).

As values of openness spread, many organizations have also adopted new communication technologies—such as online corporate forums (e.g., Wiki pages) and internal social media—and are hosting companywide townhall meetings where employees can ask questions and hear about organizational challenges and strategic initiatives (e.g., Ross, 2004; Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Detert & Burris, 2016; Turco, 2016; Davis & Kim, 2021). Additionally, scholars claim that internal grievance procedures have become more common as firms seek to keep employee complaints out of the public and legal realm (e.g., Edelman et al., 1999; Dobbins, 2009; Albiston, et al., 2016). In line with previous studies on how managers can encourage employees to speak up, researchers have shown that employees in less hierarchical environments are more likely to use these internal voice processes; for instance, Hoffman (2003, 2005) compared two taxi companies and found that more internal grievances were filed in the company with a flatter organizational culture.

Despite ample research that suggests many organizational leaders are attempting to encourage employees to speak up internally, researchers have also shown an increase in employee activists using public protests to express their discontent with their firm’s practices and policies (e.g., Briscoe & Gupta, 2021; Davis & Kim, 2021). Indeed, many of the organizations best known for promoting employee voice, are now the targets of these public complaints (Goldberg, 2020). Employee voice scholars have begun to observe this tension in the current literature, called for more research on “ethical voice,” “voice that is not necessarily pro-organizational,” and “how macrolevel contextual factors affect voice” (Chen & Trevino, 2022; Morrison, 2023).

In this paper, I show how employee activists experienced values of openness and internal voice processes when they tried to raise social, political, or moral concerns at work (see Figure 1). I rely on interviews with 52 employee activists, an archival database of white-collar employee activism events, a three-day participant observation in employee activism training, and employee activist documents to explain how employee activists suggest that internal voice processes were insufficient for certain types of concerns. I show how employee activists believed that internal voice processes generally worked well for work-product and work-process related concerns; however, when they attempted to raise social, political, or moral concerns, they explained that these internal voice processes broke down, prompting them to turn to collective action and/or individual public acts of protest. I also explore the types of social, political, and moral concerns that employee activists felt compelled to raise (see Figure 2) and how political polarization and pressure for companies to grow their revenues fueled this phenomenon.
DATA AND METHODS

I rely on interviews with 52 employee activists, an archival database of white-collar employee activism events between 2018 and 2022, participant observation in a three-day training session for employee activists, and employee activist documents to explain how employees raised social, political, and moral concerns at work (see Figure 1). I use this data to explain why employee activists viewed internal voice processes as insufficient to address social, political, and moral concerns, and in turn, sought to express their discontent using collective action and/or individual public demonstrations. I also explore the types of social, political, and moral concerns employee activists felt compelled to raise (see Figure 2) and how societal factors fueled this phenomenon.

Data Collection

Archival and Open-Source Data. To examine how professional employees are raising social, political, and moral issues within their organizations, I created a database of white-collar employee activism events, using news articles. I focused my data collection on press coverage of employee activism events, rather than the individuals who chose not to engage in activism. Similar to Scully and Segal’s (2002) rationale, I considered that current employee voice and social movement literature offers a wide array of explanations as to why employees might not speak up (for reviews see: Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Moreover, scholars have found value in studying employee activists from the activist perspective to understand how they mobilize and organize their actions, sustain their movements, frame their demands, and attempt to mitigate the risks they face (e.g., Meyerson, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002; DeJordy, et al., 2020). Relying on Zald & Berger’s (1978) definition of social movements in organizations as attempts to use “unconventional politics” to create change, I first sought to identify individual or groups of professionals who were using unconventional approaches to raising ideas and concerns about their organizations.

I searched online databases, including Google News and Globalnstream, for press coverage of such events between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2022, alongside several undergraduate research assistants; this yielded nearly 200 incidents across dozens of organizations.1 We logged and coded approximately 1,000 corresponding press articles to identify the tactics employees used, leadership responses, the number of employees participating, and the topic prompting action. We also used the press articles in this database to begin identifying individual employee activists.

Interviews. I created a second database with thousands of employee activist names and searched for contact information to reach out to these individuals for interviews, again alongside a few undergraduate research assistants. We found contact information for hundreds of activists involved in various events, and I conducted cold outreach. The number of leads for each activism event varied greatly as some activists worked to conceal their identities due to perceived risk or early managerial responses (e.g., firings), whereas other activists openly signed petitions and spoke to reporters, enabling me to gather more leads. The collective or individual nature of the incidents also varied.

As I began reaching out to individuals to interview, I realized many of the activists in my initial database had taken a leadership role in activism incidents, likely a function of who

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1 We cross checked our results with the crowdsourced database hosted on collectiveaction.tech to identify any incidents that fit our search criteria that we may have missed. Then, we searched for press on these events.
chose to speak to press or who journalists quoted. While I was keen to explore the perspective of primary organizers, I also wanted to consider the perspective of individuals who joined these movements. Thus, to source these individuals, I searched for public petitions and used these lists of hundreds, sometimes even thousands of employees, to find publicly available contact information and request interviews. I reached out to individual activists via email, personal websites, or LinkedIn. I limited my cold outreach to former employees, reduce the potential risk of participating in my study.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 employee activists from 14 technology and consumer goods firms via Zoom (or on request, Google Meet). Many of my interviews came from former Google (23), Amazon (11), and Facebook (8) employees (see Table 1). Several interviewees spoke to more than one activism event (as they moved between companies or engaged in multiple issues within one company). The higher representation of Google, Amazon, and Facebook in my sample was likely a result of a combination of factors. First, there may have been more press attention to big name tech firms as regulatory issues emerged in popular press. Second, each of these companies had public petitions that I used to source activists; in particular, the Amazon climate change petition had 8,700 employee signatures and Google had several public petitions with hundreds of signatures each.

In these interviews, I asked about the individual’s background and goals, the highlights and frustrations of their job and their organizational membership, their attempts to raise ideas and concerns at work both individually and collectively, and how they considered the risks and benefits of speaking up or speaking out about work-related issues. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, except four who asked to not be recorded. During the interviews that I did not record, I took notes directly into my computer and immediately revisited the transcript to clarify any shorthand I used during the meeting. These interviews ranged from 30 minutes to just under three and a half hours; on average, they lasted about 72 minutes. Several individuals sent me documents during our interviews, such as training materials they used. At the end of these interviews, I asked participants for referrals. Approximately 73% of my interview sample came from cold outreach to contacts identified through press coverage. The other 27% came from snowball referrals. Men comprised approximately 60% of the sample, women comprised approximately 38% of the sample, of these individuals approximately 8% were transgendered, and one interviewee identified as nonbinary (see Table 1).

**Participant Observation.** I also engaged in participant observation of a three-day training workshop for employee activists. Tech Workers’ Coalition hosted the event on Zoom and the organizers approved my participation. The training was conducted through webinar style lectures, interactive de-brief sessions, and a simulation; the event had more than 400 registered attendees (though attendance varied in individual sessions). The sessions were co-led by employee activists from previous decades and current tech activists. Trainers discussed how to raise awareness of issues, compared in-person and remote organizing, addressed concerns around managerial surveillance and retaliation, and hosted hands-on workshops to create zines, navigate ethical quandaries, and consider the future of organizing. Organizers used Google docs to compile community norms and collect key takeaways. After the training, I continued to receive newsletters from the organization every few weeks, spotlighting ongoing activism efforts.
Data Analysis

To begin, I coded my interview transcripts and field notes in several phases (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, I used open coding to explore the topics activists discussed in interviews. Some of my interview codes mirrored my archival database coding (discussed above). Other codes were unique to the interview data and observations, such as codes that addressed activists’ emotional states, their approaches to building coalitions, as well as their perceptions of company culture, office perks, dark humor, their interaction with Human Resources, their perceptions of risk, and their views on societal harm caused by their organizations.

Simultaneously, I wrote short memos after the interviews about the interesting ideas, puzzling dynamics, and consistencies or variance with other activist accounts. I also wrote an overarching memo for every five to ten interviews that I conducted to consider how I should adjust my interview questions to gather information on emerging topics of interest. In my first phase of data collection, I sorted activists by how internal versus public a given incident of raising ideas or concerns was. This led me to consider what prompted individuals to speak out—rely on public, external channels—rather than speak up—rely on internal voice processes to air their grievances. Thus, I began to ask interviewees why they chose to speak out and they described how internal processes were insufficient to handle certain concerns, offering examples of successful change initiatives they raised internally and how they differed from social, political, or moral work-related concerns they ultimately raised externally. As I re-read my data as well as the employee voice literature, I identified tensions between how scholars might expect employees to raise concerns inside organizations where leaders encourage employees to speak up internally and the tactics we ultimately observed in their use of collective action and/or individual public protests.

I later used an axial coding approach to consider the relationships between these topics. In this phase, the differences in how employee activists viewed internal voice processes when they raised work-product or work process related concerns and how they viewed internal voice processes when they raised social, political, and moral concerns emerged. As I explored the descriptions they offered of their organizations and leaders’ attempts to encourage employees to speak up, I uncovered their disillusionment when they shifted to speaking about their attempts to speak up about ethical issues. I also observed how they described macrolevel societal factors like political polarization and pressure for their companies to grow as fueling more social, political, and moral quandaries than they had previously faced and creating tensions inside their organization over how to resolve these concerns. Using selective coding, I identified the importance of internal voice processes and organizational values of openness for activists that mobilized collective actions as well as for activists who engaged in individual public protests.

Below I explain how employee activists believed individual, internal voice processes were insufficient to address their social, political, and moral work-related concerns. Then, I describe how disillusioned employee activists turned to collective action and/or individual public protests to instead air their grievances. I also explore the types of social, political, and moral concerns they felt compelled to raise, and examine how macrolevel societal factors fueled these concerns (see Figures 1 and 2). Finally, I discuss practical implications for leaders who want to foster openness and promote employee voice inside of organizations even as political polarization and pressures to grow company revenues persist.
Employee Activists Described Organizations that Valued Openness

The employee activists that I interviewed primarily came from high technology firms. They generally told me that leaders in their organizations promoted openness, cultivated employee voice, and valued dissent. Employee activists told me that leaders reinforced the importance of these behaviors during onboarding, in promotion criteria, and in their everyday interactions. For example, an activist at Netflix explained that leaders called on employees there to disagree with organization practices and policies. He said this culture was one of the reasons he joined the company. He told me,

> When I joined Netflix, one of the things that stood out from the very beginning and convinced me that it was the place for me was that they have a very strong corporate culture. They have created a whole cult of personality around it. Essentially, at the core of the culture was, [this idea] that we're looking for people who are entrepreneurial, people who will step up to big challenges, people who, when they see something that doesn't seem right, say something, people who are willing to, they call it, farm for dissent. Basically, people… who are willing to speak candidly about what they see as challenges or opportunities, and work to address them… They encouraged these discussions … [and said] we feel like we're a better company, when we work like this…

Similarly, an activist from Google told me that the company’s leaders valued transparency and voice, as they believed that it fostered innovation. She said,

> This is why we work at Google and not [at] other places, there is a sense at Google that you are invested in the company as a whole and you have a right to talk about things that you aren’t working on directly. That’s a value of the company, you can ask someone what they are working on and learn… we would have workshops and learn things from across the company… cross-pollination was a value.

Another Google activist told me, “Google was a very open and transparent company, the culture was incredibly strong and very cohesive.” A third Google activist explained,

> At Google, there's an expectation that if anybody has something to say, [you] speak up, because they're [Google leaders] concerned about [hearing it]… to the extent that you're involved, or even maybe if you're not involved in the product team actually building the thing, [leaders expect] you will speak up and that you will be heard…

Additionally, an activist at Amazon explained that the organization hires for and rewards “a bias for action,” noting it was one of the company’s core leadership principles. He said,

> Amazon is a very open company internally, anyone can enact a change, everyone is encouraged to enact change, it happens constantly… As a principal engineer you’re expected to impact the business and the tech, your job is to make changes to the way we build our software and [propose] new business ideas… Amazon wants people who are willing to drive change, it is one of their leadership principles, a bias for action… we live and breathe the leadership principles, they are engrained in you. It is like a cult… and you get promoted based on those principles… it is constantly reinforced in your psyche… they select for it and then they keep fueling the fire and amplifying those behaviors in people… they want you to go and make changes.

Moreover, a Facebook activist told me that when he joined the organization, openness was embedded in Facebook’s core values. He said, “one of the core principles was: be open, [they told us] we're willing to talk to each other, face to face about stuff.” A separate Facebook activist reiterated this. He said, “I always felt pretty free to speak candidly about what I felt the company was and was not doing well… I never felt that I was gonna get my hand slapped because I said the wrong thing.”

The employee activists that I studied often highlighted the importance of voice in their organizations and emphasized that speaking up was something that leaders encouraged and expected of them. As voice scholars would expect, some activists discussed variation among their middle managers and how well they promoted employee voice, but they frequently
explained that in an organization that promotes openness they had a multitude of channels to raise ideas and concerns to leadership directly, as discussed below.

**Employee Activists Said Their Organizations Had an Abundance of Internal Voice Processes**

The employee activists I studied also told me that leaders implemented both informal and formal processes to encourage employees to speak up inside their companies. They described informal processes, such as pitching ideas by writing an internal “press release” that would be distributed across teams and managers, hosting weekly townhall meetings where employees were invited to ask senior leaders questions, and providing message boards where employees could submit questions for leaders or discuss important topics with co-workers across the organization. Consistent with what employee voice scholars would expect, employee activists said that they felt they had great latitude to “make work more efficient” or “make product improvements” in their organizations. For instance, a different activist at Amazon explained that the company had a process to raise ideas that benefitted the company and its customers. He added that employees often discussed concerns about inefficient processes in team meetings. He said,

> There is a process in Amazon… for [raising] everything basically… you write a press release for it, describing for example, a new product. And then you kind of pass that press release up the chain, or maybe across the org chart… gets up to people that have enough power to say oh, yeah, that’s a good idea… anyone can write one… [and] it’s very okay to criticize things, like I could say in a meeting that I really don’t like that [product intake] pipeline, and that it makes me very frustrated. I did that a lot. I was very vocal. And, people didn't really mind.

Another Amazon activist echoed this; he told me, “Anything you see that isn’t right, you write a proposal, and you make it data driven. If it makes sense, it gets adopted.” One of the Google activists quoted above described several ways she and her peers had raised ideas internally, including speaking directly to managers, asking questions on internal online forums, or participating in townhall meetings. She said,

> The idea at Google is you can make a change by taking an idea to other people… the process of escalation is the dominant way to go about change… where you have an idea and you take it to your manager, and then they are like “take it to this person,” and that person says, “okay do this thing”… I haven’t really heard about people getting quashed… There is [also] an internal way to ask questions, a message board. It was another thing that was great about the company, executives would want people to ask questions at T.G.I.F. [townhall] meetings, they’d say post your questions here.

A separate Google activist explained that the company’s townhall meetings offered a unique opportunity for employees to raise ideas and concerns directly to the company’s senior leadership. He told me,

> [We had] this thing called TGIF, which, it started when Google was in a single office in Mountain View, California… every Friday, there was beer at four o'clock, and everybody got together, and the founders got up, in front of the crowd, and they just talked, and people could ask questions, and challenge them on policies and whatever else…. TGIF was powerful for a couple of reasons. [Mainly] because you're speaking directly to leadership and demanding answer…

Moreover, a Facebook activist described how employees were empowered to discuss product-related concerns, raise product ideas, and make product-related changes on their teams and on Workplace, the company’s internal forum. However, he said employee input on other topics, like user policies, was not encouraged. He explained,

> A lot of times employees had the power to change the direction of a team, or to come up with an idea that spins off its own team, this was always advertised to us… I can confirm that I had a lot of power at Facebook to decide what I thought was important. But, that was technical stuff, it was I think I can improve this caching mechanism and save a million dollars a year, which I did… I remember a time when some team
was testing a feature... and [it] went into employee testing, and somebody made a post on Workplace [an internal online forum] and it was like, “what the hell is this feature?...nobody wants this”… and there was some discussion, and it got a little heated, and [leaders were] like, “hey, guys, remember, your fellow employees worked hard on this, try not to shit on them.” But that feature never launched… I was pretty outspoken within my team… but it wasn't changing [our] policy, it was changing some of the technology…

As seen in the examples above, employee activists described ample informal processes inside of their organizations to raise ideas and concerns to organizational leaders, in addition to the standard grievance procedures, such as Human Resources channels, inside of these firms. Employee activists shared numerous stories of successfully creating change inside of their organizations, using these channels, but as previewed in the final quote, they found limitations in the types of voice that were welcomed by leaders. The changes they felt they could make using these individual, internal voice processes were limited to improving products or making processes more efficient, as described in further detail below.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS BELIEVED INDIVIDUAL, INTERNAL VOICE PROCESSES WERE INSUFFICIENT FOR CERTAIN TYPES OF CONCERNS

Despite the ample internal voice processes available to them and the encouragement from their leaders to raise ideas and concerns inside the firm, employee activists told me that when it came to social, political, and moral concerns, these individual, internal channels were insufficient in addressing their dissent (see Figures 1 and 2). Employee activists explained that leaders often dismissed their concerns when they raised them via informal, internal voice processes and when they spoke up about social, political, and moral concerns via formal, internal channels, they were often blamed for the problem.

Employee Activists Said Leaders Dismissed the Social, Political, and Moral Concerns They Raised via Informal, Internal Voice Processes

First, employee activists explained that informal, internal voice processes were often designed to encourage employees to speak up about issues that benefitted customers or the firm, but not necessarily to help employees raise concerns that impacted other stakeholders. Employee activists explained that they struggled to frame their concerns to fit the profit-centric format these informal processes required or that their concerns were ignored by leaders when they threatened profitability. For example, an activist at Amazon explained that the company’s process of writing a press release to raise ideas made it difficult to speak up internally about Amazon’s impact on climate change because the outcomes were not “customer centric.” He said,

When you propose something [using this approach], you start with the customer experience. For example, when they proposed Prime video, [it was] “we want to have a streaming service with these features.” And then, they worked backwards to how do we actually do that? This is a problem… because of this philosophy, as long as the customer gets their package in two days, you can basically have every delivery person go and beat up every baby seal in Antarctica, right? As long as the package gets to the right person at the right time, it's a trapdoor [because] the end result is good. I can have whatever adverse effects on the environment, on workers… in this working backwards philosophy, what's the benefit to the customer of having more electric delivery trucks or weird feeling recycled packaging? You can't formulate the problem that this petition presented as one of those fixes. How do I phrase the social problem in an Amazon way?

A Facebook activist explained that when employees raised privacy or policy concerns about products, their concerns were weighed against the impact on profits. Similar to the Amazon activist’s explanation that it was difficult to frame social concerns in a profit-centric way, this
Facebook activist explained that when a social concern threatened the company’s growth targets, the social concern that was often dismissed. He explained,

People come to Facebook, because they want to ship [products], they want to move fast… And when every single thing that you’re trying to launch either gets blocked or watered down, before it ever makes it out the door, because policy [concerns] say you can’t do that, that gets very frustrating… so, there is this double standard that exists for growth versus integrity… If [someone raises] policy or privacy [concerns] and tries to block it [a product], it’ll get unblocked really quickly because we want to deliver these growth targets… anything that we do that could disrupt their growth targets becomes a point of friction...

A few Facebook activists told me that when employees raised political concerns, such as Facebook’s role influencing global elections or Facebook’s “whitelist” (the list of politicians they permitted to break the company’s user agreements without punishment) in townhall meetings, leaders would often either ignore the questions or “pay lip service” to them. One Facebook activist said,

Newer employees who haven’t been through a few rounds of this confront Mark Zuckerberg [CEO] at the Q&A [townhall]… [they] speak up and say, “hey, I think we’re doing something wrong” and [try to] start a discussion… what I found was that Mark is very good at explaining away anything… when employees raise concerns, the Q&A is not about changing Mark's mind [about these issues], although some people try… It tends to be more about Mark delivering his neatly packaged justification for whatever Facebook is choosing to do … And it was only once I started to see [it repeatedly]… that it started to feel shallow… employees were able to raise it [policy concerns], but it was always just, let's get the line that is in Mark’s head about why this is okay.

Another Facebook activist reiterated how he watched peers try to raise concerns at townhall meetings, only to have leaders attempt to placate employees. He said,

The townhall issue is an interesting one. I've known people that raise things there. I never did in person, but I submitted some things [on message boards]… After the first year or two, most people start tuning out from townhalls because… you hear the same answers a lot. The townhalls… can be rather frustrating depending on how many times you've seen something play out, and how transparent you feel that [leaders] are being… you'll get these kinds of placating attitudes [from leaders], and they're not borne out by the actions.

The same activist described his attempt to raise concerns about a politician’s inappropriate content on Facebook through the company’s internal escalation channels; he said,

Initially, I filed something to say this should not be on the platform. This obviously violates… policies against dehumanizing language against particular groups… it was referred to the account manager [for violating politician]. So, in a content enforcement discussion, they said… this is a managed partner, and we need to be very careful with what we do. And [the account manager] said, this is normal for him… he's known for being very bombastic… So, it got squashed due to that commercial relationship. I, with a couple of other people, pushed back. I was like, no… the semantic games that you're playing to excuse this are ridiculous…. eventually we said, we want to meet with somebody and explain this in as much accurate detail, citing our own policies and what our executives have said publicly about what isn't allowed. We presented to a policy team, and it was a disaster… we just said, well, we can't go any further [internally].

An activist from Google told me she tried to raise her concerns inside the organization, via townhalls and internal forums as well as on committees, but leadership was not receptive. She explained,

I worked on a few different committees internally on diversity and inclusion and trying to push some AR/VR principles… I did do things [internally] to try and have more of an impact, but it didn’t feel like as a regular employee, that I had much say [on these issues]… And, remember the internal message board? [Well,] they’d [leaders] select which questions to answer or not answer, when certain questions were avoided that was a big red flag… you could get a signal about what was okay and not okay [to raise]…

Several Google activists highlighted a similar phenomenon, where organizational leaders chose the questions that they wanted to answer in townhall meetings, despite the fact that employees could see which questions had been submitted and upvoted by peers on the internal message board. A different Google activist told me,
They [the townhall meetings] are called TGIF. They [leaders often] switched the number one voted on question, if it was remotely spicy, I keep saying spicy, but, you know, critical of [a social, political, or moral decision]. They would just skip it and ignore that it was very clearly the number one voted question… they would send out a link, the tool is called Dory… you would type in a question, and then people could go in and thumbs up or thumbs down questions… it’s public. And they would go into the Q&A section and sort them by top to bottom. If the top questions were highly voted, it could be like 1,000 up votes, but [social, political, or moral], they would say “it’s not the forum”… they would go to the next question that was a super niche thing that a dozen people were interested in, but it's an easy answer.

As employee activists attempted to raise social, political, or moral concerns via informal, internal voice channels, they struggled to format them in the profit-centric way organizational norms required and found that leaders dismissed, ignored, or paid lip service to these issues. They often emphasized that how leaders treated these concerns made it clear that this was not the type of voice they intended to encourage inside the firm.

Employee Activists Said They Were Often Blamed When They Raised Social, Political, or Moral Concerns via Formal, Internal Voice Processes

Second, employee activists explained that formal, internal grievance procedures such as filing complaints with Human Resources (HR) or submitting concerns to internal whistle-blowing channels were ineffective when raising social, political, and moral complaints. Activists often told me “HR is not your friend,” explaining that formal grievance procedures are not designed to help employees in cases of workplace harassment, ethical concerns about product use, or the company’s impact on society. Instead, they insisted HR is there to “cover the company’s ass” and several activists told me that when they raised these issues, HR professionals would suggest the employee take a mental health leave. A Google activist explained that her team’s HR representatives were over-stretched and offered template solutions such as online courses to improve her communication with managers. She said,

When I reached out to our HR person, she was like “I’m sorry, but we’ve moved to a scalable model for HR that is all about help centers, it’s almost like tech support with a ticket system, where you put your query in it… And to be honest with you, I sleep like four hours a night…I’m exhausted, I’m so burned out”…. So, when I started diligently logging all this stuff as a complaint in the HR system, I’d get these temp new grad people in random call centers who were telling me to take a mindfulness class. It was completely bizarre.

Or, they’d be like here are tips for communicating more effectively with managers. And everything was like a coded message for, if you have a problem [here], you are the problem, or your psyche is the problem.

Consistent with scholars’ findings that employees who raise moral concerns in their organizations are often labeled as “troublemakers” (e.g., Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002), the same Google activist told me that reporting social, political, or moral work-related issues to HR opened the door for being labeled a rabble-rouser. She said,

If you report it [harassment/discrimination], you make it worse for yourself. That’s absolutely what happened to me. I don’t understand what I was supposed to do, just take it? Just to say, alright… That so sums up what this is. If you have something bad happen to you, you are creating more work for the system. But, no. The system created that situation… You make it sound like I just woke up one morning and was like how can I make [managers’] lives miserable?

An Activision Blizzard activist explained that his female co-workers who reported harassment to HR were also met with resistance or meaningless solutions. He said,

I had female coworkers who would go to HR and complain about harassment, and… all of that rigmarole you hear in the news stories is true… HR [said]…it’s your word against theirs… ultimately, that ended in action not being taken against the abuser… I distinctly remember, one of my colleagues had a harassment problem, and she went to HR and HR said, you are the second person to lodge a complaint against this person. So, he has two strikes, if you can find a third, then we have a case… sort of a three strikes rule…

Indeed, several activists explained that if they persisted in their complaints, HR often suggested that they take mental health related leaves of absence. One Google activist
explained that after she reported sexual harassment to HR, they suggested she take mental health leave, and that this had become common practice in the organization. She said,

I ended up, two weeks later going on leave for mental health reasons and going into intense therapy… then a friend sent me an article that was about Google pressuring people to go on leave for mental health reasons. [It said] basically you go in and your report harassment or discrimination, then they say, “you should seek counselling.” My friend said, this is exactly what happened to you. At first, I was like, no I actually had mental health issues, they were just helping me, then [I realized]… The New York Times has another piece about how after people went to counseling that Google pressured them to go to, Google used the records against them…

She further explained that the organization trained new managers to recommend that individuals who report harassment seek therapy. She said,

Another friend of mine was in a training for new managers [at Google] and they gave the new managers an email template [to use] if someone comes to [them] with a problem like harassment or discrimination, [and the] email template suggests that they seek counseling, this was a systematic thing that they had.

Another Google activist echoed this, explaining after she and her teammates filed discrimination complaints, HR did little to help and suggested they take mental health leave.

She said,

HR gave us these letters… my letter basically said, while we acknowledge that it could have been perceived [as racism] because there is a lot of evidence and we've received all the proof and we understand that this is the perception, we are not sure that it was [racism]. So…we're going to have a conversation with them [managers]. But if you have any issues, go talk to your manager. This is literally the language of the email… it was so toxic, and gas lit, and condescending. And every single time this was brought to HR, their response was always the same, especially to Black women, it was you need some mental health services… That's what they would say. This was them referring you to mental health services when you're filing a complaint.

Yet another Google activist explained that HR channels were often “weaponized” against employees who reported social, political, or moral concerns. He said,

When you're a low-level worker, HR is your adversary, when you're a medium-level worker, HR is your partner, when you're an executive, HR is your weapon… so for me, right, I'm a low-level software engineer and I have no ability to tell HR what to do, HR tells me what to do. I don't have any hiring and firing power, I don't have any authority to set rules. But when you're a director at Google… HR is someone who works with you to implement policies, right? So, if you're going to come in with a new policy for your department… HR works with you on those things… when you go up higher than that to VPs, SVPs, etc. HR listens to you; you get to tell HR what to do. And so, [when an employee reports a concern] HR comes to you [the executive] and says, what should we do here, there's been a complaint that's come from this person… And it's a little bit like when you call someone out as being disruptive because they're pointing out the racism…

Employee activists told me that when they raised social, political, or moral concerns through formal, internal voice channels like Human Resources, they were often blamed for being the problem themselves. Activists said HR professionals, at times, sent them training links to “teach them” to better communicate with their managers. Activists also said some HR professionals recommended that the activists take mental health leave, particularly if they persisted in raising these ethical issues. Finally, activists explained that rather than serve as an avenue for employees to raise concerns within the organization, HR and other formal grievance channels helped leaders “make problems go away” because, at the end of the day, the professionals working in these departments answered to organizational leaders, not employees, and they were not incentivized to address difficult concerns.

SOCIETAL FACTORS FUELED SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND MORAL CONCERNS
**Political Polarization and Companies’ Pursuit of Growth Spurred New Concerns and Created Tensions Inside the Organization over How to Resolve These Issues**

The employee activists I interviewed told me that societal factors contributed to the rise in their criticism of their firms as well as the tensions around how to resolve these concerns inside their organizations. First, employee activists told me as the political climate became increasingly polarized and companies experienced relentless pressure to grow, they became more concerned about the ethics of: how their firm’s products were being used, their firm’s stance on key policy issues, their firm’s expansion into certain markets, their firm’s broader impact on society, and their firm’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (see Figure 2). In addition to spurring these concerns, they said that political polarization and pressure for companies to grow also created tension inside their companies around how to resolve these issues. Employee activists explained that addressing their social, political, and moral concerns would have required leaders to reconsider some growth initiatives. Furthermore, as their organizations grew, so did the diversity of employees and viewpoints inside their firms.

A Google activist explained that the polarized political climate and “growing awareness that tech can cause significant harm to society” led to more employees challenging their company’s policies and practices. She said,

[The rise in employee activism] is from a combination of the political climate, management turnover, and the way topics evolved to be less about product [attributes]… I think [there] is a growing awareness that tech can cause significant harm [to society], right?… That’s what has contributed to it [employee activism] blowing up in the last year or two… [we] started seeing examples of projects like Project Maven [Google selling technology to the US Department of Defense] or Project Dragonfly [Google creating a censored search engine in China]… It's worth pointing out that a parallel thing is happening [with diversity and inclusion issues]… like the dynamic of James Damore publishing that infamous memo [within Google] that went viral where he claimed women are less [qualified for] software engineering than men… and there was all this kind of race and misogyny stuff… It also didn’t help that a lot of things that were top of mind for employees related to sexual harassment, misconducted by executives [after the #MeToo movement]…

She went on to describe how the company’s pursuit of near-term profits meant Google leaders were less compelled to heed employees’ concerns. She told me,

That mixture, especially [employee concerns] getting directly in the way of the company’s short-term profits in pursuing contracts with Department of Defense or the People’s Republic of China… those are the things that had employees feeling morally compelled to act and executives feeling like it would hurt the bottom line, if they listened… What is worse is it was happening at the same time that executives were like, ‘let’s keep on good terms with the Republican administration… we don’t want to get antitrust regulated.

A separate Google activist explained that as the company grew, so did the impact of the products it built, increasing employee activists’ sense of duty to speak up about social, political, and moral concerns. He said,

When you work in tech and when there are huge numbers of human beings on the other end of your products, it's not hard to understand how profound the consequences can be and are both for society and for individual people who your decisions directly impact… You’re constantly making decisions that try to balance whatever risks there are… against the potential for new lines of business, for new sources of revenue, for new ways to engage more users… when there is that fundamental tension… nothing that's black and white… and [different people’s] perspective balances those risks and rewards differently…

He offered similar examples of this tension between growth and societal impact, explaining that leaders may look to contracts with government entities to grow their revenues, but this raises a myriad of ethical questions for the employees who are building these products. He explained,

If you're growing [Google] Cloud’s lines of business, you're trying to figure out, do we want government contracts that have enormous revenue potential, actual hard money coming in, that is pure incremental revenue. There's not a different way to look at it, it will be for the growth of the company's bottom line. But, [for employees, it’s like] what strings should be attached, what should our lines be for what we're willing to
do versus not willing to do? Do we work with immigration in the U.S. and track down human beings, on behalf of Department of Homeland Security? Should we work with countries who have records of human rights abuses?… It is not at all hypothetical to have to make that kind of trade off. And, when there aren't neat resolutions, there are always going to be some people who remain in dissent and disagree with the path that the company is taking… particularly when you have highly intelligent, highly skilled experts who are the bread and butter of your company, and they have a lot of resources at their disposal… now you [leaders] are battling not just the market, but your own staff who are not all sold on the thing you're doing…

Facebook activists reiterated these points, explaining there was often a tension between the company’s growth metrics and the social, political, and moral concerns employees raised. One Facebook activist told me he did not believe the company would address these issues absent pressure from employees because doing so interfered with short-term profits. He said,

Other than [pressure from] employees and press, I don't think a lot of this stuff would get addressed at all. [At Facebook] it often [emerges] as a trust and safety area. From the company's perspective, that stuff is a cost center. But [when we push back] they have to weigh [not doing something] against, if they don't, then they face blowback from the press and employees. Then, it's a bit of a tradeoff for them… when does doing nothing end up leading to worse outcomes than spending a bunch of money on things that don't give us an immediate return.

He went on to explain that as Facebook grew, its societal impact did as well, which increased employees’ sense of responsibility to speak up. He said,

The stakes also change somewhat with the company size and clout… People have argued, I think, convincingly, that Facebook, in many ways, is effectively the most powerful government in the world. And so, I think you could probably argue that you can have greater impact on the direction of societies, trying to exert that power within the company than you could by voting, for example.

A separate Facebook activist explained the importance of growth at the company, noting social or political concerns were often treated as secondary to growth metrics. He said,

Nobody wants to be the person that's responsible for making that growth number go down. We want it to go up. For that reason, growth has a really, really long leash. Integrity has a really, really short leash… we don't want to do anything that could regress these growth metrics… one of the things that a lot of people advocated for very vocally was anytime you launch something at Facebook, it launches to a very small sample set, [because] we want to see how it impacts growth and user behavior. Then we'll open it up to a general population release. To do that, you have to demonstrate growth non-regression. So, we have to show that this is at least growth neutral, that it doesn't make a statistically significant dent in growth. However, growth teams have no non-regression commitments when it comes to integrity metrics, like prevalence of harmful content. They don't have to demonstrate non-regression there before they get cleared for release…

A Google activist summarized this tension by saying that as technology companies continued to scale, “so did their ambitions,” and as leaders pursued unending growth, it challenged employees’ perceptions of their company’s original promises to pursue a noble mission. He said,

As companies’ ambitions scaled in scope to be larger… there was erosion in modern tech companies of the belief that any of these companies can be, quote unquote, good companies, moral companies… as these companies are becoming more influential in our daily lives and larger in economic scale… employees want to hang on to this idea they sold us that Google is not like the others. That it's different in that we're not just purely ruthless profit pursuers, and that we have this heart and there are certain things we won't do. And, I think that the [image] is falling… as that culture changes… and massive amounts of wealth is hoarded. I think there's something to that idea, can a corporation be ethical, can it be moral, can it have a greater purpose? And I think the erosion of that concept is a big piece of what's changed...

Moreover, Google activists explained that, in addition to weighing decisions about how to grow the company’s revenue and understanding the company’s increasing societal influence, as the number of employees grew at Google and the company’s geographical presence expanded, the culture became less homogeneous, presenting more opportunities for diverging opinions. One of the activists quoted above told me,
There were points of conflict on company direction, and on what the company was willing to do, what standard it will hold itself to, what values it was willing to live up to or not live up to, and that was according to 100,000 different opinions, or however many employees we averaged during that period.

The other Google activist quoted above said,

We grew way too fast. And you saw this across the tech scene. In the seven and a half years that I was there, Google quintupled in size… As Google’s workforce became bigger and you're adding 23,000 people a year into your culture, the emphasis on and the ability to maintain a homogeneity of that culture… well, people [had] different politics, which makes sense. A company of 30,000 is going to have a very different workforce than [a larger one] and, than a company that's expanding geographically as well. [Initially], Google was kind of just in the Bay Area. There's a certain type of person that lives in the Bay Area. Then you started expanding in Austin, and Raleigh/ Durham, and Michigan, and you're bringing in different politics and different ideas about culture… I don't think an organization can grow that much and maintain a homogenous culture. I think that the open culture that everyone thought Google had, it worked because people generally agreed with each other. But, as the [organization] got bigger, different ideas were inserted.

Employee activists told me that political polarization and their company’s pursuit of growth often fueled social, political, and moral concerns and created tensions around how these concerns could be addressed inside activists’ organizations. Political polarization drew sharper contrasts between positions, prompting employee activists to insist that their organization respond to policy decisions and prompting them to consider their firms’ commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, pressure for companies to grow drove employee activists’ need to speak up about social, political, and moral issues in three ways. First, as organizational leaders pursued new lines of business, employee activists questioned the ethics of the products they were being asked to build and how customers would use them. Second, as their organizations became more influential, the social impact of their work weighed more heavily on them. Finally, as their organizations scaled, their workforces became more geographically and ideologically diverse, so the number of different viewpoints as well as the diversity of viewpoints within the organization expanded. Thus, societal factors created scenarios where the number of social, political, and moral concerns leaders may need to sacrifice near-term profits and navigate divergent employees’ opinions on the path forward.

Employee Activists Described the Political Concerns They Raised

As described above, the political climate often spurred employee concerns around selling products to government entities or prompted employees to press organizational leaders to take a stand on key policy decisions. These political concerns frequently overlapped with moral quandaries about how the products that employees built would be used or the compromises leaders required employees to make for political customers. They also overlapped with social concerns about the company’s impact on society. For example, a few Facebook activists told me they raised concerns about organizational leaders allowing politicians to violate the company’s user policies. One Facebook activist said,

We had this big conflict about the politician whitelist. We had all this code to fight misinformation, to make it show up to users as being misinformation… but, if a politician had made the post, we had extra code that would suppress all of that and would just show it as a normal post. We didn't like it, the engineers and the product side, nobody on the team liked that we had that politician whitelist.

Another Facebook activist explained that firm leaders preferred to remain politically neutral to protect firm profits, but employees often refused to accept it. He said,

If [leaders] had their way, they would be as politically removed as possible, just try to have their cake and eat it too… They’d donate to politicians of every stripe, regardless of their [personal] positions. The only time they change is when employees make it clear that they're unhappy… that can take a number of different shapes. It's not just we want you to profess support for this broader social movement. It can be we feel that
you're treating certain users [often politicians] differently. The policies you have are harmful in some way. It could be you're not doing enough to curb some kind of abuse. All of that ends up employee-driven.

Similarly, a Wayfair activist described how she and her colleagues were outraged to learn the company was selling beds to U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement that were being used in child detention centers, given the family separation policies and other mistreatments. She explained that leaders tried to justify the move as profitable. She said, [An executive] was like, “it's a business, you know?” They were saying, if [Wayfair] sells tables to the NRA, are they responsible for things that school shooters do? Which is an incredible false equivalency, this is when a lot of these articles were coming out about the sexual abuse of children at these detention centers, and it was right after some boy died alone in his cell of pneumonia and it was on CCTV footage…We were like, this is entirely different. These beds are directly causing harm. We linked it to these children are going through a traumatic event, and you are allowing this to happen… because as bad as the centers are, they have to follow certain guidelines and beds are one of them. If we don't supply the beds, they can't open.

Furthermore, a Google activist told me when she joined the organization, she was heartened by the company’s “don’t be evil motto,” a refrain several activists shared. However, she explained that as employees became aware of Google’s planned sales to government entities, software engineers worried about how the products they built would be used. She said, Google had the whole ‘don't be evil’ motto when I applied… there were more and more things that were coming out in the news, like Google's Maven project where they were working on AI [for defense]… And [Project] Dragonfly, which was Google's attempt to write a censored search engine for China… Google's work with ICE (U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (Customs and Border Patrol)… There's a common term “software engineer” that's used for people who do programming as a profession… Engineering, by my understanding, is a licensed profession with a code of ethics… there was a sense that if we want to call ourselves software engineers, we need to have our own moral standards to what we will and won't work on.

The employee activists I studied often raised concerns about their company’s decision to sell to certain government entities in light of recent policy decisions, took issue with firm leaders’ decisions to bend the rules around user policies for politicians, and called on their firms to respond to political developments (see Figure 2).

**Employee Activists Described the Moral Concerns They Raised**

Employee activists explained that beyond their political concerns, their companies’ tireless push for growth prompted broader moral objections around how the products they built would be used. Yet another Facebook activist described the tension between the “tech optimism”—the idea that the products employees built would make the world a better place—that surrounded technology companies when many employees joined and the reality that “growth at all costs” had spurred ongoing concerns for employees. He first said, When I joined Facebook in 2016 and while I was at Google [before that], there was this era of tech optimism, which was prevalent in Silicon Valley and in the world: tech was going to help solve a lot of the hard [global] problems… Google, for instance, had the motto ‘don't be evil’… I joined Facebook to continue that mission of finding ways to use tech to make the world a better place.

He went on to explain that he encountered an ongoing barrage of moral quandaries, including marketing the platform to children or crafting positive messaging to consumers after data sharing incidents, as the company emphasized “growth at all costs.” He said,

I joined [Facebook] as part of a new product team… our mission was to bring Facebook towards teenagers and college students who were using Facebook less… we tried a few initiatives, and there I started to see some of the inner workings of how Facebook operates and what causes Facebook to be successful, and a lot of it was based around a heavy, relentless focus on growth of the platform and growth of audiences at all costs… what started as an effort to focus on teens, evolved to focus on even younger audiences… if we bypass the teenage problem, we can introduce Facebook to [kids] between six and 13-years-old, that was eye-opening… during the same period, Facebook had the Cambridge Analytica [scandal]… and I was
working to do some crisis communication to present Facebook in a positive light. Those experiences combined were like clearly we're no longer in the realm of tech optimism and solving the world's problems. In fact, we're trying to solve Facebook's problems... And [other issues emerged] around Facebook’s role in Middle East conflicts and [global] elections... the controversies and moral quandaries did not stop...

He explained that weighing these non-stop moral quandaries was stressful and as he began to question his role at the company, he found peers who shared his concerns. He said, Being in that position is mentally and physically stressful because you feel a really heavy moral burden and weight on your shoulders every day. You're like, what are we doing? And, through that process, [you] find internal advocates who think similarly and can relate to, this is crazy, right?

Employee activists also worried about the moral implications of their company’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of a polarized political climate. Several activists described speaking out against racism, sexism, and harassment in their workplaces; for example, one Google activist told me after 2016, she saw “more white supremacist stuff” happening there. Other Google activists highlighted persistent racism in the firm; one said,

Google research is a very male dominated organization, especially at the upper levels. And it was definitely a very white organization… These [issues with racism] had been expressed in many different fora, including internal employee research or resource groups… there were a lot of the people expressing challenges [with racism] there. There are challenges for Black employees, all folks who are not white or Asian… there was a lot of anti-Blackness within the org, there still is.

Another Google activist explained that she and other minority women formed a group to demand change after observing that minority women often took on extra work but were not rewarded in the same ways as their white counterparts and discussing the phenomenon numerous times with Human Resources (as noted above). She told me, We were a part of a working group. It was a very secret working group, until it wasn't, and essentially what we were coming up with was our list of demands because we were being tapped to do diversity events. We were being asked to do all these other things, but never being promoted. We were never tapped to be promoted. We were never tapped for leadership… this was a very clear divide in our team that the Black and LatinX specialists are looking very different in performance, than other specialists. We noticed the trend and put together a list of demands. Then we put that in front of our leadership, and they lost their minds...

Along the same lines, an Activision Blizzard activist explained that when the company responded to a lawsuit that accused it of having a toxic culture that led to “constant harassment” for female employees, calling the suit “meritless” and “irresponsible” on the heels of the broader #MeToo movement, his colleagues mobilized to protest. He said, It was no secret at Blizzard that there were problematic people who were protected… I think it was sort of a well-known dirty secret of Blizzard that [leaders] would be willing to turn a blind eye to a lot of things until it became so egregious that they couldn't ignore it anymore…once the [sexual harassment] lawsuit hit the major news cycle [and leaders responded]… there were a lot of mobilization efforts happening...

Employee activists wrestled with ongoing moral quandaries as their companies grew.

First, they had to consider the ethics of growing in certain markets or “spinning” the negative externalities of their products. Activists felt particularly betrayed when facing these moral conundrums as they believed that these organizations had promised to have a positive impact on the world. Second, employee activists questioned their firms’ commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion amid political polarization and external movements (such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter) that emphasized the impact of discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Employee Activists Described the Social Concerns They Raised

Finally, employee activists raised concerns about their company’s impact on society. Activists reiterated that as their organizations grew, so did their ability to impact people’s
lives. For example, a Facebook activist explained that he believed speaking up about Facebook’s willingness to allow politicians to violate its terms, its influence on global politics, and its willingness to market its platform to children all had a significant impact on society. He told me,

I could potentially change the trajectory of how the company does business to create a better society... by knowing what's right and what's wrong and trying to take a stance for it. For me, it was coming from that same place as [protesting] the [President] Trump post. [So,] I made contact with journalists and spoke out publicly... and shared my experience and insider information about what I knew...

A Netflix activist told me that his colleagues protested the company’s decision to air a comedy special that included transphobic remarks because they believed the comments caused harm to the transgender community. He explained,

It was like... we told y'all this is unacceptable, that this is actual violence, that the things he's saying is causing actual harm and that he [comedian] is violent towards trans people... the content was so appalling... pardon my French, but who the f*** thought this was a good idea? Why did we put this on the service? Why wasn't anybody consulted about how to make it better?... That led to the employee walkout...

Similarly, an employee activist at McKinsey told me that he and his peers grew frustrated at McKinsey’s attempts to “greenwash” their business by highlighting select sustainability efforts while enabling companies that accounted for significant global emissions. He said,

The sustainability work that McKinsey does is used to greenwash the work with clients that damages the climate in orders of magnitude greater [than sustainability work offsets]... McKinsey is responsible for enabling more than half of global emissions and it is lying to its employees, its clients, everyone. The math is quite simple... we have 10-12 years to change this transition time [of emissions]... McKinsey is a neural network of capitalism that is trading tools, best practices, and approaches and cross-pollinating this across companies and industries...[and] I believe that if the largest consulting firm was willing to take a hit on the P&L (profit and loss statement) to dramatically reduce emissions, maybe we’d see a shift. [So], if [participated in collective action and sent a company-wide note] because I hoped to bend the trajectory in a better direction for our existence...

One Amazon activist told me that he believed Amazon leaders and employees had an obligation to consider their long-term impact “on the planet” in the same way they considered the company’s long-term financial health. He explained

We have this leadership principle [at Amazon] about trying to balance concern for the long-term with having bias for action... by we, I mean Bezos [former CEO], he wrote a lot about how we think about the long-term, and that's a special part about the way that Amazon does business, and it's paid off. Amazon was, strongly misunderstood for long periods of time and then, grew like gangbusters, and eventually took over the world. So, [I thought] maybe we should continue to do that without also destroying the world. Maybe we should take an even longer-term view and think about our longevity as a company being coupled with the longevity of the planet.

Employee activists told me that as their organizations grew, activists became increasingly aware of and felt compelled to speak about their company’s impact on society. Activists raised concerns about how their firms contributed to climate change, impacted global elections, or how products harmed marginalized or disadvantaged groups, such as children. As activists spoke about raising social, political, and moral concerns, they often discussed connecting with peers along the way or “taking their concerns public,” as they struggled to gain traction inside their organizations, as discussed in more detail below.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS TURNED TO COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PUBLIC PROTESTS TO EXPRESS THEIR DISSENT

As is previewed above in several quotes, employee activists grew frustrated while trying to raise social, political, and moral concerns via internal voice processes, and instead pivoted
towards voicing their concerns collectively and publicly. These activists often pointed to the company’s values as a reason they felt entitled to speak out. For instance, an Amazon activist told me that the firm encouraged employees to speak up and enact change, but there was no clear way to do so about social, political, or moral issues, prompting them to engage in public, collective action. He said,

The changes I can make internally are for my team or department, my business product, my area of technical focus… If I tried to do this [advocate for change around the company’s climate impact] internally, I could spend all of my effort to create change, but the return is going to be minimal, if anything… or I can increase my chance of success by working with other people and doing it publicly… this [climate policy] is outside scope and so, it has to be collective and public.

The same activist explained that Amazon leaders had laid the groundwork for employee activism by selecting outspoken, driven employees, encouraging these employees to constantly create change inside the company, and then limiting the effectiveness of internal voice processes to work product or process issues. He told me,

Amazon wants people who are willing to make an impact, to drive change… when you put a bunch of people like that together who also believe in science, this [climate change activism] is bound to happen.
And, people at Amazon are vocal about LGBT rights, Black Lives Matter, about remote work… [they are] vocal, passionate people who are willing to take action. It is because of Amazon’s strategy and what they are looking for in employees… it has unintended consequences for leaders...

Similarly, a Google activist told me that when employees raised concerns about leaders’ decision to pay an executive charged with sexual misconduct a $90 million severance agreement, it did not seem sufficient to speak up about these issues internally. She said,

The [sexual harassment] walkout was unique because it was [us] protesting the way the company [already] mishandled a complaint. And, because of that, there was less trust that the company would be able to handle this complaint about the complaints.

She noted that this principle extended beyond sexual harassment and included worries about how the technology that Google created would be used. Her previous failed attempts to raise these concerns internally (as noted above) prompted her to participate in collective action. She explained,

[It’s confusing because] there is a message at Google that you are invested in the company as a whole and you have a right to talk about things that you aren’t working on directly… I think people took that very seriously, if there is a project across the company that I don’t want my name attached to, I’m going to say something…so, I participated in the [sexual harassment] walkout. Then, I signed the Maven petition [opposing the sale of technology to the US Department of Defense]. And, I signed the Dragonfly petition [opposing the work to establish a censored search engine in China].

Yet another Amazon activist reiterated the idea that leaders often ignored social, political, or moral concerns when employees raised them internally. She told me, at first, she pushed back against raising concerns about the company’s climate impact publicly but ultimately, grew frustrated as leaders ignored internal calls for change. She said,

At first, I was the person in every [activist] meeting that would be like why are we doing this? Can't we do it from within the company rather than trying to force them [leaders] from the outside, and putting them on the defensive?… I was like, I got them to fund this [other] thing that I was working on, so I feel like we can get them to do this, too. It's a no brainer, of course, they [Amazon leaders] would want to care about the environment… think about the PR… But I was really wrong… Amazon Employees for Climate Justice [tried to raise these ideas internally], we did. We got shut out… I was surprised that Amazon [leaders] were not getting it… Now, I'm realizing that that's actually a pretty common thing for these types of issues [to be ignored]… So, that's where we were like, okay, we're going to do the shareholders’ resolution to start.

A Facebook activist explained that leaders ignored his attempts to raise the perils of marketing the platform to younger audiences. He explained that as he attempted to raise these issues internally, he “bonded” with employees who shared his concerns, so when the warnings were ignored, they began discussing how they could make their views public. He said,
When I was working on the Messenger Kids thing, I was like I have young kids and I wouldn't want them exposed to this... when I was on the Instagram side, [there were] controversial things around social media addiction, particularly for teens... mental health impacts... I went into this role of I'm going to inform others about the real research that's out there and the risks. I participated with internal groups surfaced research... and through that experience, I bonded with others who shared that same experience of having concerns ignored so, [some of us] decided to talk to journalists [at the point where] it was feeling like this is just wrong. I wasn't the only one [thinking] this is ridiculous. [We kept waiting for] common sense to kick in.

An Apple activist emphasized how hard she tried to raise her concerns about sexism internally before she eventually posted on Twitter and spoke to mainstream media about her experience. She told me,

There were five levels where I tried to escalate it internally before, speaking out externally. I talked to my direct manager, my skip level manager, HR, then I talked to the director of my organization. And then finally, as a last ditch, I tried to get the DEI team involved, and none of those things helped... My brain was wracking itself, trying to figure out how to [get leaders to care]... part of my impulse to talk about it [publicly] was I need people to know this happens, I need to protect other women in my network, or I need other women that it could happen to, to know that I'm the kind of person they can talk to, if it happens.

A Google activist who now trains other activists shared a PowerPoint presentation with me. After several slides that covered building employee networks, identifying decision makers in the organization, and using company values to enact effective persuasion tactics, Slide 39 of the presentation read “if all else fails… break glass.” The slide suggested activists create “employee petitions with succinct and clear asks” garnering at least “5% support” as that equals “a credible threat.” It also suggests “media engagement/ public pressure may be situationally powerful.” Finally, the slide suggests employee activists may “strike or quit,” noting on a separate slide that the “cost of replacing engineers is high.”

Even as employee activists trained other activists, they emphasized trying to raise concerns via internal voice processes before engaging in collective action and public protests, although, they readily acknowledged that would likely be the necessary step as they began to internalize the unspoken rules about the types of issues leaders would engage when they were raised internally. Still, employee activists took care to explain their pivots to collective action and public protest as a result of their failure to get traction inside of their organizations and emphasized that their organizations encouraged them to speak up in the first place.

DISCUSSION

Extant research suggests that organizational leaders can encourage employees to speak up inside their firms by signaling that their input is welcome and will be effective, and by creating formal and informal mechanisms for employees to raise ideas and concerns (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Burris, 2012; Kochan, et al., 2019). However, I find that encouraging employees to speak up inside of an organization may signal to employee activists that leaders will welcome dissent around a myriad of issues that they are not prepared to address, positioning them to face collective and/or public backlash from their employees. In particular, I show that as organizational leaders attempt to foster open, psychologically safe cultures, they may create internal voice processes that employee activists perceive work well for work-process and work-process related concerns but not for their social, political, and moral concerns. This disconnect in employee activists’ expectations—that they are welcome to, and even, expected to disagree—and their experience trying to raise social, political, and moral concerns may prompt them to instead engage in collective action or individual public protests to express their discontent. Here I expand on my discussion of how employee activists view internal
voice processes, the types of social, political, and moral concerns they are raising, the societal factors fueling this phenomenon, and the practical implications for organizational leaders.

**Contributions to the Literature on Employee Voice and Psychological Safety**

Scholars have shown that many organizational leaders are attempting to foster open, psychologically safe cultures to encourage employees to raise ideas and concerns freely inside their firms (e.g., Edmondson, 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Turco, 2016; Edmondson, 2018; Coutifaris & Grant, 2021). Indeed, researchers have also shown there are numerous benefits to the firm, its customers, and employees when leaders foster employee voice, including increased innovation and learning, error prevention and correction, improved work processes, and less illegal and immoral behavior (Morrison & Milliken 2000; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Detert & Trevino, 2010; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008, 2012; Liang et al., 2012; Grant, 2013). Furthermore, current research has explored how leaders can encourage employees to raise ideas and concerns internally by creating transparent, flat organizational cultures (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ross, 2004; Turco, 2016), by adding voice to firm values (Ross, 2004; Turco, 2016; Leigh & Melwani, 2019), by creating formal grievance procedures (Saunders, et al., 1992; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken, et al., 2003; Vallas, 2006; Albiston, et al., 2016; Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Kochan, et al., 2019), by offering private meeting spaces for employees and their supervisors (e.g., Saunders, et al., 1992; Kellogg, 2009; Burris, 2012; Turco, 2016) and by granting employees audiences with upper management (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Ross, 2004; Detert & Trevino, 2008; Turco, 2016).

Yet, there is a tension between these findings and the phenomenon we are observing whereby employees of some of the companies that are best known for encouraging employees to speak up internally are increasingly engaging in collective action and public demonstrations to express concerns about their organization’s practices and policies. While scholars have long acknowledged that individual, internal voice processes may fall short as employees raise concerns in organizations (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Ashford et al., 1998; Scully & Segal, 2002), and that when they do individual employees may report corporate wrongdoing to authorities (e.g., Near & Miceli, 1985; 2002; 2016) or rely on small coalitions of like-minded peers to lobby organizational leaders for change (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Satterstrom, et al., 2020), current research has not, to my knowledge, explored why employee activists may turn to contentious activism from inside an organization where leaders claim they support employee dissent and have internal processes to solicit it. I show that employee activists may try to raise their social, political, or moral concerns inside these firms, and as they do, they may struggle to format these concerns in voice processes that are designed for profit-centric ideas, they may believe that leaders dismiss these issues, and they may find that Human Resources is ill-equipped to address them. Despite believing that internal voice processes generally work well for work process or work product related concerns, employee activists may believe that internal voice processes breakdown when it comes to social, political, and moral issues, and thus, they may opt to engage in collective action or individual public protests to express their dissent.

Additionally, I find that some activists described new forms of retaliation for raising social, moral, or political concerns internally. Whereas scholars have shown that employees who attempt to engage in moral debates at work may face discrimination in hiring and promotions, be excluded from networks, labeled a troublemaker, or even terminated (Taylor
& Raeburn, 1995; Rheinhardt, Poskanzer, & Briscoe, 2023), I show that Human Resources professionals may respond to employee activists by recommending mental health leave or providing learning and development tools to “improve their communication with managers,” suggesting to employee activists that when they share such a concern, “they are the problem.” Furthermore, I also describe the types of social, political, and moral concerns that employee activists felt compelled to raise at work and explained how political polarization and pressure for companies to grow have fueled this phenomenon. Thus, answering calls for more research that explores “ethical voice” and “how macrolevel contextual factors affect voice” (Chen & Trevino, 2022; Morrison, 2023).

**Implications for Practice**

This research has important implications for leaders who seek to foster employee voice, even as political polarization persists and they face continued pressure to growing company revenues. In understanding the types of social, political, and moral issues that employee activists are raising and how they experience internal voice processes, organizational leaders may be able to take preemptive steps to lessen some potential controversy at their firms.

Some organizational leaders, such as those at Coinbase and Basecamp, have implemented “no politics at work rules” in an attempt to preempt employee activism. In both cases, leaders offered severance packages to employees who did not want to abide by the new standards and both organizations experienced significant turnover. Basecamp lost nearly a third of its workforce after the rule was implemented, leading the CEO to publicly apologize, saying “it blew things up internally in ways we never anticipated” and that he “completely owns the consequences” (Fried, 2021; Hatmaker, 2021). Coinbase lost five percent of its workforce after implementing its no politics at work rule (Roberts, 2020). While “no politics at work” rules may be tempting as organizational leaders seek to calm tensions among employees amid rising polarization, in addition to creating costs in employee turnover, these rules may also risk employees not raising important business concerns surrounding politics, such as flagging potential regulatory issues or alienating key customer bases.

Additionally, many leaders have adapted their organizational cultures, in response to activism. For example, one employee activist I interviewed told me that Facebook dropped “to be open” from its core values. A Netflix activist explained that the company added language to its culture document to hedge its language around farming for dissent, the document now tells employees that they may need to work on content that they oppose, and if they cannot, Netflix might not be the right place for them. As organizational leaders seek to avoid the disruption that employee activism may cause, they face a challenge: if they revert open cultures and discourage voice in their organizations, they may miss out on the benefits of employee voice as well.

Instead, leaders might consider consulting activists to develop specific voice mechanisms for moral complaints. A couple of the employee activists I interviewed from Facebook mentioned an internal whistleblowing channel as a way to raise moral concerns there, but noted that most of the time, they were never informed as to how the complaint was addressed or resolved, leading them to feel as though they were “screaming into the void.” Some activists suggested that knowing how leaders address these concerns systematically may have resolved some of their consternation; they understood that leaders faced legal limitations on what they could share surrounding certain complaints—such as sexual harassment accusations—but more transparency around the investigation process and consequences
would have provided some semblance of resolution. For example, activists at Google who protested the company’s handling of sexual harassment complaints demanded increased transparency around the number and types of reports filed by employees every year, as a way to hold leaders accountable for resolving these claims and improving the overall climate of sexism, harassment, and discrimination (Stapleton, et al., 2018). Gaining activists’ input while designing these channels may not only help organizational leaders create more effective internal voice processes for moral concerns, but it may also improve activists’ sense of procedural justice (Greenberg, 1987) even when leaders are not able to provide full transparency on a specific complaint.

Next, organizational leaders might also consider proactively creating internal guidelines for making decisions about prospective customers to preempt some political concerns. Some employee activists told me that their organizations adopted task forces to create ethical criteria on which to evaluate prospective customers, in response to political concerns, such as those raised at Wayfair about selling to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement or those raised at Google about selling to Artificial Intelligence technology U.S. Department of Defense. Creating these groups may help to avoid large-scale controversies around sales, particularly if leaders solicit employee input into the criteria initially and then distribute the parameters widely.

Additionally, organizational leaders might consider adding performance metrics around social impact to internal reports or emphasizing the importance of qualitative measures of social impact. Several employee activists told me that growth metrics trumped concerns around unintended consequences of a product or societal harm. For example, activists at Facebook explained that privacy concerns or policy concerns about the social network’s impact on elections were secondary to growth and user metrics, particularly as they were often qualitative and hindered the company’s ability to “ship new products” and “move fast.” Finding a way to measure social impact or reiterating its importance on internal reports, may create more productive internal avenues for activists to raise their concerns and alleviate a potential false dichotomy from other employees who rely on organizational leaders to signal what they care about through performance metrics.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This paper has several limitations and areas for future research. First, I rely on interviews with employee activists. I did not speak with employees who chose not to participate in activism or the organizational leaders responsible for responding to employee activism. Thus, this paper presents the views of the employees who were ultimately willing to target their firm with contentious activism. It is possible that other employees have found more success raising social, political, and moral work-related concerns via internal channels. Future research could explore how employees who do not choose to raise social, political, and moral concerns publicly view internal voice processes with regard to these topics. For instance, do these employees also view internal voice processes as insufficient to address these concerns, but simply choose to remain silent or do they believe these concerns are adequately addressed internally? Additionally, I present leadership and Human Resources professionals’ responses to social, political, and moral concerns based on interviews with employee activists and my archival database, which relies on press reporting of these actions; however, organizational leaders’ and HR professionals’ intentions and perceptions might be different than the views of activists presented here. Future research could explore how firm leaders and HR professionals
approach responding to employee activism and how non-activists perceive their activist colleagues.

Second, I interviewed left-leaning, progressive activists. While I did reach out to a small number of conservative activists that I was able to identify in press and corresponded with a couple via email, I was not able to capture the perspective of employees who may have felt strongly in the opposite direction of the activists I interviewed. Future research could consider how leaders navigate workplaces with a mix of conservative and liberal employees who hold opposing viewpoints on social, political, and moral work-related issues.

Third, I examined employee activism across organizational perspectives. In particular, I interviewed 52 insider activists in 14 organizations. While this perspective allows me to compare and contrast the conditions that enable different types of employee activism, there may be differences between these firms that are not fully explored. For example, while the firms I present in this paper promote some degree of internal employee voice, there may be meaningful differences in how they enact it. Future research quantitative research could explore how certain approaches to promoting employee voice impact employee activists’ ability to organize inside their firms. Additionally, former employees of Google, Facebook, and Amazon comprise a significant portion of my sample, thus, future research might seek to gather additional perspectives from less represented technology and consumer goods organizations to understand additional nuances around how voice and activism is enacted in these firms.

Fourth, I interviewed employee activists who engaged in activism between 2018 and 2022, which was a relatively strong labor market, particularly for technology sector employees. While some activists discussed real financial constraints or visa concerns which influenced their perceptions of risk, most activists expressed confidence that they could find alternate employment if they were fired as a result of their activism. Thus, many activists today may alter their perception of the risks of participating in contentious activism, given the significant layoffs in the tech sector since early 2023 (Hirschman, 1970). Future research could consider how the labor market impacts the willingness of activists to engage in disruptive tactics.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explore how employee activists experience internal voice processes as they attempt to raise social, political, and moral concerns inside their organizations. I show how, despite viewing these processes as generally sufficient for raising work-product and work-process related concerns, they believed that when they raised social, political, or moral concerns, leaders ignored their dissent and Human Resources professionals were ill-equipped to address it. I also examine the types of social, political, and moral concerns employee activists felt compelled to raise and I show how political polarization and pressure for companies to grow fueled this phenomenon. I contribute to the employee voice literature by showing how different types of voice may fare in internal voice processes, even in organizations that encourage employees to speak freely. I also explore the practical implications of this phenomenon for organizational leaders.
References Chapter 1—Speaking Up and Speaking Out: How Employee Activists Raise Social, Political, and Moral Concerns at Work


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Figure 1: How Employees Raise Social, Political, and Moral Concerns at Work

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<td>• Find Formal Channels Ill-Equipped to Address Concerns; Report HR Blames Activists for Problem</td>
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<td><strong>Employee Activists</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Escalate Concern, Engaging in Collective Action and/or Individual Public Protest</td>
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</table>

*Slight shading represents what employee voice scholars would predict.

Figure 2: Employee Activists’ Social, Political, and Moral Concerns

- **Social Concerns**
  - Activists worried about their firms’ impact on society
  - Examples: Facebook activists opposed marketing to children; Amazon activists protested the company’s impact on climate change

- **Political Concerns**
  - Activists pressured firms to avoid partnerships with government entities, or asked firms to respond to political developments
  - Examples: Wayfair activists opposed selling beds to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Google activists opposed selling AI technology to U.S. Department of Defense

- **Moral Concerns**
  - Activists lamented ongoing moral quandaries
  - Examples: Google activists opposed creation of a censored search engine in China; Facebook activists worried about the firm’s ability to influence global elections
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Organization(s)</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Activism Event(s)</th>
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CHAPTER 2 — MAKING MOVEMENTS AND ENGAGING IN NOISY EXITS: HOW EMPLOYEES REPURPOSE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS FOR ACTIVISM

Abstract: In this paper, I describe how employee activists used internal communications tools to mobilize large-scale collective action against their own organization quickly, often shortening the time organizational leaders had to respond to their movements. I also examine how employee activists used internal communications tools and external social media to amplify their noisy exit messages, creating artifacts of dissent within their organizations, attracting mainstream media attention, and at times, laying the groundwork for future activist movements. Finally, I consider how organizational leaders responded to employee activists’ use of internal communication tools by placing new restrictions on these platforms and how activists adapted to these constraints.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, employee activists have raised concerns about their organizations’ practices and policies through large-scale, contentious collective action as well as individual resignation statements in press and on social media platforms. For example, in 2019, hundreds of Wayfair employees signed a petition and protested when they learned their firm sold beds to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that were used in child detention centers (Kelly & Ruckstuhl, 2019). In 2018, an estimated 20,000 Google employees walked out and published demands, calling on leaders to change how the organization addresses sexual harassment after leaders paid an executive charged with sexual misconduct $90 million in severance (Wakabayashi, et al., 2018). In 2019, thousands of Amazon workers demanded the organization reduce its carbon footprint by filing a shareholders’ resolution, crafting a petition, and protesting (Martineau, 2019). Moreover, dozens of employees at Google, Facebook, Apple, and other organizations have garnered mainstream media attention after posting resignation statements on their social media platforms that include concerns about their companies’ user policies, handling of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, or decisions to sell to certain customers (Timberg & Dwoskin, 2020; O’Sullivan, 2020; Metz, 2021; Schiffer, 2021; Grant, 2022). A 2023 Gallup survey found 18 percent of employees are “loud quitting,” actively attempting to disrupt their organization to express dissent.

Such widespread contentious activism is at odds with the vast majority of research on insider activists—employees who seek to change their organization’s practices and policies— which suggests that employees are reticent to adopt contentious tactics when engaging in activism (e.g., Meyerson & Scully; 1995; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Scully & Segal, 2002; Creed, et al., 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011; Soule, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeCelles, et al., 2020). Indeed, scholars have shown that while external activists often engage in more disruptive forms of activism, such as boycotts, strikes, and open petitions (e.g., King & Soule, 2007; King, 2008; McDonnell & King, 2013), employees tend to “operate on a fault line,” seeking to adhere to their firm’s social norms while attempting to enact change (Meyerson, 2001). Researchers have demonstrated that insider activists often temper their goals (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Creed, et al., 2002; Davis & White, 2015; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeCelles, et al., 2020) and mobilize small coalitions to avoid sparking backlash from their managers and peers (Scully & Segal, 2002; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Very few
studies, to my knowledge, have explored when and how employee activists might engage in more contentious tactics; a rare exception is Morgan (2006), which explains how Black employees at Polaroid in the 1970s organized a movement to oppose the company’s role in South African apartheid. In this example, employee activists—supported by students and outsiders—engaged in protests and called for boycotts. Still, in his study, employee activist organizers relied on in-person mobilization techniques, such as posting fliers to rally their coworkers.

Indeed, social movements and organizations scholars have shown that when employee activists seek to enact change from inside their firms through collective action, they use their insider status to raise awareness of an issue, identify potential allies, and disseminate plans (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Creed, et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Heucher, et al., 2024). Researchers have shown that employee activists often use their knowledge of firm values and goals to frame their claims as they raise awareness of an issue, usually among their immediate teams or personal network (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Dutton, et al., 2001; Creed, et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2009; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016). Second, employee activists tend use their knowledge of organizational culture to assess the viability of their change initiative and use internal social structures to identify potential allies. Employee activists often study their organizational context, consider their relationships with leaders, and contemplate the timing of their proposals (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Creed, et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Briscoe, et al., 2014); they may also rely on identity-based employee networks—such as employee resource groups—to spin off smaller groups of reformers (Meyerson, 2001; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004). Finally, employee activists may use their access to organizational routines and platforms to create “free spaces” to exchange information with allies and plan their change efforts (Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011).

Recent research suggests that “virtual opportunities” may help employee activists mobilize peers (Raeburn, 2004). Raeburn (2004) explains that the LGBT employee activists she studied in the 1990s used corporate newsletters and external message boards to mobilize peers inside their organizations and to connect with like-minded individuals in other companies. Since her study, new communication technologies have spread rapidly, and employees have access to a greater number of tools both inside their firms as well as outside their organizations to enable mobilization of their peers. Social movement scholars have called for more research exploring how employee activists are leveraging new communication tools to publicly protest their organizations (e.g., Soule, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Davis & Kim, 2021; Heucher, et al., 2024).

In this paper, I answer these calls and explain how employee activists leveraged internal communication tools to quickly mobilize large coalitions for contentious, collective action or to amplify their noisy exits. I detail how organizations’ internal communication tools—designed to encourage employees to speak up inside the firm, rather than externally—may create opportunity structures for activism as employee activists use them to widely air their grievances, assess the levels of internal support for their cause, and disseminate calls to action. In doing so, I show how employee activists are lowering barriers to using contentious tactics to protest their organizations and shortening the time leaders have to respond. I also show how employee activists use internal communications tools to engage in noisy exits, creating artifacts of dissent and potentially laying the groundwork for future discontent.
Employee Activists Tend to Rely on Small Coalitions and Temper Their Goals

Scholars have called employees that seek to change their organizations’ processes or practices “issue sellers” (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; Alt & Craig, 2016), “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), “social intrapreneurs” (Davis & White, 2015), “insider social change agents” (Heucher, et al., 2024), and “activists” (DeJordy, et al., 2020; Briscoe & Gupta, 2021). Most scholars who study social movements or issue-selling in organizations view employees as carefully attempting to adhere to cultural norms while they advocate for change (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011; Davis & White, 2015; DeJordy, et al., 2020; Wang, et al., 2021). For example, Meyerson (2001) said the employee activists she studied “operated on a fault line” as they wanted to succeed inside their organization while attempting to change key practices to reflect their personal values. Briscoe and Gupta (2016) called employees “quintessential insiders,” explaining that their employment relationship makes them “difficult to recruit into activism and steers them towards “more persuasive tactics when they do engage.” Furthermore, DeCelles, Sonenshein, and King (2020) explain that emotions like anger, which fuel mobilization in external social movements, do not have the same effect on institutional insiders because even as employees experience anger, they also fear repercussions of engaging in activism, often prompting them to withdrawal instead.

Indeed, scholars have shown that employees have typically been reticent to use large-scale organizing and disruptive tactics to target their own firms and, instead, they tend to mobilize smaller coalitions and persuade leaders by “tempering” their goals (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Creed, et al., 2002; Davis & White, 2015; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). For example, Dutton and colleagues (2001) show how issue-selling employees often framed their proposals as “incremental” and emphasized the importance of “patience” when trying to enact change. Scully and Segal (2002) as well as Soderstrom and Weber (2020) used the term “micro-mobilization” (McAdam, 1988) to describe the employee activists they studied. Scully and Segal (2002) explained that “the smaller scope of action” best described the challenges their activists posed to management as well as “the changes they hoped to affect.” They explained that employee activists reframed their goals to appear less threatening and avoided “large-scale actions for fear of being censured or expelled.” Even so the small groups of women, minority, and LGBT employee activists acknowledged that managers could perceive any gathering as a risk of employees “rising up, rebelling, and causing trouble,” noting that even their peers leered and joked about how they were “plotting an overthrow.” Research shows that even when employee activists moderate their approach, they face career setbacks (Soule, 2012); for example, Taylor and Raeburn (1995) show that as gay, lesbian, and bisexual academics participated in activism, they experienced more biases in hiring, tenure, and promotion, exclusion from networks, devaluation of their work, harassment, and broader discrimination than their non-activist gay, lesbian, and bisexual counterparts.

There are very few studies, to my knowledge, that have shown employee activists engaging in contentious tactics to enact change inside their firms. For example, Morgan (2006) and Soule (2009) describe Black employee activists at Polaroid who organized protests to oppose the company’s decision to sell products to the South African government in the 1970s, thus enabling apartheid. Morgan (2006) explains that Ken Williams, Caroline Hunter, and a peer posted fliers throughout the company to raise awareness of their concerns, and
later, organized a rally for a few hundred employees and called for a boycott of Polaroid products. The day after the rally, Ken Williams engaged in a “noisy exit” (Withey & Cooper, 1989), resigning from the firm while publicly voicing his dissent. The company, in response to such activism issued a memorandum to all employees warning that anyone involved in calls to boycott or protests would be “subject to severe disciplinary action, including discharge;” Caroline Hunter was ultimately fired for her involvement in the movement (Morgan, 2006).

**Despite the Risks, Employee Activists Have Some Advantages**

Despite the barriers to engaging in activism that employees face, researchers have shown that employees have insider knowledge of organizational values and goals, prevailing culture, social structures, and routines that may help them to mobilize supporters (Dutton, et al., 2001; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011; Soule, 2012; Briscoe et. al., 2015; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Wang and colleagues (2021) show that labeling initiatives based on collective identities and tapping into organizational pride may help mobilize supporters. Briscoe and Gupta (2021) suggest that employee activists’ knowledge of their firm enables them to analyze the conditions, frame the issue, repurpose processes and spaces, and leverage networks to persuade leaders.

First, employee activists may use their knowledge of firm values and goals to frame their claims as they raise awareness about key issues. Current literature shows that employee activists often use “the business case” and internal culture documents to justify their change initiatives (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Dutton, et al., 2001; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016). For example, Creed and colleagues (2002) show how employee activists (on issues of civil rights and nondiscrimination) “understood the landscape” in their organizations and used multiple frames to create common identities and meanings as they raised concerns. Dutton and co-authors (2001) show how hospital employees tied the outcomes of their proposed changes to organizational values and goals, such as patient care and profitability. Creed and colleagues (2002) demonstrate that LGBT employee activists advocated that equality was “good for business” and other LGBT employee activists framed their efforts as part of the ethics clause of the company’s handbook (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Raeburn (2004) shows that employee activists used benchmarking data from peer organizations to justify why leaders in their firms should adopt similar policies.

Second, employee activists may use their knowledge of organizational culture to assess the viability of their change initiative and they may use their access to social structures to identify potential allies. Researchers have demonstrated that employee activists often study the organizational context, consider their relationships with leaders, and contemplate the timing of their proposals (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Creed, et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Briscoe, et al., 2014). For instance, Dutton and her co-authors (2002) explain that employees engaged in “contextual sensemaking” before launching gender equity initiatives; they describe how the female reformers they studied often occupied “lower power positions and… [bore] risks when speaking up about… value-laden issues” so, these women considered the receptivity of leaders and their peers before they raised these concerns. Briscoe and colleagues (2014) show how employee activists used their knowledge of the CEO’s personal values and influence to determine the viability of their movements. Scully and Segal (2002) and Raeburn (2004) show how employee activists used larger identity-based employee networks, such as employee resource groups, to spin off smaller groups of reformers.
Third, employee activists may use their knowledge of organizational routines and access to internal platforms to disseminate calls to action. Scholars have shown employee activists may use company platforms and routines to create “free spaces” to plan their change efforts (Scully & Segal, 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). For instance, Kellogg (2011) demonstrates how surgical residents who advocated reforms used lunch gatherings and afternoon handoff meetings to consider how to enlist senior support, lobby their peers, and enact new practices. Soderstrom and Weber (2020) describe how employee activists used “situational interactions” inside their firm to raise peers’ knowledge of new initiatives and foster excitement about their proposals. The authors explain that these “episodic” situational interactions between colleagues were necessary to mobilize peer support and momentum, as “initial episodic interactions turned into embedded relationships” and built coalitions.

The vast majority of studies show how employee activists engage in smaller-scale mobilization practices and use their insider knowledge to use persuasive approaches to convince their leaders to change organizational practices and policies. Recently, however, scholars have pointed to a rise in employees’ use of such disruptive tactics and large coalitions to target their own firms (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021; Davis & Kim, 2021), and called for more research examining how employee activists mobilize for contentious activism as well as the opportunity structures for insider activism (e.g., Soule, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Davis & Kim, 2021). Below, I elaborate on Raeburn’s (2004) analysis of “virtual opportunities” in the 1990s to describe how employee activists repurposed new internal communications tools to challenge their firms by mobilizing large coalitions for contentious collective action or by engaging in noisy exits.

NEW COMMUNICATION TOOLS INSIDE ORGANIZATIONS

As noted above, a few social movements and organizations scholars have signaled the importance of new communication tools, explaining that activists inside and outside of organizations may use them to create “free spaces” to organize (Raeburn, 2004; Davis & Kim, 2021). For example, Raeburn (2004) shows how employee activists used “virtual opportunities” in their organizations in the 1990s to disseminate information, such as posting information about meetings on electronic bulletin boards and asking the editors of the company’s electronic newsletters to include announcements about their initiatives. She also demonstrates how employee activists found external internet communities where they could share best practices and commiserate with other LGBT activists. Davis and Kim (2021) theorize that internal communication channels such as Slack and external social media networks like Facebook may “create low cost and pervasive ways” for employee activists to communicate. While these scholars acknowledge new communication tools may be an important opportunity structure for employee activists, they do not explain how mobilization on these tools unfolds inside of organizations in detail, nor do they describe how organizational leaders respond to the use of corporate spaces for this activity, prompting insider activists to adapt.

In recent years, organizational ethnographers have shown that firms have adopted a myriad of new communication tools, which have promoted openness and bidirectional information sharing, including townhall meetings, internal online forums, internal social media, email listservs, digital chat platforms, collaborative working documents, survey software, and project management systems (e.g., Ross, 2004; Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008;
Researchers have demonstrated that organizations often embrace these tools as they can promote cross-department collaboration and problem solving outside an employee’s formal scope of responsibility and enable organizational change (Ross, 2004; Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Turco, 2016). For example, Turco (2016) explains that employees in the company she studied used the internal Wikipedia platform to “discuss strategic business issues of importance to the entire organization.” Turco further notes that employees in her setting often posted new ideas to the platform, shared results of analysis they conducted, and raised questions about new policies, offering executives an opportunity to weigh in on their work or allay their concerns. Similarly, in their study of employees’ use of an internal online forum in a large company, Cunha and Orlikowski (2008) found that employees used internal online forums to challenge organizational change initiatives, yet, rather than enabling more contentious collective action to protest leaders’ decisions, the scholars found that employees’ use of internal forums provided a space for catharsis, defusing mounting frustration and instead enabling organizational leaders to enact the change. In contrast, I show how employee activists may repurpose internal communications tools that were designed to empower them to speak up inside the organization to instead mobilize large coalitions for contentious collective action or to amplify their noisy exits.

DATA AND METHODS

I rely on interviews with 52 employee activists, an archival database of white-collar employee activism events between 2018 and 2022, participant observation in a three-day training session for employee activists, and employee activist documents to explain how employee activists repurposed internal communications tools to mobilize for collective action and engage in noisy exits (see Tables 2 and 3). I also use this data to explain how organizational leaders reacted to activists’ use of these internal communications tools.

Data Collection

Archival and Open-Source Data. To examine how professional employees are raising social, political, and moral issues about their organizations, I created a database of white-collar employee activism events, using news articles. I focused my data collection on press coverage of employee activism events, rather than the individuals who chose not to engage in activism. Similar to Scully and Segal’s (2002) rationale, I considered that current social movement literature offers a wide array of explanations as to why employees might not engage in activism (e.g., Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeCelles, et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars have found value in studying employee activists from the activist perspective to understand how they mobilize and organize their actions, sustain their movements, frame their demands, and attempt to mitigate the risks they face (e.g., Meyerson, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Truelove & Kellogg; 2016; DeJordy, et al., 2020). Relying on Zald & Berger’s (1978) definition of social movements in organizations as attempts to use “unconventional politics” to create change, I first sought to identify individuals or groups of professionals who were using unconventional approaches to raising ideas and concerns about their organizations.

I searched online databases, including Google News and Globalnewstream, for press coverage of such events between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2022, alongside several undergraduate research assistants; this yielded nearly 200 incidents across dozens of
organizations. We logged and coded approximately 1,000 corresponding press articles to identify the tactics employees used, leadership responses, the number of employees participating, and the topic prompting action. We also used the press articles in this database to begin identifying individual employee activists.

**Interviews.** I created a second database with thousands of employee activist names and searched for contact information to reach out to these individuals for interviews, again alongside several undergraduate research assistants. We found contact information for hundreds of activists involved in various events, and I conducted cold outreach. The number of leads for each activism event varied greatly as some activists worked to conceal their identities due to perceived risk or early leadership responses (e.g., firings), whereas other activists openly signed petitions and spoke to reporters, enabling me to gather more leads.

I collected data on employees using “unconventional” approaches to speaking up or speaking out regardless of whether they acted alone or assembled a coalition; I decided this was important as often an individual who acted alone sparked collective action, or individuals who engaged in collective action later acted alone. As I began reaching out to employee activists who engaged in collective action, I realized many of the activists in my initial database had led these activism events, likely a function of who chose to speak to press or who journalists quoted. While I was keen to explore the perspective of primary organizers, I also wanted to consider the perspective of individuals who joined these movements. Thus, to source these individuals, I searched for public petitions and used these lists of hundreds, sometimes even thousands of employees, to find contact information and request interviews. I reached out to individual activists via email, personal websites, or LinkedIn. I limited my cold outreach to former employees to reduce the potential risk of participating in my study.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 employee activists from 14 technology and consumer goods firms via Zoom (or on request, Google Meet). Many of my interviews came from former Google (23), Amazon (11), and Facebook (8) employees (see Table 4). Several interviewees spoke to more than one activism event (as they moved between companies or engaged in multiple issues within one company); these 52 interviews provided 88 separate insights on 29 activism events (see Table 5). The higher representation of Google, Amazon, and Facebook in my sample was likely a result of a combination of factors. First, there may have been more press attention to big name tech firms as regulatory issues emerged in popular press. Second, each of these companies had public petitions that I used to source activists; in particular, the Amazon climate change petition had 8,700 employee signatures and Google had several public petitions with hundreds of signatures each.

In these interviews, I asked about the individual’s background and goals, the highlights and frustrations of their job and their organizational membership, their attempts to raise ideas and concerns at work both individually and collectively, and how they considered the risks and benefits of speaking up or speaking out about work-related issues. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, except four who asked to not be recorded. During the interviews that I did not record, I took notes directly into my computer and immediately revisited the transcript to clarify any shorthand I used during the meeting. These interviews ranged from 30 minutes to just under three and a half hours; on average, they lasted about 72 minutes. Several individuals sent me documents during our interviews, such as training materials they used. At the end of these interviews, I asked participants for referrals.

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2 We cross checked our results with the crowdsourced database hosted on collectiveaction.tech to identify any incidents that fit our search criteria that we may have missed. Then, we searched for press on these events.
Approximately 73% of my interview sample came from cold outreach to contacts identified through press coverage. The other 27% came from snowball referrals. Men comprised approximately 60% of the sample, women comprised approximately 38% of the sample, of these individuals approximately 8% told me they were transgendered, and one interviewee identified as nonbinary.

**Participant Observation.** I also engaged in participant observation of a three-day training workshop for employee activists. Tech Workers’ Coalition hosted the event on Zoom and the organizers approved my participation. The training was conducted through webinar style lectures, interactive de-brief sessions, and a simulation; the event had more than 400 registered attendees (though attendance varied in individual sessions). The sessions were co-led by employee activists from previous decades and current tech activists. Trainers discussed how to raise awareness of issues, compared in-person and remote organizing, addressed concerns around managerial surveillance and retaliation, and hosted hands-on workshops to create zines, navigate ethical quandaries, and consider the future of organizing. Organizers used Google docs to compile community norms and collect key takeaways. After the training, I continued to receive newsletters from the organization every few weeks, spotlighting ongoing activism efforts.

**Data Analysis**

To begin, I coded my interview transcripts and field notes in several phases (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, I used open coding to explore the topics activists discussed in interviews. Some of my interview codes mirrored my archival database coding (discussed above). Other codes were unique to the interview data and observations, such as codes that addressed activists’ emotional states, their use of corporate communication technologies and more discrete non-corporate communication technologies, their approaches to building coalitions, disagreements over tactics, as well as their perceptions of company culture, their use of dark humor, and their perceptions of risk.

I later used an axial coding approach to consider the relationships between these topics. In this phase, the relationship between employee activists’ common practices for mobilizing (widely airing grievances, quickly assessing internal support and identifying potential allies, and disseminating calls to action) and their use of internal communication tools such as townhall meetings and digital platforms, including Slack, email listservs, and internal online forums (e.g., Workplace and Memegen), emerged. Using selective coding, I identified the importance of new communications tools for activists that mobilized for contentious collective actions as well as for activists who engaged in noisy exits.

Furthermore, I wrote short memos after the interviews about the interesting ideas, puzzling dynamics, and consistencies or variance with other activist accounts. I also wrote an overarching memo for every five to ten interviews that I conducted to consider how I should adjust my interview questions to gather information on emerging topics of interest. This prompted me to focus on the practices activists described as integral to mobilizing collective action or engaging in noisy exits. As I re-read my data as well as the social movements literature on employee activists, I identified how the affordances of new communication tools may have reduced some of the risks typically associated with engaging in contentious activism tactics and may have amplified employee activists’ noisy exits. Finally, I coded employee activists’ descriptions of how leaders responded to their activities.
Below I describe how employees used the internal communications tools to mobilize coalitions for contentious activism and to engage in noisy exists as well as how these tools may have enabled their activism efforts. I also explain how organizational leaders responded to employee activists’ co-optation of internal communications tools by restricting internal communication (see Tables 2 and 3).

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS REPURPOSE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO ORGANIZE COLLECTIVE ACTION

The employee activists I studied told me that communication tools inside their firms enabled them to mobilize large numbers of employees quickly (see Table 2), thus creating more disruptive forms of collective action than the smaller coalitions of employees typically observed in the social movements and organizations and issue-selling literatures (e.g., Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). First, as employee activists sought to raise awareness about particular social, political, or moral concerns, internal communication tools provided reach outside of their individual teams and personal networks to large swaths of the organization and enabled them to engage in conversations both synchronously and asynchronously. Next, as employee activists sought to determine how much peer support existed for their particular social, political, or moral concern, internal communications tools enabled them to quietly gauge the sentiment of their peers before engaging in riskier forms of activism and to connect with peers to lead activism efforts. Finally, as employee activists sought to disseminate calls to action, internal communications tools provided a venue to communicate with groups of likely supporters or to engage in mass advertisements of their plans.

One Google activist explained the importance of internal communications tools to me, as she shared the slides that she uses to train other employee activists. The slides instructed employee activists to “build employee networks” by “communicating outside your working group via mailing lists, social media, and in-person gatherings.” A few slides later, when addressing activist burnout, the slides advised that activists “invest in scalable solutions.” She explained,

To organize any employee movement… you need to have some kind of internal social network or other internal mechanism of communicating to employees outside of your working group [team]… It [is a lot harder] if it is a risk [that] you would be fired if you were caught talking to a co-worker in a different department, right?

Another Google activist explained that internal communications tools, such as email listservs and internal online forums, were crucial in enabling connections between disparate co-workers and providing “free spaces” for making activism plans. He said,

Google started out very lenient on employee discussion. You have regular [email] lists for things like politics… there's even a video games list. There's literally a listserv for pretty much any interest that you have, and then some [conversations about social, political, or moral concerns] would appear on the internal Google Plus [online forum]… so, the ability for employees to go to these lists or create [new] lists and just talk about these [issues] or plan events… by having that, there’s less restriction on [making plans], that is kind of what enables a lot of these kind of connections to be made. I think that, if it wasn't for that, you wouldn't have as much connection to other [employees]…

Raise Awareness of an Issue

In line with Cunha and Orlikowski’s (2008) findings, when employee activists raised social, moral, and political concerns inside their organizations, they often turned to internal
communications platforms to air their grievances. However, in contrast to Cunha and Orlikowski’s (2008) findings, rather than simply performing catharsis, employee activists told me that seeing peers post their frustrations, often encouraged them to organize a more formal response. Employee activists said that they used townhall meetings, digital chat platforms (e.g., Slack), email listservs, and internal online forums (e.g., Workplace) to share their social, political, or moral concerns. Using internal communication tools enabled them to connect with a large number of their peers very quickly and to see other co-workers’ concerns asynchronously, as opposed to engaging in one-on-one or small group conversations, which limited employee activists to their team, their personal network, or workspace and to synchronous conversations. Thus, raising concerns via internal communication tools helped employee activists to overcome certain time and space constraints; it also limited the amount of time organizational leaders had to observe the conversations and intervene before employee momentum grew around an issue.

For example, several employee activists explained that as they posted about their frustrations on internal message boards or chat platforms and saw their peers’ responses flood in, they were motivated to quickly organize a more formal response. A Google activist who led the sexual harassment walkout after leaders paid a $90 million severance to an executive who was charged with sexual misconduct explained that women at Google flocked to email listservs to initially express their disapproval. She said, I was on this email group called expecting and new moms, and there was another one that was the female engineers list, which had a lot of similar discussion… And that instigated a lot of conversation about how outraged people were over the Andy Rubin story. That was the jumpoff point for the walkout… there were multiple threads with tons of people commenting on them. And, that’s what got my wheels turning [to organize a response] because… so many people were saying in these groups that there is a lot of opportunity discrimination going on… people had some bad experiences at offsites… that’s what helped me understand the connection between this corporate accountability at the top… the optics were really bad of paying Andy Rubin $90 million… it was like, we’ve been fighting this shit for so long and [we’re] reminded that this company has more money than God…

Another Google activist explained, You’d hear about every [concern]… Dragonfly, which is the thing where they tried to do that [project] in China… or, for Cloud to gain market share, exploring the contract with CBP [U.S. Customs and Border Patrol]… There are several mailing lists, they are very active discussions… all the spicy stuff at Google tends to start on listservs like engineering miscellaneous. There were threads about it. It’s just like a water cooler. We go there to [post] questions… and, Google has TGIF… a companywide all-hands where Sundar [the CEO] talked, some projects were presented, etc. This was also where a lot of discussion was going on around the company with large [activism] initiatives. This is where Cloud skepticism [on its contract with Customs and Border Patrol], or basically any [social, political, or moral] gripe at Google got raised.

A Facebook activist told me that employees often used the question-and-answer portions of townhall meetings to raise concerns and “build a movement” of other employees. He said, Part of the [townhall] Q&A was an opportunity for employees to soapbox in front of Mark [Zuckerberg, the CEO] and in front of all the other employees. Talking about that kind of stuff [political concerns] and being open about it… we could present that research and talk about that research with people and build up kind of a movement internally of employees who feel this way.

He also described how Facebook employees used the company’s internal online forum and digital chat platform to raise awareness of issues. He told me, Facebook uses Workplace [an internal message board]… and we would start to organize on Workplace and WorkChat… sometimes, it took the form of making a joke, kind of one of those nervous laughter jokes like “haha, we don't care about misinformation at this company”… [and] people made groups where they could talk about this kind of thing… for instance, there was a group called “let's fix Facebook” and they weren't talking about fixing [product] bugs, they were talking about fixing the company… that was where people would say… “hey, is this thing that we're doing harming or users?”
A Netflix activist echoed this, explaining how employees immediately turned to internal communication platforms, including Slack, to vent frustrations about leaders’ decision to air the Dave Chapelle comedy special. They told me,

Someone watched it [the special] and made a memo of the upsetting parts and suddenly, there were tons of messages on the internal Slack… There was a private [internal] Slack channel [for the transgender community at Netflix] and a public [internal] Slack channel [for the transgender community and its allies at Netflix]… the reaction started on the private Slack channel and moved to the public one… the public Slack channel multiplied like crazy… it went to around 3,000 people. At the time, Netflix had like 10,000 employees, so like a third of the workforce, and people start talking about Ted’s [the CEO’s] responses. So, on the private channel, we started talking about how to approach this: who do we need to contact, what are we asking for, how to say what we are upset about it, etc.

An activist at Wayfair explained that employees there used internal Slack channels to initially draw attention to “suspicious” orders for children’s beds, and to ultimately uncover that the beds were being sent to Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facilities. Then, employees used the same Slack channels to begin mounting a response. She said,

Wayfair used Slack… and we had a politics channel. At one point, one of the engineers got a ping that was like, hey, this really massive order for children’s beds is going to New Mexico. And, they thought that that was really weird and were like that is super weird, why don't you look into that? Things went from like zero to 100 really fast [as employees responded]. We figured out that this was the detention camp… and me and a group of five to ten other people quickly drafted up this letter and started passing it around…

Often, widely airing their grievances via internal communication tools and seeing peer responses “flood in” provided the “spark” for employee activist organizers to coordinate more formal responses. Furthermore, using internal communications tools afforded employee activists reach outside of their team, department, or personal networks and reach in terms of time flexibilities as well, as these conversations could occur synchronously or asynchronously. Thus, the affordances of these internal communications tools lowered barriers in their first stage of insider activist mobilization and reduced the time that organizational leaders had to respond.

Assess the Levels of Internal Support

Employee activists also told me that they used internal communication tools—such as digital chat platforms (e.g., Slack), internal online forums and social media (e.g., Memegen, GooglePlus, Workplace), collaborative working documents, and survey software—to assess the level of peer support for a cause before they engaged in more contentious forms of activism. Employee activists said internal communications tools helped them to “take the temperature of their peers” in relatively low risk ways. For example, several activists at Google and Facebook said they monitored internal online forums and internal social media, which provided functions such as up-votes and likes, to see when certain posts resonated with large groups of their co-workers. Similarly, employee activists at Google used collaborative working documents and survey software to collect anecdotes from employees who may share their concerns. In addition to helping them determine if they had sufficient support to organize a more formal response, these tools also enabled employee activists to identify peers who may be interested in helping them organize change initiatives. One employee activist explained that Google had an internal online forum where employees could create memes (humorous images or videos). This forum allowed employees to anonymously “up vote” or “down vote” ideas. He explained,

On Memegen [an internal message board where employees posted memes] the two default views are either a reverse chronological display of what memes are happening right now or the most popular memes. Particularly, people would live meme TGIT [the weekly townhall meeting]… so, if you're a person like me,
who thinks that it's bullshit that Andy Rubin got like a hundred million dollars for being forced out after sexually harassing people, then you see a meme about it, you upvote it, and upvoting makes things more visible to people… Once something gets popular enough that it's in the Top 25 or 50, lots and lots of people see it…so, there's a marketplace of ideas and up votes and down votes are the mechanism by which the market speaks. Once things reach a certain threshold of popularity, that tends to compound on itself. And then you get a really high-profile thing. It's a sentiment thermometer. The number of memes sort of reflects how strongly people feel about it.

The same activist explained that, in addition to enabling employee activists to see which topics were resonating with peers, Memegen and other internal online forums like Google Plus could be used to identify co-workers who cared about the same topics because while up-votes of memes were anonymous, posting on these forums was not. He said,

There were very few people in Google who weren't infuriated by the fact that Andy Rubin got away with all this stuff and made more money than any of us will ever see, basically, for doing it. He doesn't even have to work anymore. Come on, he gets to retire gets a f*** ton of money because he's a predator, that's terrible. So, a handful of people started identifying each other through seeing, oh, this other person is posting on Google Plus, this other person is posting on Memegen, and reaching out behind the scenes, and a small number of people started saying we need to mount a real response to this, what should we do? And so, people talked about having a walkout, it was the Women's Walkout for Real Change. And it was planned by a small group of people on an unbelievably short timeline, a week or a week and a half, something like that.

A separate Google activist explained,

As Memegen got larger, you could say here are the things that people at the company found most funny, and eventually important, right?... It became kind of a virtual water cooler… Memegen would tend to just by its nature be a little bit more critical of leadership… the combination of [the fact that] you can see the real time reaction of people both in the [types of] memes that they create and the volume of memes that [employees] create…and then later, [you can see] which ones got upvoted [by other employees], it [shows what topics] had resonance with people. It almost accidentally created a summary of here's what people cared most about… or what they found most concerning, funniest, most interesting …

Similarly, a few activists described using collaborative working tools to better understand peer sentiments. For instance, one Google activist explained that she used Google forms [a survey software] to collect stories to better understand sentiments about how Google handled sexual harassment complaints before she organized a walkout. She said,

[After seeing all the posts on the listservs], I sent around a link to a Google form asking why people were so upset about the Andy Rubin [executive sexual misconduct] story and wanted to speak out because there was so much interest and I was like, what is going on here… there were 350 stories that were sent in anonymously about institutional betrayal… the failure of HR, leaders, the whole system…

Another Google activist who contributed to the sexual harassment walkout described how these efforts evolved from determining sentiment inside the organization to compiling demands for leaders and collecting stories for activists to use as datapoints during their protest. She explained that organizers used both Google documents [a tool that affords concurrent editing with other users] and Google forms to do this. She told me,

Part of the discussion that was had with organizers was… we are going to sit down and come up with this document… [organizer] started drafting it. It was sent around. At some point, all of the feedback was coming in… there were hundreds and hundreds of people on this document [concurrently] leaving comments… the other big part was anonymously collecting people's stories…. so that it wouldn't just be this like list of demands, but it would also be these actual experiences… it was like pages and pages and pages of submissions about people's experiences. That was a really big thing. We collected everyone's story anonymously… and, [later], as part of the local organizing, what we did to protect people's anonymity… one of us read out the stories. So that person's identity was protected. That was really powerful… Collectively, you want to do as much as you can to include everyone… everyone was commenting on it… it was a lot, but that was what was amazing about it. That was what was so special about it, everybody was jumping in there it was a lot of momentum.
Along the same lines, a Netflix activist explained that seeing the activity on the company’s digital chat platform, Slack, reassured him that he was not alone in feeling frustrated by the company’s decision to air the Dave Chapelle special. He explained, “Chappelle [special] drops... I'm answering emails and I see the activity notice was 13 new posts in the trans allies Slack channel... I was like, what is going on? The channel is blowing up... And, to call it insane, I think would be a little bit of an understatement... it became clear very quickly that not only were we not the only ones who were feeling this, people were pissed...

Indeed, as employee activists used these internal communication tools to assess the levels of internal support for their cause, before they engaged in disruptive action, it allowed them to find “safety in numbers.” These internal communication tools gave employees low-risk ways to determine if they had sufficient support among their co-workers before they engaged in riskier activism behaviors. These internal communication tools also helped employee activists to identify potential allies and co-organizers by monitoring who posted similar content and reaching out to them to privately coordinate more contentious actions. Thus, employee activists were able to lessen another barrier to mobilizing contentious collective actions in their firms. Furthermore, as several activists noted, the likes and upvote functions of these platforms meant that if a particular concern resonated with enough people, it gained visibility as a top idea, giving certain posts a “viral” momentum inside the organization, once again shortening the time organizational leaders had to respond before momentum grew around a movement.

**Disseminate Calls to Action**

Finally, employee activists used internal communication tools, including digital chat tools (e.g., Slack channels), email listservs, internal profiles (e.g., Workplace profiles), and project management systems to advertise their campaigns and signal solidarity. Employee activists told me, when disseminating calls to action, internal communications tools often provided them with “pre-formed groups of likely supporters;” for example, activists at several organizations described targeting left-leaning groups or groups with shared identities on email listservs and digital chat platforms to garner support for petitions. Additionally, employee activists noted that internal profiles provided opportunities for activists to signal solidarity within their organizations; for instance, activists at Facebook and Google explained that they added badges or changed their profile pictures to show widespread support for a cause. Finally, employee activists suggested that their access to internal systems provided opportunities to engage in subtle, humorous disruption to advertise their campaigns. For instance, activists at Google described hacking the IT system to change peers’ desktop backgrounds to advertise a walkout, while activists at Amazon flooded internal workflow systems with emergency “tickets.”

An activist at Wayfair told me she volunteered to grow their movement protesting the sale of beds to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and she used politically-aligned Slack channels to rally employees. She explained that the company had encouraged “community building” on Slack, which inadvertently created pre-formed “free spaces.” She said, “I said I'll talk to people internally, I will spread [it] around, especially getting signatures... I was ‘boots on the ground’ trying to convince people... I was really finding any sort of left-leaning channels. So, the politics channel, the LGBTQ channel... There was also a social concerns or community activism channel... I would go there and post the [petition] link and a blurb explaining what it was [and say] we think it’s wrong [selling beds to ICE]. We're not pressuring you to sign, but it would be great if you could and here are our reasons and our beliefs. And here are our steps forward... Wayfair really did encourage this community
building. So, there were channels for people who like plants and stuff. There was this whole community side of the work, where people could just talk about whatever. I targeted those mostly.

An employee activist at Activision Blizzard also told me the #MeToo movement walkout organizers there relied on pre-formed Slack groups to disseminate plans. He said,

The organizers were very vocal in Slack… I heard about the [walkout and petition] efforts… in a larger ABK [Activision Blizzard King space] called the allyship channel, they were using [a lot of] Slack channels. There were sort of calls to arms on internal communications at that point. There were people in the Slack channel who were rallying support and saying, “hey, we're gonna be staging a walkout to protest these things if you want to join.”

An Amazon activist explained that employee activist organizers targeted several email listservs of engineers in the organization and were thoughtful to approach them in a culturally appropriate way. He explained that among engineers at Amazon, “the biggest thing that can kill an idea is the lack of data.” He told me that organizers used their cultural knowledge of the group to tailor their appeals, explaining “this is a very Amazonian thing [to do]”. He said,

There was an email blast that went out to the engineers… and in there, there was a bunch of information about, hey, what is this? What are we looking for? And, it had data, which was cool. I can't remember the specific numbers, but they went in and crunched from the fulfillment center perspective some of the impacts of the shipping side of the business, it even had some statistics from the transportation and logistics side in terms of CO2 emissions or fuel usage or whatnot. But that was just kind of giving you the background on this is who we are and [doing it that way, with data showed] we're not just some random group of people, this isn't just some like external group that is doing some campaign… this is by Amazon employees for Amazon [engineers], directed at Amazon corporate.

A Google activist confirmed that employee activists often used listservs or internal employee interest groups on digital platforms to plan action for their causes. She explained,

There are internal groups, email lists, for millions of things. So, any affinity groups associated with those things would email out to their groups [about activist activities]. So, Women@Google emailed us [about the sexual harassment walkout]... Same with the [Project] Maven petition, I was a part of the AI Ethics [listserv], and I got an email about that too.

The same activist told me employees protesting Google’s handling of sexual harassment complaints also used symbols on an internal profile system to signal solidarity, in hopes that the widespread nature of participation would make it less intimidating for others to join. She said,

There was a badge, so on the internal system you have a profile for every person and there are these little badges for things, such as going to an offsite together… and the [organizers] made one for the [sexual harassment] walkout so it was like a very public thing… and it felt like no one was afraid.

Similarly, a Facebook activist described how employees used their internal profiles to signal solidarity during Black Lives Matter protests as the company had (temporarily) decided to allow President Trump’s provocative post to remain online. He said,

Everybody changed their profile picture to just the color black. I think it was just kind of to show solidarity [with Black Lives Matter]… The point was everybody was doing it and it was showing that this matters to me. And that's kind of a low-cost way to signal solidarity in a way that's not anonymous…

Some employee activists took a more assertive approach to repurposing internal systems. For example, one Amazon activist explained that some individuals had submitted “tickets” to an internal project management system, indicating that someone needed to attend to the “climate emergency” and assigned the project to c-suite leaders. He explained that this process alerted large swaths of the organization and became a humorous way to advertise the movement and attract the attention of uncertain peers. The activist said,

It felt like they [movement organizers] were really making use of the systems they had… they did some like fun stunts. My favorite was they cut—Amazon has a ticket system, you will cut a ticket being like, hey, this price is wrong, or this app isn't working in Quebec and there are severities from five, which no one ever marks something as five because it will never happen… most are a three, where it's like, we noticed
something weird going on with the mattresses, can someone look into it? And it goes up to step one, which is like the website is out, Amazon.com is no longer functioning, all hands-on deck. If a step one is ever cut, it's a really big deal, all sorts of on-call chains are alerted… Anyone can cut a step one technically… it just better be that something's burning down. So, the organizers cut step one tickets around the “climate emergency.” And they tried to assign it like Wilke [senior Amazon executive] and made Bezos [former Amazon CEO] a watcher on it, which is [that] you'll get automatic updates on the ticket to your email. I think that was the most fun. I really appreciated that it was a real inside baseball for Amazonians [Amazon employees] it was probably one of their best PR moves.

Similarly, a Google activist explained that employee activists there used their access to internal systems to advertise the sexual harassment walkout widely by changing desktop backgrounds and sending computer alerts. He said,

[A couple] people used technical hackery, they bent the rules a little bit and used their technical privilege to affect other people's computers to advertise this very, very widely. So, one person changed everybody's desktop background to a thing that said, “Walkout for Real Change is on this date.” And then there was another person who, everybody uses Google Chrome on our work computers, and we have all kinds of plugins, Google Chrome extensions, we use loads of them. And, most of them are developed in house, the ones that we use, so somebody changed the code on one of the extremely widely used corporate Chrome extensions to spread the word about this…

Employee activists used their access to these internal platforms to disseminate calls to action. Rather than needing to find safe places to discuss their plans and coordinate times, community-oriented Slack channels and certain email listserves served as spaces where employee activists felt most participants would be receptive to their cause and they could post about protests and petitions. Furthermore, internal profiles provided opportunities for employee activists to signal solidarity with each other and make it feel safe to join their cause; by simply changing profile photos or adding a badge, employees could see how widespread a movement was. Finally, some employee activists embraced more assertive tactics, going so far as to change desktop backgrounds, send computer alerts, or submit project management tickets to advertise their movements to co-workers. Again, by repurposing these internal systems, employee activists were able to attract significant attention to their movements very quickly.

**Indicators of Effectiveness**

One might wonder how to determine if the affordances that these internal communication tools provided to employee activists genuinely reduced the barriers to organizing collective action inside these organizations. Employee activists often emphasized how quickly they were able to mobilize hundreds, or in some cases thousands, of employees to support a cause, attributing that speed and scale to their use of internal communication tools. Employee activists often said these tools enabled them to “surprise” leaders. In addition to employee activists’ perceptions, one could interpret firm leaders’ responses—implementing restrictions on how internal communications tools could be used (discussed in detail below)—as another indication that organizational leaders also viewed these tools and enabling activism inside their firms.

One Netflix activist explained how using internal communications tools to air grievances, identify potential allies, and disseminate calls to action enabled activist organizers to rally a large number of employees to leaders’ dismay. He said,

To lay out a timeline… I'm answering emails Tuesday morning and suddenly, I see in Slack there are new messages, I start reading people are like, did you see what we just dropped?... Somebody went and watched it, and catalogued the parade of horribles within, and posted it to Slack… to call it insane would be a little bit of an understatement. How crazy that time was. It was like messages flying back and forth. Emails flying back and forth. Google Hangouts where people were getting together to just express their rage… We had
like 500 People in the Slack channel and then it jumped to like 2500 people… My phone was blowing up non-stop… That led to the employee walkout… we organized very quickly… as we were scheduling those first early meetings, that's when I think people at the company, the higher ups, began to realize how not quiet the situation was going to be…

Similarly, an activist at Wayfair explained that a small group of employees organized the walkout there in a matter of days after discovering the company was selling beds to U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. She told me,

It was really fast. It was the span of a week and a half, maybe, everything went down on Slack… Me and a group of like ten other people, drafted up this letter and started passing it around… There was this whole weekend of this blowing up. And then come Monday or Tuesday, they called another townhall meeting [to discuss it]… and [again, an employee said], you could do the right thing now and set a really great example and not sell the beds… But, they [leaders] were like we don't want to do that… So, we organized the walkout in like another day or two…We had something like 700 people walk out.

Additionally, a Google activist told me she did not anticipate that her efforts to oppose how the company addressed executive sexual misconduct would lead to a 20,000-person walkout within a week, but as stories poured in via Google forms and email listservs, she stepped up to coordinate a response on digital spaces. She said,

I felt like there was something fomenting on the expecting and new moms email group and the female engineers list, which I wasn’t on but had a lot of similar discussion, they just needed someone to take like a project manager role. So, I was like, I’ll create another group [email list] and if people want to go talk about this here, I wasn’t [initially] thinking it would lead to a walkout in a week, but it worked out that way…

Another Google activist elaborated, explaining that the organizers of the sexual harassment walkout used internal communications tools to foster the passion their peers had for the issue. He described how activist organizers at Google turned the “flurry of activity” on mailing lists into productive discussions on what to demand from leaders and to gather stories from peers to share during the walkout, which all led to the large protest movement within a week.

With the [sexual harassment] walkout, it was maybe the first [time] where the activism very quickly went public, rather than staying within the company… a lot of that happened via mailing lists, Google has had a culture of companywide mailing lists that anybody can join and give opinions on. It was basically a flurry of activity for a couple days where people were iterating over, what specific improvements do we want to ask for, and that bit diffused across the company… spread via other mailing lists… So, somebody made a [new] mailing list for the walkout, specifically, and said, this is open to anybody at the company, if you have things to share or suggestions, please join and add to the thread and, of course, they had several hundred contributors very quickly… from what I saw of the mailing list, it was a lot of support and solidarity. I recall [organizers quickly saying] tell us your own experiences, when are times that you felt discriminated against at Google, and then people who had good stories then got to tell those stories at the walkout.

An organizer at Amazon described a similar phenomenon. She explained that employee activists there were hoping to get 1,000 signatures on their climate change petition to make it “newsworthy” enough to be covered by mainstream press. However, to their dismay, as “it got forwarded around email listservs, it blew up,” garnering significantly more support than they anticipated. She told me,

We had a goal of getting 1,000 signatures. We had been talking to a New York Times reporter and they basically were like, if it is newsworthy enough, we’ll definitely cover it in an exclusive article, but it’s gotta be a good number to be newsworthy. So, we said okay, if we could get to 1,000 within the first couple days then we could publish and get this New York Times coverage. So that was a goal we had. And we were a little nervous, you know? No one had ever done anything like this at Amazon. We didn’t know what the reception was going to be and it blew up, in a great way. It snowballed. We got to 1,000 within the first couple hours, it was like 3,000 by the first day. So, we scrambled quickly and published it right away and it ended up getting up to 8,700… And, we got thousands of people to walkout in the global climate strike… that was the turning point when they realized, okay these workers are serious and they are not going away…

When considering the degree to which internal communications tools enabled employee activists to reduce the barriers to mobilizing their peers, it is important to note how these tools
helped them to reduce the time and space constraints associated with in-person mobilization practices. While internal communications tools did not entirely replace one-on-one conversations or less technical mobilization tactics such as posting fliers, making stickers, or hosting in-person meetings, these internal communications tools enabled employee activists to access peers on different teams, departments, and geographic spaces instantaneously, both synchronously and asynchronously. By reducing these time and space constraints to air grievances, by providing mechanisms for employee activists to assess the levels of internal support before engaging in disruptive actions, and by creating “free” spaces for employee activists to quickly disseminate calls to action, internal communications tools reduced many of the barriers to organizing and enabled employee activists to mount large-scale, contentious movements very quickly, limiting the time organizational leaders had to intervene or counter their efforts.

**EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS ALSO USE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS AND EXTERNAL SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE IN NOISY EXITS**

As described above, it is not uncommon for employee activists who seek to change their organizational practices or policies to ultimately leave their firm (Morgan, 2006). Indeed, many employees choose to engage in a “noisy exit,” speaking about their concerns while resigning (e.g., Withey & Cooper, 1989) rather than choosing between voicing concerns and exiting the firm (Hirschman, 1970). In my study, some employee activists engaged in noisy exits, rather than engaging in collective action, as they could not rally co-workers to support their cause or simply did not want to participate in or lead a movement, instead preferring to issue an individual public statement of dissent. Other activists engaged in both collective action and a noisy exit, as they left their firm after growing weary of trying to enact change from within it.

These employee activists also used internal communication tools in unexpected ways; they often posted notes of dissent to their colleagues on internal message boards or sent them via large email listservs explaining their concerns and decision to leave. These posts often resonated so deeply with co-workers that they quickly spread through the firm. Many employee activists also aired their grievances and explained their decision to resign on their personal social media accounts, and in many cases, these posts garnered attention from mainstream media outlets. While scholars have acknowledged noisy exits as an option for employees who want to exercise both voice and exit (Withey & Cooper, 1989), these activists’ use of internal communications tools and external social media tools amplified the reach of their messages, and sometimes laid the groundwork for later employee movements.

**Creating Artifacts of Dissent**

When employee activists posted messages of dissent on internal communications tools, they often emphasized their intention to “document” their concerns; they explained that airing their grievances widely while resigning was not merely a cathartic act, but instead meant to leave a record for their peers, managers, and future employees. For example, a Facebook activist who opposed the company’s (temporary) decision to allow President Trump’s provocative post during Black Lives Matter protests remain on the platform and participated in a public letter decrying the lack of mental healthcare for content moderators described her noisy exit to me. She explained that it was common for employees to use “badge posts”—
goodbye notes on internal social media with a photo of their badge and a description of their concerns—as a final act of dissent. She added that these internal posts remained even after employees departed the company, creating “artifacts of dissent,” which other employees could build on as they aired their own grievances. She said,

Initially, I was trying to change Facebook from within. [That’s] why I was doing all those [Workplace] posts and trying to get involved [in collective action]… but at the end of the day, I realized it [Facebook] is broken beyond repair and the whole try to fix things from inside… when the system has structural problems… I can’t fix this… I did—they were called badge posts—I explained some of my concerns and I linked it to [another Facebook activist’s] badge post and [yet another Facebook activist’s] badge post, and I had a lot of sources in it. I wrote… my problems with Facebook as a company… and I think it is still [posted]. That's one of the good things, when they deactivate an employee profile, all your stuff stays. So, part of the desire [to do this] is to create artifacts for other people down the road… an internal artifact.

Along the same lines, a McKinsey climate activist explained that he decided to both participate in collective action in the form of a letter that was signed by 1,100 employees and by sending a company-wide email to explain his decision to resign.

[We] created a letter, that gained 1,100 signatures in a week before managers engaged quickly to shut it down. A lot of promises were made, [like] we’ll take a look at this but there was no visible, material movement… After months of this dragging on, I resigned. One opportunity you get is to send a mass communication. So, I chose to do that… I wanted to layout the case for change by documenting the scale of the problem and noting the hypocrisy of the organization to my sustainability colleagues… I wanted to inform them that their work is being used to greenwash McKinsey’s other work. I wanted to layout the case that we are part of a climate genocide…

A separate Facebook activist and a Google activist described the phenomenon as “rage quitting,” explaining that many employees had become exhausted by the number of social, political, and moral issues they faced at their firms. This Facebook activist said his circle of about 30 Facebook employees had attempted to influence leaders by collecting data, compiling reports, and raising their concerns internally as well as by signing petitions, but they felt their efforts were insufficient. Ultimately, he explained that many of his colleagues decided to quit and shared their reasons for leaving internally and publicly.

We had a Facebook chat group where we [said] we're going to tackle [issues such as censoring information in foreign conflicts or promoting products to children]. We had an active chat group of 30 plus people who were like a task force and we decided… when we see something that's wrong, we're going to chase it down, we're gonna open up internal support tickets, and we're gonna [speak up] and make a difference. Sometimes, that was effective. But [later] in that chat thread, people were like I can't believe this [is still happening], I'm gonna quit my job, I'm gonna go public, I'm going to share everything [I know] about it. So, it was a range of emotions and reactions [among] those who felt so strongly that they wanted to make a statement by rage quitting internally and, later, speaking to press…

Often, employee activists who engaged in noisy exits also chose to post their message of dissent on external social media platforms, as well as via internal communication tools. Many of these posts went viral, garnering significant support from colleagues and external audiences, and some attracted significant mainstream media attention. For example, yet another Facebook activist told me he also resigned in the wake of the President Trump post during Black Lives Matter protests. As he resigned, he explained his decision internally as well as on external social media and, after a journalist saw his viral post, he did a cable news interview. He said,

I wasn't really trying to go viral. I knew I maybe could… [but] I went viral on LinkedIn first… [and] eventually, I did an interview with a [cable news outlet] reporter… [before I did this] I saw a hopeless post on Workplace [internal online forum]… with someone saying, 'well, what are we going to do all threaten to resign?' And I wanted to be an example of the answer being 'yes, that is an option, you can do that'…

He further explained that despite having a coalition of peers who rallied around the same issue, he did not want to “lead a movement.” He told me,
I wasn't trying to start a movement. I wasn't trying to rally coworkers, there were [other] people doing that… it was a personal decision where I said, I promised myself that if a politician called for violence and Facebook didn't do anything about it [I would leave], I had let myself be placated in the past… I'm a software engineer and I care about movements, and I care about speaking out. And, I'm not a bad leader, when I have to be… I was the Drum Major in the marching band… there are a few people [at Facebook] that were interested in starting up an action committee. But I don't want to be the leader of an action committee… I don't want to be a people manager. And, if I was going to have this [be a] movement, I was going to have to inspire people… I didn't want to have to manage [it all].

An activist at Apple told me she had gathered information on differences in pay and remote work allowances between her male and female colleagues, after a learning her male teammates had significantly higher compensation and were permitted to work remotely full-time. However, she did not initially think about cultivating peer support. She said,

One of the guys [on my team]… he was a contractor, and he received a full time offer. He approached me to ask, ‘hey, would you talk with me about your comp… so that I can evaluate if my offer is fair?’ And I said, sure, never in a million years imagining that he's going to make the amount more than me that he ends up revealing… So, he tells me he what he’s been offered… it was just completely deflating, because I understand that these numbers matter not just in the present, it’s that it spans out into [our] future… And the main question I walk away with is, is it just him? Is he really freaking exceptional, or is this a pattern? So, I start asking more people… I talked with eight men, they all made more. I talked to three women… all less than the men… And if I were to go back and do it differently, I would have tried to make us feel more of a collective sense of ownership over this instead of me making my little database. I would say, [let’s] talk to more people… [because] in the end, it was me alone with my little spreadsheet of numbers that I'd collected.

She spoke up within Apple, and after leaders refused to make any changes to her compensation or remote work allowances, she quit and spoke out on Twitter and to press. She also filed a lawsuit. Despite having to raise the concern alone, two years later, thousands of women and allies at Apple took collective action based on gender discrimination issues (the “AppleToo” movement).

Many employee activists used internal communications tools to issue mass goodbye emails, post badge notes, or otherwise explain their concerns inside the organization before departing; employee activists also frequently aired their grievances on personal social media sites and as their posts went viral, they attracted attention from mainstream media outlets and spoke out about their concerns to journalists as well. As employee activists dissented for all to see, both inside their firms and publicly, internal communications tools and external social media amplified these messages, created documentation of their dissent, and provided building blocks for other employees seeking to show a pattern of employee concerns. Some of these noisy exits may have even sparked movements later.

**Indicators of Effectiveness**

Again, one might wonder how effective internal communication tools and external social media truly were at amplifying the noisy exit messages of these activists. One indicator to consider when evaluating this phenomenon is whether co-workers took note of noisy exit messages. In the first example, I provided above, the Facebook activist explains that while creating her “badge post” she “linked it to [another Facebook activist’s] badge post and [yet another Facebook activist’s] badge post.” This was a common refrain I heard from activists as they sought to build on the “artifacts” of dissent left by employees who engaged in noisy exits before them. She explained that a previous badge post informed her decision to write one,

Before I did my badge note… I saw [other activist] posting about concerns about integrity issues, manipulating elections in countries that Facebook kind of cared less about, that weren't as high profile, like Honduras or Azerbaijan… asking for more support, a team to help, to invest to combat that. And, she [this
activist] had a big departure post explaining why she was leaving and that she turned down a $60,000 severance package to not speak, so that she was able to speak…

In addition to the first example, it is worth noting that I came across the name of McKinsey employee activist quoted above after another McKinsey climate activist forwarded me a few “goodbye notes” from his colleagues, citing them as lasting documents of dissent. Beyond these two examples, numerous employee activists that I interviewed referenced goodbye notes their peers had penned as they resigned. Several Google employee activists referenced a lengthy goodbye email from an activist who co-organized the sexual harassment walkout and led efforts to end forced arbitration and other diversity initiatives in the organization. Other Google activists referenced a note written by an activist who organized movements protesting Google’s user policies and decisions to sell products to governments. Some of these noisy exit messages may have even laid the groundwork for later movements. Beyond the example of the Apple activist that I cited above and a separate Google activist [whose departure spurred a petition in the organization in support of her], an activist at Facebook explained that noisy exits were often crucial in raising awareness of issues when mobilizing individuals. He said,

When things like organized walkouts [happened]… there would [first] be certain posts that people make, whether it’s a badge note [noisy exit statements] or a research note, you know, there’s an internal Workplace group called let's fix Facebook the company. And that was a forum for a lot of criticism and provocative challenges. And [movements happen] when one of those posts starts to gain a lot of traction, internally, lots of activity in the comments…

By leveraging internal communications platforms and external social media, employee activists not only captured the attention of their peers, but these lasting artifacts often motivated their peers to speak up later. The act of “rage quitting,” using these tools may have reverberating consequences for organizations that span beyond the day they are posted, or even the news cycle that they occupy.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS DESCRIBED LEADERSHIP CRACKDOWN ON THEIR USE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

Another possible indicator that employee activists’ use of internal communications tools to mobilize coalitions for collective action and to amplify their noisy exits was effective is how organizational leaders reacted to it. Employee activists told me that as firm leaders realized how employee activists were using internal communications tools to organize their collective action efforts and engage in noisy exits, firm leaders began restricting how employees could engage on these tools inside their firms. First, employee activists told me that organizational leaders implemented new communication and collaboration policies. Activists said that organizational leaders often used these new policies as pretext for firing organizers. Second, employee activists said that organizational leaders hosted fewer townhall meetings and when they did, they had more scripted interactions. Finally, employee activists told me that firm leaders began revising their values statements to hedge language encouraging openness and dissent.

Organizational Leaders Restricted Internal Communications

Employee activists said that organizational leaders implemented new communication and collaboration policies and used these new policies to fire organizers. As social movements and organizations scholars would predict (e.g., Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Soule, 2012), many of the employee activists I interviewed had been fired or demoted as a result of their activism.
efforts. Several of the activists that I interviewed shared firsthand accounts of how their companies used new communication policies such as accessing restricted documents to fire them, or how they were “demoted” into roles with less authority and “pushed out” of their organization after leading movements. For example, one Google activist explained,

The General Counsel [name] sent an email saying there is a new policy around need to know information. This is the pretext for firing people for organizing now. They created this policy, which says if you access a document that’s on a need-to-know basis or sensitive information, that’s a fire-able offense. Why is this significant and crazy? Google has always had all the documents and calendars open on the back end. We are an open culture. It’s all about innovation. Go get inspired by what this other product team is doing. Learn about this and that. That was something they actively encouraged: this openness… Also, did the document owners need to label things need to know? Oh no, you should just know that you shouldn’t be looking at those. And, it was bizarre because the policy as it was written was so confusing. They left it ambiguous.

The same Google activist told me Google leaders used this new policy to fire employees who organized movements. She said,

A few weeks later, they fired the “Thanksgiving Four” [activists], well five after they fired [activist name]. One of whom, [activist name], was fired because he opened someone’s calendar and saw they were meeting with a union busting consultant… the NLRB sued Google for this, and they won. Basically, you have the NLRB under Trump, a conservative NLRB, saying you’re f***** up in firing these people…

Additionally, several Google activists told me that leaders began restricting what employees could discuss via email listservs as well. One said,

During my time at Google, they changed some of the policies around those [email] groups. I was on the group where [Google AI ethics activist] emailed out here’s what happened and I’m really disappointed—I think it was Women and Allies of Google Brain—but after that, a moderator joined the group and all posts had to go through the moderator.

Another Google activist explained,

Another big controversial [change] was the community guidelines policy, which basically said that any email list had to have a designated person that was supposed to manage it, and it was supposed to comply with a certain code of conduct that was HR sanctioned. So, for some of the really big lists, like politics or MemeGen, the company decided that now there's an HR person who's in charge of moderating…

Along the same lines, a couple of Facebook activists noted that after employees changed their internal profile pictures to black squares in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, in the wake of President Trump’s provocative post, HR leaders instituted a new rule prohibiting it. One of them told me,

That movement got shut down… HR said you have to have a photo of your face as your profile picture… But, I don't know if it was really HR that needed your face as your profile picture because there were people who had anime profile pictures all the time. But, they did kind of start to shut down that kind of discussion.

Organizational Leaders Hosted Fewer, More Scripted Townhall Meetings

Several employee activists also noted that firm leaders also engaged in fewer townhall meetings, and these meetings had become more scripted, as employee activists used them to air grievances or leaked their contents to press. One Google activist told me,

Internal corporate culture [changed]… like how management interacted or how they talked about things from an internal comms perspective, you saw a lot more muted tones… One example of this is, Google has this thing called TGIF, it's their weekly chat [originally] with the founders… they were known for being relatively unscripted. Over time, it got much more scripted… this [used to be] a chance for anybody to ask any question and [a leader] would just come up and answer, but you started seeing a lot more scripted responses, a lot more careful language… there was definitely a lot more hesitation to take a clear stance on these [social] issues.

He further explained,

TGIF, the weekly all-hands… it used to be a live broadcast [internally] and you could ask any questions, then they made it not a live broadcast and where you couldn’t ask any questions. There definitely was a time where they didn’t want any questions, they didn’t want you to talk…
Similarly, a Facebook activist explained, “Talking about that kind of [political or moral] stuff and being open about it is harder at Facebook now, but back then it was not quite so locked down, we could present that research and... build up kind of a movement internally of employees who feel this way. And the movement wasn't always sufficient. I remember distinctly Mark [Zuckerberg, the CEO] using the words verbatim “this is not a democracy” at one of the [townhall] Q&As, but internal pressure was valuable enough that you could tell they [leaders] were trying to combat it... Now I hear that Mark is doing fewer Q&As... employees [used to be] able to speak up and say, “hey, I think we're doing something wrong here” and start a discussion. It is more closed now... it's harder to have these discussions..."

**Leaders Revised Organizational Values**

In addition to restricting the internal communication tools that employee activists used to mobilize and changing townhall events, employee activists said that some firm leaders revised their organizational values to combat insider activism. A Netflix activist told me leaders there altered the company’s culture statement, hedging the parts that previously encouraged employees to dissent and adding language explicitly explaining that employees may need to accept decisions they do not like and work on content they oppose. He said, “We forced the company to review and revise its entire culture memo [after protesting the Chapelle comedy special]. It's different now. They've taken out parts about farming for dissent and about speaking up when you see something wrong. They changed it to say something along the lines of if you work here, you have to accept that we're going to make some things you're probably not going to like and if you don't like it, you can leave..."

The same Facebook activist quoted above noted that leaders there also changed their core principles; he said, "There wasn't a whole lot of anonymity at Facebook. But the idea was that it didn't matter [if you participated in activism], you didn't need anonymity, because one of the core principles was ‘be open,’ we're willing to talk to each other. Notably, the only core principle that is not a core principle anymore. They swapped it out..."

Archival data confirms these claims, Facebook no longer boasts “to be open” as a core principle, instead the company says, “be direct and respect your colleagues” (Denton, 2022). Netflix also altered its culture code, while some language around farming for dissent remains, the company’s leaders issued a memo shortly after activists opposed the Dave Chapelle special, explaining “depending on your role, you may need to work on titles you perceive to be harmful... if you’d find it hard to support our content breadth, Netflix may not be the best place for you.” (Grace, 2022; Mellor, 2022).

Ironically, these leadership attempts to restrict internal communication, may have sparked more collective conversation among employees about firm policies. For example, a Facebook activist told me as leaders revised values to exclude “be open,” limited townhalls, and imposed new rules on forums, employees formed a group to discuss these changes. He said, "There was a group [on Workplace] called examples of Facebook becoming less open. And people would share posts where there have been people talking... [or] people having an argument getting shut down by HR... People would actively discuss those events in the examples of Facebook becoming less open group. Moreover, a Google activist said that employees responded to the addition of listserv moderators by debating their purpose and what they meant for free speech at Google. She said, "The [Google] culture was really shifting from like a free for all where you can talk to anyone, you can email or message anyone at Google... [the role of the moderator] was really not clear to me and there was debate on the email chain about why this person was doing this and what it meant... [activism] was all happening on email listservs and the gist was are you [moderator] going to stop me from objecting to you [leaders]? How free am I?"
One of the activists that I interviewed who had been fired, using the new internal communications policies as pretext told me that before he was fired, Google leaders had suspended him and announced his suspension as well as disciplinary action against a few other employees. This prompted several hundred of his peers to rally on their behalf. He said, An email [was sent] from the chief legal officer at the time to the entire company talking about two employees being suspended and a third being fired… So, we held a rally and that was attended by several hundred people outside the San Francisco office… Monday afternoon, they fired me and [activist name], who were both the ones suspended and who the rally was for, along with [activist name] and [activist name]...

Similarly, an activist organizer at Amazon explained that when leaders decided to fire two employee activists there, hundreds of other Amazon employees expressed their discontent and solidarity. She said,

We actually organized a mass disobedience of hundreds of workers making a public post all together, with everyone making statements criticizing the company publicly with their names. We also made a video of people saying I/we won’t be silenced, we are going to keep speaking out… we think that made Amazon back off from doing more warnings at the time… that was a real turning point and people had a lot of stories where they said I wanted to be in solidarity… because here are [activist name] and [activist name] who are out there putting their careers on the line, yes I’m feeling fear but I have to have their backs...

A Google activist explained that restricting internal communication and firing organizers had an inciting effect because the employees there “had a vision” of what the company was that was different than the new attempts to crackdown on activism suggested. She said,

[The leaders’ responses were] very, very chilling. I think that part was the most disruptive to everybody's vision of Google as a company that isn't evil, a company that is very transparent… for the organizers be punished or the stories we were hearing about organizers being punished and retaliated against, that was very chilling. And I don't know if it changed the risk benefit calculus necessarily [of doing it again], because there is a vision of Google that all of us have...

Employee activists told me that firm leaders responded to their co-optation of internal communications tools by implementing restrictions on these platforms—such as putting moderators on internal forums and email listservs or limiting access to shared documents—by hosting fewer townhall meetings, and by hedging language around dissent and values of openness. Moreover, as social movement scholars would expect, firm leaders often fired or demoted employee activists, using these new policies as pretext. Ironically, however, these attempts to restrict internal voice may have prompted additional collective conversations inside these firms as employees pointed to changes in the companies’ cultures and leaders’ attempts to limit employee speech.

**EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS ADAPTED AS LEADERS RESTRICTED INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**

Even as leaders implemented new restrictions to limit employee activists’ use of internal communications tools, activism in these organizations persisted. Dozens of employee activists described using tools like Discord and Signal to move their organizing efforts “off corporate spaces.” They explained they could get a sense of who might support their efforts on internal communications tools then move to more secure channels. For instance, a longtime Google activist who now trains other activists said, “people are [still] communicating with each other, especially on platforms like Signal.” Another Google activist told me,

The HR people monitoring those different lists for “inappropriate” behavior… that built the realization of now this discourse is being limited… so, we should consider having discourse off corporate platforms, we should have our own [email and chat] lists…
Still another Google activist explained that she avoided internal platforms after managers began surveilling email listservs. She said,

[After Google started restricting listservs], I used WhatsApp, Signal, text… just depending on how people communicated, [for peers] inside of Google, I chose texting… Signal, I’ve only used with journalists or friends who are journalists… and, WhatsApp has fallen out of favor since they were bought [by Facebook/Meta].

An Amazon activist told me, “mostly we use Signal [now], which is kind of like Slack but more secure …we took everything to more secure channels.” Employee activists who led the three-day activist training session that I observed emphasized this point in numerous sessions, telling trainees to “move off corp[orate] spaces” to avoid managerial retaliation.

Furthermore, employee activists responded to leaders firing their peers who led movements by adapting their tactics. For example, a Netflix activist explained that after the leader of their movement was falsely accused of press leaks and fired, remaining employee activists began feeding stories to the press through a social media influencer. He said,

[Netflix organizer] got fired pretty quickly… We met with the [executives] who had been involved in the investigation… and they laid out for us what they believed was the evidence supporting the fact that [name] was the one who [leaked]… Then, the way we got around not leaking, but still being able to communicate to the public was [we used] a good friend of mine who is a trans activist who works adjacent to the entertainment industry… we put her in charge of being the person to talk to the press [for us]... we thought she's got a [social media] following, she's got a presence, she knows people all over the place, she is a Black trans woman. We can't speak, we don't want to get fired… when press reached out to us, we referred them to her…

Employee activists adapted after leaders restricted their use of internal communications tools, revised values, and fired organizers. Employee activists told me that they used internal communications tools for early stage organizing and moved later-stage discussions “off corporate spaces.” Moreover, some employee activists began using social media influencers as press intermediaries to avoid being fired for “leaks” while expressing their concerns publicly.

**DISCUSSION**

Prior research shows that insider activists tend to rely on smaller scale coalitions and use persuasive tactics when they attempt to enact change in their organization (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). When employee activists seek support for their change initiatives, they often engage in micro-mobilization and use in-person practices to raise awareness of an issue, identify potential allies, and discuss their plans (e.g., Scully & Segal, 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Recent research suggests that “virtual opportunities” may help employee activists mobilize peers to support their cause (Raeburn, 2004), but it has not shown how employee activists may use new communication tools to mobilize for large-scale, contentious action or to amplify noisy exits. In fact, some extant research on how employees use internal communications tools such as townhalls, online forums, digital chat platforms, and email listservs suggests that when employees use these tools to challenge leaders, these internal communications tools may quell dissent rather than foster it as these platforms provide leaders the opportunity to interact with discontented employees and they allow employees to vent frustrations (e.g., Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Turco, 2016). Instead, I have shown how employee activists may repurpose these tools to mobilize large coalitions for contentious activism or to engage in noisy exits around social, political, and moral issues at
work. Here, I expand my discussion of this phenomenon to explore how it can contribute to our understanding of insider activists and the opportunity structures for activism.

**Contributions to Social Movements and Issue Selling Literatures on Insider Activists**

This paper contributes to the social movements and issue selling literatures by showing how insider activists can engage in large-scale, contentious activism. Current literature suggests that insider activists are reticent to adopt disruptive tactics (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Creed, et. al., 2002; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeCelles, et al., 2020). When employees do target their own firms with activism, they tend to “temper” their goals and engage in “micro-mobilization” (e.g., Meyerson, 2001; Dutton, et al., 2002; Scully & Segal, 2002; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Specifically, employee activists carefully frame their claims using shared identities when raising awareness about their issues (e.g., Creed, et al., 2002; Dutton, et al., 2002; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016; Wang, et al., 2021), leverage their personal networks or employee groups based on shared identities to identify potential supporters (e.g., Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004), and create “free” spaces using organizational routines and systems such as lunch meetings or electronic newsletters to prepare for action (e.g., Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011; DeJordy, et al., 2020). In this way, they primarily engage in smaller-scale, slower, in-person organizing.

In contrast, I find that insider activists may draw on internal communications tools to raise awareness about issues, identify potential allies, and disseminate calls to action. In particular, they may use internal communications tools such as townhall meetings, digital chat tools, and internal social media/online forums to widely air grievances, which may help them to reach larger audiences more efficiently than employees who engage in one-on-one, in-person conversations or employees who do not have access to peers on other teams and departments or are limited to synchronous conversations. I also find that employee activists may use internal communications tools to quickly assess the level of internal support for their cause before they engage in more risky forms of activism. Specifically, employees may rely on internal online forums (such as meme boards) or internal social media to post dark humor comments and wait to see how many employees “like” or “upvote” their message. Additionally, they may use collaborative working documents or survey software to gather employee stories and assess how widespread complaints are. These tools may also help employee activists to identify other individuals who are interested in organizing a more contentious response. Furthermore, I find that employee activists may use internal voice mechanisms to disseminate calls to action by identifying pre-formed groups they perceive will be sympathetic, such as using digital chat channels with shared political ideologies or common interests to create “free spaces,” where they may distribute “calls to arms” and disseminate petitions and protest plans. Employee activists may also use internal profiles to signal solidarity and try to persuade peers it is “safe” to join their cause by adding a badge or changing their profile photo. Finally, employee activists may even engage in subtle and humorous “PR stunts,” hacking desktop backgrounds or flooding project management systems with “tickets” to address.

By effectively leveraging internal communications tools to quickly mobilize supporters, employee activists may be able to lessen some of the barriers to engaging in contentious activism. While the majority of employees may remain reticent to engage in disruptive tactics, internal communications tools may help employee activists to get a better sense of how much support they can garner from peers before they escalate to disruptive tactics, and then may
empower them to grow their movements quickly, limiting the time firm leaders have to intervene before the movement expands. Despite leaders’ attempts to restrict internal communications tools, employee activists may continue to adapt, finding ways to use internal tools in the early stages of their activism and, later, moving to more secure digital communication technologies, such as private text messages, Signal, or Discord to plan more subversive actions.

Contributions to Political and Cultural Opportunity Structures for Activism

A growing body of social movements literature has begun to identify the cultural and political opportunity structures that make firms likely to be the targets of activism (e.g., King, 2008; Kellogg, 2010; Briscoe et al., 2014; McDonnell, et al., 2015). For example, McDonnell and colleagues (2015) explain that firms that are the targets of activism often defensively adopt strategic management devices (e.g., social responsibility committees or disclosure reports) to manage their social image, which ironically, makes these firms more likely to be targeted by activists again, as these devices increase corporate accountability. Briscoe and his co-authors (2014) show that employees consider CEO ideologies and influence to determine the likelihood that their activism efforts will succeed; they find that firms with more powerful CEOs with more liberal ideologies are more likely to be targets of activism. Moreover, Kellogg (2010) finds that employees who have access to both cultural toolkits (frames, identities, and tactics) and political toolkits (staffing systems, accountability systems, and evaluation systems) may be more likely to challenge organizational practices than employees who only have access to cultural toolkits.

In this paper, I identify additional features of cultural and political opportunity structures that make firms likely to be the targets of activism. I explain that internal communications tools, and in particular many new digital communication technologies, serve as opportunity structures for activism as they enable employees to mobilize faster and at a larger scale than previous insider activist mobilization tactics (e.g., Dutton, et al., 2001; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Kellogg, 2011). More specifically, I show how employee activists use internal communications tools including townhalls, digital chat tools, email listservs, internal social media/online forums, collaborative working documents, and survey software to widely air their grievances, laying the groundwork for their activism, quickly assess internal support and identify potential allies in low-risk ways, and to create “free spaces” to disseminate calls to action. In doing so, I answer calls for research on this topic (e.g., Soule, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Davis & Kim, 2021; Heucher, et al., 2024)

Future Research and Limitations

This paper has several limitations and areas for future research. First, I rely on interviews with employee activists. I did not speak with employees who chose not to participate in activism or the organizational leaders responsible for responding to employee activism. Thus, this paper presents the views of the employees who were ultimately willing to target their firm with contentious activism. Future research could explore how employees who do not choose to raise social, political, and moral concerns publicly view employee activists’ use of these tools inside their firms. For instance, do employees who do not engage in activism view leadership constraints on internal communications tools as restrictive as well? Additionally, I present leadership responses to activism based on interviews with employee activists and my archival database, which relies on press reporting of these actions; however, organizational
leaders’ intentions and perceptions might be different than the views of activists presented here. Future research could explore how firm leaders approach responding to employee activism and how non-activists perceive their activist colleagues.

Second, I interviewed left-leaning, progressive activists. While I did reach out to a small number of conservative activists that I was able to identify in press and corresponded with a couple via email, I was not able to capture the perspective of employees who may have felt strongly in the opposite direction of the activists I interviewed. Future research could consider how leaders navigate workplaces with a mix of conservative and liberal employees who hold opposing viewpoints on social, political, and moral work-related issues. Future research might also consider if conservative activists mobilize differently than their progressive counterparts.

Third, I examined employee activism across organizational perspectives. In particular, I interviewed 52 insider activists in 14 organizations. While this perspective allows me to compare and contrast the conditions that enable different types of employee activism, there may be differences between these firms that are not fully explored. For example, while the firms I present in this paper used some type of internal communication tools, there may be meaningful differences in how many of these tools are used and how they are used inside each firm. Additionally, former employees of Google, Facebook, and Amazon comprise a significant portion of my sample, thus, future research might seek to gather additional perspectives from less represented technology and consumer goods organizations to understand additional nuances around how activism is enacted in these firms.

Fourth, I interviewed employee activists who engaged in activism between 2018 and 2022, which was a relatively strong labor market, particularly for technology sector employees. While some activists discussed real financial constraints or visa concerns which influenced their perceptions of risk, most of the activists I interviewed expressed confidence that they could find alternate employment if they were fired as a result of their activism. Thus, many activists today may alter their perception of the risks of participating in contentious activism, given the significant layoffs in the tech sector since early 2023 (Hirschman, 1970). Future research could consider how the labor market impacts the willingness of activists to engage in disruptive tactics.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper examines how employee activists may use internal communications tools to mobilize for large-scale, contentious activism and to engage in noisy exits. I show how employee activists leveraged townhalls and new digital communication technologies to widely air their grievances, to quickly assess the level of internal support for their cause, and to create “free spaces” to disseminate calls to action and how these tools afforded employees the abilities to rally coalitions at a larger scale and faster than previous research suggests. I also show that some activists wanted to speak publicly but did not want to lead a movement, grew weary of collective efforts to implement change, or could not rally enough supporters, and thus, opted for a noisy exit to publicly raise their concerns. I show how internal communication tools and external social media amplified their simultaneous use of exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970; Withey & Cooper, 1989). Finally, I show how organizational leaders responded to employee activists’ efforts to mobilize via internal communications tools by restricting access to these platforms, revising values statements, and firing organizers; yet, even as they did so, employees adapted and engaged in further collective conversations about changes to their firms’ culture, sparking a cycle of activism.
References Chapter 2—Making Movements and Engaging in Noisy Exits: How Employees Repurpose Internal Communications Tools for Activism


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Table 2: Employee Activists Repurpose Internal Communications Tools to Mobilize for Collective Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Affordances</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Select Additional Examples</th>
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| **Raise Awareness of an Issue** | - Townhall meetings  
- Digital chat platforms (e.g., Slack)  
- Email listservs  
- Internal online forums/internal social media (e.g., GooglePlus, Workplace) | - Efficient reach (outside of team, personal network, or workspace)  
- Time flexibility (can be synchronous or asynchronous, faster than in-person conversations) | “That was a canary in the coal mine moment [the President Trump post during Black Lives Matter protests] where everybody went… we have strayed so far from business as usual…we need to be doing more, we have a responsibility… the venue for that discussion was Workplace, which is basically Facebook's internal [forum]… I [spoke] candidly about what I felt the company was and was not doing well on posts that I made in Workplace or as comments on the posts that other people made.” |
| Google employees could raise awareness of an issue through various tools | - Provide a spark to organize around  
- Build momentum for more formal action | “Andy Rubin was one of the original developers of Android. But, he was credibly accused of sexual harassment by multiple people. And, he basically got the opportunity to resign and got an enormous bonus… it was bonkers… For a while [right] after people would, anytime that there was some sort of large amount of money that people were talking about, folks would chime in to measure it in milli-Rubins like, how many thousands of high-profile sexual predator payoffs is this? So, people kept that issue alive in the zeitgeist… that unfolded on Memegen, through Google Plus, through Google Docs that got shared around on those [platforms] and email lists.” |
| Google has basically this internal version of Google Plus that would allow employees to like make Facebook-esque posts and share opinions, and a lot of people put how frustrated they were about this sexism at Google, how absurd it was…” | | “Google has basically this internal version of Google Plus that would allow employees to like make Facebook-esque posts and share opinions, and a lot of people put how frustrated they were about this sexism at Google, how absurd it was…” |
| “They would have these weekly [townhall] meetings where big-time senior leadership would come and answer questions. And, you would see people, we use this public chat Q&A tool, Dory, people would write a question that would be… they would ask this pretty aggressive question. Like when things came out about the Google [platform] that was being built for the Chinese government that was a censored Google, a lot of the engineers were up in arms, some people quit. Or like the firing of [activist], who was like a principal AI scientist, once all those emails came out, they would ask all these questions at the [townhall and chat]… there were some [discussions on chat and in townhalls about] like defense contracts, ICE contracts that people were super critical of, too. So, that’s how we raised all kinds of things when it felt like an unethical line had been crossed.” | | “They would have these weekly [townhall] meetings where big-time senior leadership would come and answer questions. And, you would see people, we use this public chat Q&A tool, Dory, people would write a question that would be… they would ask this pretty aggressive question. Like when things came out about the Google [platform] that was being built for the Chinese government that was a censored Google, a lot of the engineers were up in arms, some people quit. Or like the firing of [activist], who was like a principal AI scientist, once all those emails came out, they would ask all these questions at the [townhall and chat]… there were some [discussions on chat and in townhalls about] like defense contracts, ICE contracts that people were super critical of, too. So, that’s how we raised all kinds of things when it felt like an unethical line had been crossed.” |
| “For these issues [Project Maven and Project Dragonfly protests] that they would show up on like in the internal social media or internal chat groups. There were a whole ton of mailing lists on different topics. And actually, after the first couple of these things got going there were sort of dedicated, there was an ethics and transparency mailing list, for example, for people who wanted to keep it in touch with these kinds of issues.” | | “For these issues [Project Maven and Project Dragonfly protests] that they would show up on like in the internal social media or internal chat groups. There were a whole ton of mailing lists on different topics. And actually, after the first couple of these things got going there were sort of dedicated, there was an ethics and transparency mailing list, for example, for people who wanted to keep it in touch with these kinds of issues.” |
“We had Google Plus [an internal forum] where you could sort of follow your coworkers and then follow the people they follow and get to know other people… and some mailing [email] lists are more conducive than others to people just voicing their opinions…. For this particular open letter… you'd hear the chatter on… Google Plus, on the internal messaging system was talking about it, or mailing lists. And so, the idea for the walkout seemed to evolve very organically, I still have no idea who were the first people who suggested it. But it just started showing up on these mailing lists and Google Pluses. And I knew I wanted to be part of it. I think the question then became well, is it actually going to hit critical mass?”

| Assess Internal Support for a Cause | - Digital chat platforms (e.g., Slack)  
- Internal online forums / internal social media (e.g., Memegen, GooglePlus, Workplace) | - Low visibility: passive monitoring of peer behavior  
- Low risk: identification of sympathetic peers via online tools | - Understand levels of support before engaging in more contentious activism  
- Reach out to potential co-organizers |

“I made a Google document with a list of why the policy was ill-considered… and I shared it on our internal IRC network [instant messaging] because at that time, employees socialized on IRC. And, people started collaborating on the document… at one point we had 50 people collaboratively editing it… And, then people were like actually, I don’t have anything to add I just want to sign my name in support. I didn’t even think of this as a petition when I started it…”

“There is an internal thing, I was going to say message board, but it is not really a message board… it’s called Memegen. It’s like an internal Tumbler, and people can post memes with text on it, and you can look at it by popularity or by recency. And a lot of times, when there was something brewing or something going on, there would be a lot of posts about it. You could get a sense of like people’s general temperature through Memegen…”

“[I would] post something and then had people reaching out privately… because this particular situation was bothering them [too], and they had seen this happen a number of times. And so, it was something that they were willing to work on… some of these [people], I never met them met in person, they might work in a completely different office, completely different group… But there's some level of social fabric or trust or something that's built, the more that you interact with people in a shared [online] space… the dynamics [on Workplace, the online forum at Facebook] are also fairly similar on a platform like Slack or something like that, you have things posted in large groups, then you [create] small groups… to try and figure out what the best way is to try and affect the change that you want… I've heard from other [activists at] companies, people at Apple or Netflix, they all have some internal forum where they have these larger discussions [first], and then [use that to find] groups that are more passionate about, like at Apple working remotely, or Dave Chappelle at Netflix, it all plays pretty similar, from what I've seen… so, for example, if you have people in a larger group chat on Slack or something, and you have a discussion happening, it becomes very clear that three people or five people are of a particular mind of what should happen with the Dave Chappelle special or something like that, then, it might be that you start something and you just message those five people.
“I was very active on internal channels like Memegen and Google Plus… people knew me from those forums. I had a skill about knowing the mood or sentiment and channeling it into something really funny. Like, there are some rankings for [the best contributors?] and I was second on that list globally at one point. I started getting connected with employee activists like [name 1], [name 2], and [name 3].”

“Memegen was [also] a very big kind of temperature consensus thing. Like getting the feel of where everyone was at… During TGIF [the weekly townhall], they would have a live feature where people would make memes as the company meeting was going along. And there was even a little like sentiment bar of like how people felt, and you can upvote or downvote, to kind of change the sentiment as you're watching it. And so, it was really a very good way of just getting a pulse of the company. So, this live graph that would be moving, while the presentation is going on. You could tell especially with the more scripted answers, the sentiment will go really, really far down… And it was really fascinating to watch, someone would say something on stage and in a few seconds, there will be a meme about it. That's how rapid it was… We definitely would do that as an assessment of how do people feel about this, if I'm gonna make a petition or something like that. How am I expecting it to be received? And so, we would do those kind of little assessments just to figure out, is it just us feeling this way or, are other employees feeling this way? Sometimes we would like make memes about it and see how well they did or not.”

**Disseminate Calls to Action**

- Digital chat platforms (e.g., Slack)
- Internal profiles on internal online forums/ internal social media (e.g., Memegen, GooglePlus, Workplace)
- Email listservs
- Project management systems/ desktops

- Access to pre-formed groups of likely supporters
- Access to mass distribution channels

- Caught attention of peers across organization

“[She told me] if you want to participate in the digital walkout [at Facebook], we're doing it tomorrow. And here's the Dropbox link with the profile photo that for the profile picture image that you can set on Workplace [internal online forum] to publicize your participation.”

“The petition that we circulated internally [at Amazon], we sent it to a bunch of internal mailing lists, which got a lot of people to sign it, and [after] it went around, we could kind of follow up and say if you're curious about learning more about this stuff, we'll be in this conference room at this time… and, we did set up our own mailing lists, because any employee can do it. So, we set up our own climate shareholder resolution internal mailing list and people could join that. Then we could send announcements to that group and trying to coordinate… We [also] did some stuff where we would create these issue [tickets], and then people can upvote them… normally, it's like, we should fix this technical thing, or there's a bug in this piece of internal software, can we please fix it?…There are a couple of different similar systems inside Amazon that sort of issue tickets, but it's a similar mechanism, no matter which system. We used JIRA for tracking work items, you would create one of these issues to track something that you're working on in your day-to-day work, and that gives visibility for your manager to see what
the status it is, and you can leave comments, you can have some communication there. But, you can also use them to [flag] here's a task in our backlog... And people can upvote, if it's something that's widely used. So, we could create an issue that's like, 'we should change our climate policy'... and then you can do a little internal campaign to try and get people to click the plus one.'

“We used Memegen... we definitely leveraged it to, one thing that we did that was a little bit more subversive [during a campaign] was we made a corporate communication bingo card. So, we had a bingo card that I think we distributed one of the townhalls to try to see if anyone could finish bingo with what was being said and I remember distinctly someone in the actual - so it was like in one big room in in headquarters- I remember hearing 'Bingo!' from someone there. And like the executive looking up and like 'what's going on?' That was, that was a fun moment.”

“I found petitions on... some people would email them out [on listservs], they would be on like the AWU Slack channel. And there was this employee directory. And everybody has profiles with little badges, like these little stickers. And sometimes, I would just go to somebody's profile, because I had to send an email and I would see this badge and be like, oh I've never seen that. Then it would open up a petition or something like that.”

“There was a petition for no GCP for CPB [Google Cloud Platform for Customs and Border Patrol], this issue kept getting raised all over the internal channels... then, the other thing that got posted was the climate strike and petition... Google has an internal link shortening system, go links... would be Go slash something. It's sort of internal thing that they set up in Chrome [for petitions].”

“We had some internal forums [at Amazon], there was one email list for Women in Tech and it wasn't just women, it was a group where you go and help women get into tech that I was on... it was a mailing list and meetings where you connect with people about a cause that you care about... I was a member of a few groups and someone sent an email about joining the climate group and I joined... I joined, and I forwarded it to my team members that I knew were like-minded, or email groups I thought were amenable. And, people in the climate group would send proposals about what actions to take.”

“We have this thing at Google called a go link, it's a short link to redirect to an internal page, so you don't have to remember a long address. So, it was something like go/stopmaven [petition to stop selling to US Department of Defense]. People created pages internally, basically a Google Doc, explaining what it was... anyone could just create one. There were no restrictions on it. So, people would create Google Docs have a go link that pointed to it... we [also] had this internal meme generation tool called Memegen... So, I had a bunch of templates, you can create memes and link things to give context and people would have
memes and things like that… They had been rolling out these like community guide this thing called [Memegen], which is basically a custom meme maker… they started censoring those people, deleting their ques now. And the HR people that are monitoring those different lists for meme page... one of the things that the company decided to do was now there's an HR person who's in charge of moderating that conduct that was HR sanctioned. So, it basically for some of the really, really big lists, like po email list had to have a designated person that was supposed to manage it, and it was supposed to comply with certain, a cert

gets discussed internally…

One big controversial [new internal communications policy] was the community guidelines policy, which basically said that lists, any email list had to have a designated person that was supposed to manage it, and it was supposed to comply with certain, a certain code of conduct that was HR sanctioned. So, it basically for some of the really, really big lists, like politics, like Memegen, which is an internal meme page... one of the things that the company decided to do was now there's an HR person who's in charge of moderating that platform now. And the HR people that are monitoring those different lists for 'inappropriate behavior’…”

“[After] a huge number of arguments and questions at company all hands and lots of posts on Google's internal network, especially on this thing called [Memegen], which is basically a custom meme maker… they started censoring those people, deleting their questions and memes and things like that… They had been rolling out these like community guidelines to make internal communications 'nicer and

Indicator of Success: Fast, Large-Scale Response (Select Additional Examples)

“The walkout was a huge success in Cambridge. More than half the office was out on the street… it was extremely successful… the press showed up and interviewed people, I think a local journalist interviewed me at the walkout. And, I had nothing to do with organizing it at all, I was just a guy in the crowd. Also, people got up and gave testimonials about their own experiences of harassment and retaliation at Google...”

“I saw it [Amazon climate change petition] in… there was some bold stuff they would do where they would just email ton of people. I think it may have been in this [internal] email list called Seattle Chatter… I would say, there were somewhere between several hundred to 1,000 [employee signatures] by that point, when I saw it… and [for the walkout] probably half my team went… So that was a pretty big gathering.”

“I participated in all of the actions… The [activist] leaders organized the walkout and sent details and we participated… Seattle’s downtown streets were filled, we joined forces with Google at the time, and it was a LOT of people. This was my first mass protest, and I have pictures somewhere and it was a lot... it was huge. Even just the [number of] Amazon employees, well it was just when Doppler, the new building with the spheres... well, that whole street was filled with people.”

“The petition… we like circulated it internally at Amazon and had people sign their names and published it on Medium… we ended up getting more than 8000 [signatures], we got like a lot of people to sign it pretty quickly. So, then a bunch of people who had been following it [the movement] because of that [petition] were able to show up and actually in person [for the shareholder meeting]…”

“It was a really surreal experience, people showed up... And, it was wild… we did the petition first. And the petition had like 20,000 signatures on it… it was so humbling… my participation in the walkout [felt] very miniscule… it didn't matter that I was holding the megaphone, what mattered was that 1,000 people showed up [just in one location]... the real story is, how a ton of people all together, standing up for the same thing could really affect change… It all happened so quickly, I was holding the mic... and after that, I picked up a second issue. I became the organizer for parental leave at Google. We had another round of discussion on expecting new moms about how other companies were offering longer leave than Google was, and that Google's reported to be best in class in terms of benefits, and that we needed more… I got like 3,000 signatures for my parental leave petition…”

“I think we were genuinely surprised at how many people were there. I saw almost everybody I knew in the office walking out. So, I don't know how many people chose not to participate in whatever fashion, but it really felt like we had enough of critical mass… it was very, very organic.”

Indicator of Success: Leaders Restrict Internal Communications (Select Additional Examples)

“I do think that Facebook [was] very tolerant of criticism internally and of dissent. I think that has started to change… that shows up in a couple of ways. One is company leaders saying, not making certain topics, off limits, but really erecting a lot of guardrails around how it gets discussed internally…”

“One big controversial [new internal communications policy] was the community guidelines policy, which basically said that lists, any email list had to have a designated person that was supposed to manage it, and it was supposed to comply with certain, a certain code of conduct that was HR sanctioned. So, it basically for some of the really, really big lists, like politics, like Memegen, which is an internal meme page... one of the things that the company decided to do was now there's an HR person who's in charge of moderating that platform now. And the HR people that are monitoring those different lists for ‘inappropriate behavior’…”

“[After] a huge number of arguments and questions at company all hands and lots of posts on Google's internal network, especially on this thing called [Memegen], which is basically a custom meme maker… they started censoring those people, deleting their questions and memes and things like that… They had been rolling out these like community guidelines to make internal communications ‘nicer and
more constructive, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah... They created a community guidelines enforcement group. I'm not even kidding. It wasn't just Memegen, they also did the mailing list and things like that... And there were a lot of people who were concerned that they would be weaponized. And then, they were... there was like a Chrome browser extension that was supposed to be some [new] policy enforcer that... what it actually did was alert you and had code to report you if you tried to make large meetings, more than 100 people and things like that..."

"They [Amazon leaders] instituted a lot of other stuff to tamp down on the use of these email lists. They added more moderation and publicized more rules around like, if you run one of these lists, you have to make sure that you moderate in this way, and you can't use them for certain things, like you can't solicit signatures or you can't circulate petitions, stuff like that. So then, obviously, they're just selectively enforced because they can't universally enforce something like that. So, then it's just a way to say, oh, if you're doing something that we don't like, like circulating a petition that we don't like, they have some reason to say we're gonna fire you or whatever, which I think is illegal. Like, you have to show that you're, enforcing things in a sort of consistent manner, especially if it's around organizing...

"Sometime after Black Lives Matter—and I think this was partially in response to the [collective] action [changing] profile pictures— they created a new rule that your profile picture had to be of yourself, and you couldn't have like an image or anything political specifically, they called out, there's like a list of things you couldn't have."

"One of the ways that Google always felt super open and transparent was a lot of internal documentation that anyone could access as long as you were a full-time employee... So, in my last role, especially doing compliance, I relied on access to lots of those things. And then at some point, someone in management decided, 'for security reasons, we have to be more restrictive.' So, lots of things weren't open by default anymore. To some of us it felt like, well, people found out about Project Maven [contract with United States Department of Defense], and things because there were docs about them... So, it felt like this change was more about not letting people find out about those kinds of things, more than it was an actual security issue. I could be wrong, but I don't remember any security incident that happened because a Google doc was viewable internally. And, my last four years at Google, it was something that I would have known because that's an area that I worked in. So, you start seeing things like that..."

"What ended up happening during that period is, the internal Facebook HR people, they were aware of what's going on and they eventually put restrictions and communication guidelines in place internally to kind of try to quell a little bit of that. That internal uprising, so to speak."

Indicator of Success: Leaders Used Internal Communications Restrictions to Fire or Punish Employee Activists (Select Additional Examples)

"There were [a couple] different people who used sort of technical hackery... both of those people suffered consequences. I think at least one of them lost their job. But they definitely got like, some pretty severe reprimands from HR."

"[The firings] definitely sent chills because they [Amazon change organizers] were fired essentially over sending an invitation. Like this is what it came down to was all the gutsy things that they have done, Amazon didn't like fire them, even though they were clearly the authors are the big brain behind [the climate movement], they got fired over sending invitations [via internal listserve] to several interest groups within Amazon to participate in this speak out event...

"Almost everything that people organized was organized on internal mailing lists... and that worked relatively well until 2018, there was a fair amount of backlash against the organizers of the women's walk out [sexual harassment walkout], there was retaliation... by 2019, Google had laid people off for... looking things up internally, talking about them internally, having a petition internally, trying to get Google to change and escalating, when that didn't work. So, especially by the end of 2019, it was like we really shouldn't be talking about this on corp [internal email listserve], we were not even comfortable, the fact that we had named ourselves Googlers for Endi...

"Once they realized that we were more annoying than they maybe initially thought, after this walkout, it started to become more risky to talk to the press, people got some warnings like don't talk to journalists, you're not authorized to do that. And it's against whatever policies. So, then it became a little bit more tricky. And, then obviously, I was still kind of participating, and didn't leave until a little while later. But, with firing of the two of the most prominent leaders in the group for talking to the press or doing stuff like sending communications internally or whatever. Yeah, then it became a little bit more [risky]...

"Eventually, many of the organizers did get either let go or re-organized into roles that they were unhappy with and that sort of thing. I think also, there were a bunch of people that got fired essentially for their activism about Dragonfly or Maven, these other things. There was a media story that called them the Thanksgiving four, Thanksgiving five, who all got fired over Thanksgiving weekend for essentially speaking out about those things. And, the company had some reasons on paper, why they fired these people or whatever. But, it was clearly a little bit of, okay, we're going to start pushing back on this [activism]."

"The Thanksgiving before I left, a bunch of people getting fired suddenly, because there were people who were like organizing internally. And they kind of had very nonsense reasons that they gave for firing them. Some of it for like, security policy violations, which were kind of ridiculous things. There wasn't anything real, in my opinion."

"The company was definitely not in favor of this stuff. And more and more over time, they were kind of trying to crack down on organizing in various ways. I was eventually fired as a result of the CBP actions, which, according to the company was because I shared confidential information when I shouldn't have... there was a whole mess of policies around confidential and need to know information that were implemented through 2019 in various versions... they historically had been very open with documents, it was encouraged even
to go read a random design document for some other products you don't work on, you'll learn something from it. But, this was reframed to be you should only be looking at things when you have a business purpose for it. And stuff is confidential by default, and some things are needed to know. And you should know that they are need to know, even if they aren't marked that way, which was very confusing… jarring I think is a good word for it. It was a made an attempt anyway at a major cultural shift, and people were upset about it… There was this really bizarre ruling that they tried to pass off as established policy where there was a new like calendar warning if you tried to book a meeting of more than 100 people. And it said, per this established policy, that that's only allowed for certain business purposes, which had not been true before and, clearly wasn't the case. There were things like book clubs or my office had a Friday whiskey group that would meet and there wasn't really a limit on their group size.”

“I remember having colleagues and managers that were like, this would never happen here. But sure enough, the organizers of that petition, guess who never got promoted again? Guess who got blacklisted in the industry? Wasn't because they were bad performers.”

Indicator of Success: Leaders Hosted Fewer Townhalls, More Scripted Interactions (Select Additional Examples)

“Google does like to say that it is an open culture, and many people have said, we have this all-hands that everybody can participate in, but that has actually been really constrained over the past two or three years, those all-hands meetings have been restricted to product.

And... there's basically a big move towards more siloing information…”

Indicator of Success: Leaders Revised Values (Select Additional Examples)

“I think it was more of a surprise to employees that the values that were espoused through their onboarding… all of that was now all of sudden, it was kind the rug pulled out from under [us]. And it wasn't that management was openly changing those things [values of openness]. They weren't openly changing those values, but they were more boiling the frog and boiling the frog by slowly turning up the heat, slowly turning up the temperature. And everyone's realizing like, ‘Oh, this is not the company I wanted to work for.’… So, if you can kind of see this pattern that built over time of just kind of consistent eroding of trust that, that sort of built internally. And it only kind of got worse as the internal comms have got a lot more sanitized a lot more, tidied up a lot less, for lack of a better word, genuine or human. It was more like we were just reading a statement…”

“So at Google, I genuinely saw kind of the culture go down and it broke my, my little capitalist heart, right… When I joined, there's was more transparency and [it was different] the way leaders would talk to us, right?... I understand, like the balancing act… But I also can't say that I trust you… The idea of being, quote unquote Googly w

Activist Adapted (Select Additional Examples)

“In May 2019, that new ‘need to know’ policy had been trying to lock things down. By Thanksgiving that year, they fired people because they said that they violated these [new] guidelines but, if you follow it exactly, you can't do your job… So selective enforcement is the only way that any of it works the way it does. And so selective enforcement is what you got. And selective enforcement applied to [activist name], to [activist name], to [activist name], and to [activist name], who are the four people who were fired at that time… This triggered a whole wave of people recognizing that Google is not always the good guy, recognizing that talking on corp [corporate platforms] is not always the thing to do that the rules have changed. And writing a petition even or sharing details about your petition or talking about what is going on inside Google, using links to things inside Google is no longer a safe thing on its own… That was like an overnight shift so when the folks were fired in Thanksgiving 2019. Suddenly, everything was in question. It was no longer the case that talking on Google Chat was obvious, it was no longer the case that doing any of these things was something that I felt comfortable with... that was a really, really aggressive shift. And I was not the only one who felt that like that. Within a month, we had 200 people on our [new] external mailing list that we had never managed to get that many people off corp to something related to Google before… So [activist group name] was an external groups.io list that we set up. That was the first kind of widespread group that was set up of Googlers talking about fixing Google from outside Google. Before that, nobody would ever go off corp [internal communication platforms] for any reason. Why would you do that? Corp is right there. And when and [activist name] was fired for spurious reasons, but the underlying basis of it was their work on the no GCP for CBP [Google Cloud Platform for Customs and Border Patrol] petition… we had to shift.”

“There was kind of a built that realization of this discourse is now being limited, the kind of discourse that we can have. So it was like, 'hey, we should consider having discourse off corporate platforms, we should have our own list,' and stuff like that. And it kind of started building that feeling.”

“So that [new internal communications restrictions] really became an issue for Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, we basically knew because we had this huge email list that was like 7500-800 people, all the people who had signed this thing, we knew that whenever we sent a message [now], we [had] use it very sparingly, we knew that whenever we sent a message to that group, whoever sent the message was in danger of getting fired or like some kind of reprimand or something. So, for a while, there was a lot of times where we would find people who supported us who it was like their last day. And they would send an email for us.”

“[As time went on…] the people who are organizing the walkouts, they would kind of schedule a meeting and we try to not use company resources so, we wouldn’t use our work phones, we wouldn't use internal email. We tried to, just both for I guess our own personal security reasons and not be accused of you know, abusing company resources. I feel like some of this stuff is protected labor activity. But, you know, we tried to keep things off [corporate platforms]...”
do with that. Because people are like, oh my God, thank you for that much like, this is supportive. All of my former colleagues had my back, they all put their stamp of approval on, they all said this is true. So, Google. I didn't at all… it was all happening so fast… I woke up and my phone was about to die because I had so many notifica

Twitter] popped off… as a Black woman, we all know, we've all been through this. So, in my brain, this isn't new information. With my tweets, I thought, this isn't gonna go anywhere.

"… I still feel like it's upsettin…"

Had I known that this was going to be something that existed and more important, existed globally, for the rest of my life, I would have put way more thought into using curse words that my mama's gonna see… I had 500 [Twitter] followers, these people don't engage with my tweets, I thought, this isn't gonna go anywhere. So, I didn't think of it as [anything more]… next thing I know, they [people on Twitter] popped off… as a Black woman, we all know, we've all been through this. So, in my brain, this isn't new information. This has been happening. It's been existing, why would anybody be shocked or surprised about it? So, I didn't say to myself, I'm about to expose Google. I didn't at all… it was all happening so fast… I woke up and my phone was about to die because I had so many notifications… People were like, this happened to me, we believe you. We know what we know. It's true. Google needs to do better, everyone was supportive. All of my former colleagues had my back, they all put their stamp of approval on, they all said this is true. So, it was very much like, this is bigger than what I could have ever anticipated or imagine. I didn't really know what to do that. I still don't know what to do with that. Because people are like, oh my God, thank you for that… I still feel like it's upsetting that this is so big for people.”

Table 3: Employee Activists Use Internal Communications Tools and External Social Media to Amplify Noisy Exits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creating Artifacts of Dissent</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Affordances</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Select Additional Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Email listservs</td>
<td>- Mass distribution channels</td>
<td>- Widespread attention within organization and/or externally</td>
<td>“One of the trends that I noticed was that, over time, anytime anybody leaves Facebook, at least on their own terms, they share what's called a badge note internally, where they post a picture of their badge, and then you know, a blurb about their time there and what they're sad to be leaving behind and where they're going next. And, you saw a lot of fiery badge posts, especially from researchers saying, 'hey, we know what's going on, the company is not doing anything about it. This is f*****, I'm out.'”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Internal online forums/internal social media (e.g., Workplace)</td>
<td>- Platforms to document dissent</td>
<td>- Snowball of dissenters (one noisy exit inspired others)</td>
<td>From an activist email: “These attachments [noisy exit messages from employee activists] will keep you busy for a bit. It gives you a sense of McKinsey’s willingness to turbo-charge the climate crisis for the profit of its partners.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- External social media platforms</td>
<td>- Visible ways to support “noisy exit messages,” such as likes and linking to other posts</td>
<td>- Sometimes, sparked a movement</td>
<td>“While they were reading me my rights, I'm drafting an email to the entire 500+ person team. And I'm saying in the email, I say I'm being let go literally right now, if you want to understand how this happened, here's my personal email. It's been nice working with you all. And then in the subject line, I said it was nice knowing you I’m being fired. And I pressed send, and it popped up in [HR person’s] inbox, and it popped up in my inbox. And they both on Zoom were, they literally ended the call immediately. I was locked out of everything. So, they all saw what happened… [later] I literally had 500 followers on Twitter at that time, and I legitimately said, I was like let me just get this out…”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indicator of Success: Garnered Significant Reach Inside and/ or Outside the Organization, Encouraged Future Activists

From fieldnotes: After our conversation, I received an email from [Activist], who forwarded a note from her former colleague with a lengthy explanation of her career at Google, departure from Google, and her [moral] concerns about Google. Linked at the bottom of this Google activist’s noisy exit, was another Google activist’s noisy exit.

“I saw other people that I worked with making public [exit] statements. And I decided that in solidarity, I was going to do the same… It was like, I'm concerned about the precedent that this [decision to allow President’s Trump posts to remain on Facebook] sets and this is this is already a topic of public conversation… There was also a digital walkout that was organized right around the same time…”

“She's very much an activist and when she quit, I'm sure you heard about the email that she sent out. I fully believe everything she said there. That is exactly how I think it had been operating for a while… [Activist name], she had been one of the organizers of the 2018 Google walkout, she had written this goodbye letter as well that was like very much documenting what was happening… these [issues of racial discrimination] were expressed in many different fora, including, internal listservs…”

“Had I known that this was going to be something that existed and more importantly, existed globally, for the rest of my life, I would have put way more thought into using curse words that my mama's gonna see… I had 500 [Twitter] followers, these people don't engage with my tweets, I thought, this isn't gonna go anywhere. So, I didn't think of it as [anything more]… next thing I know, they [people on Twitter] popped off… as a Black woman, we all know, we've all been through this. So, in my brain, this isn’t new information. This has been happening. It's been existing, why would anybody be shocked or surprised about it? So, I didn't say to myself, I'm about to expose Google. I didn't at all… it was all happening so fast… I woke up and my phone was about to die because I had so many notifications… People were like, this happened to me, we believe you. We know what we know. It's true. Google needs to do better, everyone was supportive. All of my former colleagues had my back, they all put their stamp of approval on, they all said this is true. So, it was very much like, this is bigger than what I could have ever anticipated or imagine. I didn't really know what to do that. I still don't know what to do with that. Because people are like, oh my God, thank you for that… I still feel like it's upsetting that this is so big for people.”
Table 4: Employee Activist Interviews for Chapter 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization(s)</th>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Activism Event(s)</th>
<th>Length of Interview</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>User Policies</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>Database/Press</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Activist Interview 4</td>
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<td>Project Dragonfly; Project Maven; Sexual Harassment Walkout</td>
<td>68 minutes</td>
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<td>69 minutes</td>
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<td>Activist Interview 18</td>
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<td>DEI Concerns; AI Ethics; Protecting Temps, Vendors, and Contractors</td>
<td>66 minutes</td>
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<td>Sexual Harassment Walkout; Project Dragonfly</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Google</td>
<td>Activist Interview 29</td>
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<td>Sexual Harassment Walkout; Protecting Temps, Vendors, and Contractors</td>
<td>122 minutes</td>
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<td>Activist Interview 31</td>
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<td>DEI Concerns; Sexual Harassment Walkout</td>
<td>63 minutes</td>
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<td>Protecting Temps, Vendors, and Contractors</td>
<td>77 minutes</td>
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<td>53 minutes</td>
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<td>Sexual Harassment Walkout; Project Maven; No Google Cloud for Customs and Border Patrol; Project Dragonfly; Protecting Temps, Vendors, and Contractors</td>
<td>124 minutes</td>
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<td>49 minutes</td>
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<td>65 minutes</td>
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<td>Content Moderation; Project Dragonfly; Project Maven; Sexual Harassment Walkout</td>
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<td>President Trump Post; Marketing to Children; User Policies; Sexual Harassment/ MeToo</td>
<td>74 minutes</td>
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<td>President Trump Post; Politician Whitelist</td>
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<td>President Trump Post; Politician Whitelist</td>
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<td>55 minutes</td>
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<td>85 minutes</td>
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<td>81 minutes</td>
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<td>199 minutes</td>
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<td>Activist Interview 8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Police Contracts; Never Again Tech Petition</td>
<td>57 minutes</td>
<td>Database/Press</td>
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<td>Never Again Tech Petition</td>
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<td>DEI Concerns</td>
<td>54 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>McKinsey</td>
<td>Activist 53*- Email Response</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Attached two lengthy “farewell” emails from activists</td>
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<td>Google</td>
<td>Activist 54*- Email Response</td>
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<td>User Policies, Sexual Harassment Walkout</td>
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<td>Google</td>
<td>Sexual Harassment Walkout</td>
<td>13 Interview Accounts; 1 Email Response</td>
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<td>Google</td>
<td>User Policies</td>
<td>3 Interview Accounts; 1 Email Response</td>
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<td>Google</td>
<td>No Google Cloud for Customs and Border Patrol</td>
<td>2 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>No Pride for Google</td>
<td>2 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>AI Ethics</td>
<td>1 Interview Account</td>
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<td>Google</td>
<td>Protections for Temps, Vendors, and Contractors</td>
<td>6 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>President Trump Post</td>
<td>5 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>3 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>Dave Chapelle Show</td>
<td>2 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>DEI Concerns</td>
<td>2 Interview Accounts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>Remote Work</td>
<td>1 Interview Account</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>Environmental Hazard</td>
<td>1 Interview Account</td>
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<td>Activision Blizzard/ Gaming Industry</td>
<td>Sexual Harassment/ MeToo</td>
<td>4 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>Multiple Technology Firms</td>
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<td>2 Interview Accounts</td>
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<td>1 Interview Account; 1 Email Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wayfair</td>
<td>Sales to Immigrations and Customs Enforcement</td>
<td>1 Interview Account</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>DropBox</td>
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<td>1 Interview Account</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Sales to Police</td>
<td>1 Interview Account</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1 Interview Account</td>
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<td><strong>88 Interview Accounts; 3 Email Accounts</strong></td>
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Abstract: In this paper, I consider the direct effects and secondary consequences of employee activism by exploring how employee activists framed firm leaders’ responses to their contentious activism in ways that either constrained or fueled their movement’s momentum. Here, I examine three categories of outcomes: big wins—when organizational leaders acquiesced to all activist demands, partial wins—when organizational leaders offered some concessions or made meaningful gestures to acknowledge activists’ concerns, and losses—when organizational leaders rejected activists’ demands and doubled down on the business practice in question. Finally, I show that regardless of a movement’s outcome, employee activists sought to build lasting capacity across movements and organizations by using internet technologies to improve resource mobilization for future employee activists.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, employee activists have embraced contentious tactics to oppose their organizations’ practices and policies (e.g., Briscoe & Gupta, 2021; Davis & Kim, 2021). However, the vast majority of existing research suggests that employee activists temper their goals and rely on persuasion tactics to enact change in their organizations (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Ashford, et al., 1998; Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). While not all of their attempts to change organizational practices and policies have been successful, employee activists have achieved a number of concessions from their employers emphasizing patience and using influence approaches, including gaining domestic partner benefits for LGBT couples (e.g., Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Briscoe, et al., 2014; DeJordy, et al., 2020), implementing sustainability programs (Loundsbury, 2001; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), and changing hospital residency hours and staffing practices (Kellogg, 2011). Still, social movements and organizations scholars have found that external activists often use more contentious forms of activism such as protests and calls for boycotts, which can create disruption (Luders, 2006), reputational (Baron & Diermeier, 2007; King, 2008; McDonnell & King, 2013), and capital costs (e.g., King & Soule, 2007; Vasi & King, 2012) for the targeted organizations. In response to such tactics, some firm leaders have acquiesced to activist demands while others have taken harsher stances, refusing to concede (e.g., Ingram, et al., 2010; Briscoe, et al., 2014; McDonnell, 2016). Yet, there is a gap in our understanding of how firms respond to employee activists who employ disruptive tactics.

Furthermore, how a firm responds to incidents of activism often carries consequences beyond the cost of accepting or rejecting the movement’s demands (e.g., Briscoe & Safford, 2008; McDonnell, et al., 2015; Briscoe, et al., 2015). In particular, researchers have found that certain responses to activism may make the firm more likely to be targeted by activists again. For example, McDonnell, King, and Soule (2015) explain that when firms concede to external activists by implementing social management devices—such as annual reports or internal committees tasked with managing a given social issue—they are more likely to be targeted again, as the increased disclosure provides an opportunity for activists to strike. Researchers have also shown that activists may persist in the face of success or failure in ways that enable
other activists. DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca, and Creed (2020) explain that some of the 1990s LGBT activists they studied offered advice and support to activists in other companies seeking the same social changes, even when they failed to enact change at their own firms.

In this paper, I explore the direct effects and secondary consequences of contentious employee activism. I draw on interviews with 40 employees who engaged in contentious, collective action targeting their own firms, as well as an archival database, and a three-day participant observation in employee activist training to explain how employee activists interpreted leaders’ responses to their disruptive change efforts. I explore three categories of outcomes: big wins, partial wins, and losses and, for each category, I consider how activists’ interpretation of leadership responses either constrained or fueled their movement’s momentum. Finally, I examine how employee activists’ used internet technologies to build lasting activist capacity across movements and organizations as they trained, funded, and supported other employee activists, regardless of their own movement’s outcome.

**ACTIVISM AND ITS DIRECT EFFECTS**

Researchers have shown that activists may elicit a variety of responses from firm leaders (Wu & Liu, 2023): firm leaders may resist activism (e.g., Kellogg, 2012), ignore activists (e.g., Ingram, et al., 2010; Piazza & Perretti, 2020), work alongside activists (McDonnell, 2016; McDonnell, et al., 2021; Odziemkowska, 2022) or concede to activists’ demands (e.g., Briscoe, et al., 2014; Luo, et al., 2016). For example, Ingram and colleagues (2010) show that Wal-Mart leaders ignored protests in contested areas where they wanted to open new stores, if they believed the location would be profitable enough. Additionally, McDonnell and King (2013) demonstrate that firm leaders often relied on symbolic concessions, using prosocial claims to engage in “impression management,” in response to being targeted by activists. Odziemkowska (2022) and McDonnell (2016) show that firm leaders, at times, decided to cooperate with activists, particularly when they were repeatedly targeted and were “facing a reputational deficit,” as this approach helped them to “co-opt” activists as allies. Raeburn (2004) explains that many firm leaders made meaningful concessions to activists, adopting more LGBT friendly workplace policies. Furthermore, Ingram and his co-authors (2010) also show that, when Wal-Mart leaders viewed a future store site as less profitable, they conceded to activists and abandoned plans in the contested location.

Activists have achieved direct effects by adopting a myriad of different tactics. In particular, social movements and organizations scholars have shown that external activists often use contentious tactics, such as protests, calls to boycott, or even sabotage, to create disruption (Luders, 2006), reputational (Baron & Diermeier, 2007; King, 2008; McDonnell & King, 2013), and capital costs (e.g., King & Soule, 2007; Vasi & King, 2012). Researchers have found that contentious tactics are particularly costly to organizations when they garner significant press attention or occur during a period of organizational vulnerability (King & Soule, 2007; King, 2008). For example, King & Soule (2007) show activists can impact a target firm’s stock price by “staging public protests and garnering media coverage.” Additionally, King (2008) finds that firms were more likely to respond to activist boycotts when the target firm had recently experienced reputational damage or a decline in sales.

Despite a fairly robust literature on how activists use disruptive tactics to extrapolate concessions from firm leaders and a growing literature on how firm leaders respond to such contentious activism, these studies focus on external activists. The vast majority of extant
research shows that employee activists tend to use persuasive, influence approaches when attempting to change their organizations’ practices and policies (for a review, see: Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Scholars have shown that employee activists are reticent to adopt the more contentious tactics that external activists embrace, due to their resource dependence on the firm and given their access to internal decision-making channels (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Kellogg, 2011; Briscoe, et al., 2014; DeCelles, et al., 2020; Heucher, et al., 2024). While their persuasive efforts are not always successful, researchers have shown that employee activists have achieved direct effects while taking a more tempered approach (for reviews, see: Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Heucher, et al., 2024). For instance, employee activists have gained domestic partner benefits for LGBT couples (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Briscoe, et al., 2014), implemented sustainability programs (Loundsbury, 2001; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), and changed hospital residency and staffing practices (Kellogg, 2011).

There are very few examples, however, of the responses that employee activists may elicit when using more contentious tactics. Soule (2009) provides a rare exception as she examines how employees at Polaroid in the 1970s protested the company’s decision to sell products that enabled South African apartheid. She explains that Polaroid took out advertisements in newspapers to “announce their wrongdoing,” “sent a team of experts to study the situation in South Africa,” and donated to local communities. Still, there is an open question about how firm leaders respond when their employees adopt contentious tactics to oppose organizational practices and policies, particularly as employees seem increasingly willing to do so, and how employee activists interpret such responses. Scholars have called for more research that examines the different responses employee activists may elicit from firm leaders (e.g., Soule, 2012; Briscoe, et al., 2014; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Wu & Liu, 2023; Heucher, et al., 2024).

**SECONDARY CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIVISM**

Beyond the direct effects that activists may achieve, activists may impose secondary consequences when they target a firm. For example, McDonnell, King, and Soule (2015) show that when firm leaders respond to being the target of activism by adopting social management devices—such as annual reports or internal committees that monitor social issues—they are more likely to be the targets of activism again, as these mechanisms provide disclosures that activists may use to launch future campaigns. Briscoe and Safford (2008) demonstrate that when activists succeeded in gaining concessions from firms that were known to previously resist activism, more mainstream firms adopted the same contested practices, as the resisting firm’s adoption signaled that the practice had become less contentious. Odziemkowska (2022) explains that firms often seek to collaborate with social movements after being contentiously targeted by activists, yet when moderate activists partnered with firms under threat, radical activists critiqued the decision, thus threatening the support and resources the moderate activists had moving forward. Moreover, DeJordy and colleagues (2020) found that, regardless of a firm’s adoption or rejection of activist demands, some activists continued to support other individuals advocating similar change in different organizations, providing advice and support.

This small, but burgeoning literature shows that how firm leaders respond to activism may be interpreted by activists in ways that shape future activist endeavors. Activists may use the tools that were adopted to assuage their concerns over social issues to gather information to
start new campaigns (McDonnell, et al., 2015), activists may use other firms’ adoption of policies as benchmarks to sway peer firms (Raeburn, 2004; Briscoe and Safford, 2008), and radical activists may use firms’ desire to partner with moderate activists to criticize moderates and constrain their future support. Given the magnitude of these secondary consequences, it is important to understand how activists interpret firm leaders’ responses to their initiatives and how these interpretations fuel or constrain their change efforts.

In this paper, I consider how employee activists interpreted firm leaders’ response to their use of contentious activism tactics. In doing so, I show the different ways organizational leaders responded to contentious activism. I also show how employee activists’ interpretations of these responses impacted their movement’s momentum. In particular, I explore how employee activists reframed big wins—instances where firm leaders acquiesced to all of the employee activists’ demands—as smaller wins to broaden their social change objectives and continue their social change efforts. Additionally, I examine how employee activist coalitions fractured in the face of partial wins—when organizational leaders acknowledged the concerns of activists and offered some concessions—as activists pursued niche change initiatives or accepted the resolution as sufficient. Furthermore, I consider how employee activists reframed their losses, when leaders rejected all of their demands. Finally, building on DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca, and Creed’s (2020) finding that activists may support other activists, regardless of their own movement’s outcome, I show how employee activists used internet technologies to train, fund, and support other employee activists beyond their own movement’s objective, instead spanning their reach to employee activists in other organizations and with different goals (see Figure 3). This research has important theoretical and practical implications as it examines the direct effects of contentious employee activism as well as the secondary consequences of it.

DATA AND METHODS

I rely on interviews with employee activists as well as archival data and participant observation in a three-day activism training to explain how employee activists interpreted leadership responses to their contentious activism, how these responses enabled or constrained their movement’s momentum, and how employee activists went on to use internet technologies to build lasting capacity across movements and organizations (see Figure 2).

Data Collection

Archival and Open-Source Data. To examine when and how professional employees are engaging contentious activism to protest a variety of topics within their organizations, I created a database of white-collar employee activism incidents, using news articles about the events. I focused my data collection on press coverage of employee activism events, rather than the individuals who chose not to engage in activism. Similar to Scully and Segal’s (2002) rationale, I considered that current social movement and organizations literature offers a wide array of explanations as to why employees might not engage in activism (e.g., Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; DeCelles, et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars have found value in studying employee activists from the activist perspective to understand how they mobilize and organize their actions, sustain their movements, frame their demands, and attempt to mitigate the risks they face (e.g., Meyerson, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002; Raeburn, 2004; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016; DeJordy et al., 2020). Relying on Zald & Berger’s (1978)
definition of social movements in organizations as attempts to use “unconventional politics” to create change, I first sought to identify individual professionals or groups of professionals who were using unconventional approaches to raise ideas and concerns about their organizations.

I searched online databases, including Google News and Globalnewstream, for press coverage of such events between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2022, alongside several undergraduate research assistants; this yielded nearly 200 incidents across dozens of organizations. We logged and coded approximately 1,000 corresponding press articles to identify the tactics employees used, leadership responses, the number of employees participating, and the topic prompting action. We also used the press articles in this database to begin identifying individual employee activists.

**Interviews.** I created a second database with thousands of employee activist names and searched for contact information to reach out to these individuals for interviews, again alongside a few undergraduate research assistants. We found contact information for hundreds of activists involved in various events, and I conducted cold outreach. The number of leads for each activism event varied greatly as some activists worked to conceal their identities due to perceived risk or early managerial responses (e.g., firings), whereas other activists openly signed petitions and spoke to reporters, enabling me to gather more leads. The collective or individual nature of the incidents also varied. While I collected data on employees using “unconventional” approaches to speaking up or speaking out regardless of whether they acted alone or assembled a coalition, in this paper, I focus on collective and public efforts to raise work-related concerns.

As I began reaching out to individuals to interview, I realized many of the activists in my initial database had taken a leadership role in activism incidents, likely a function of who chose to speak to press or who journalists quoted. While I was keen to explore the perspective of primary organizers and draw heavily on their perspective in this paper, I also wanted to consider the perspective of individuals who joined these movements. Thus, to source these individuals, I searched for public petitions and used these lists of hundreds, sometimes even thousands of employees, to find publicly available contact information and request interviews. I reached out to individual activists via email, personal websites, or LinkedIn. I limited my cold outreach to former employees, reduce the potential risk of participating in my study.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 employee activists from 14 technology and consumer goods firms via Zoom (or on request, Google Meet). In this paper, I draw on interviews with 14 employee activists who led contentious movements and 26 employee activists who joined contentious movements (see Table 6). Many of my interviews came from former Google (19) and Amazon (10) employees. Several interviewees spoke to more than one activism event (as they moved between companies or engaged in multiple issues within one company. The higher representation of Google, Amazon, and Facebook in my sample was likely a result of a combination of factors. First, there may have been more press attention to big name tech firms as regulatory issues emerged in popular press. Second, each of these companies had public petitions that I used to source activists; in particular, the Amazon climate change petition had 8,700 employee signatures and Google had several public petitions with hundreds of signatures each.

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3 We cross checked our results with the crowdsourced database hosted on collectiveaction.tech to identify any incidents that fit our search criteria that we may have missed. Then, we searched for press on these events.
In these interviews, I asked about the individual’s background and goals, the highlights and frustrations of their job and their organizational membership, their attempts to raise ideas and concerns at work both individually and collectively, and how they considered the risks and benefits of speaking up or speaking out about work-related issues. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, except four who asked to not be recorded. During the interviews that I did not record, I took notes directly into my computer and immediately revisited the transcript to clarify any shorthand I used during the meeting. These interviews ranged from 30 minutes to just under three and a half hours; on average, they lasted about 72 minutes. Several individuals sent me documents during our interviews, such as training materials they used. At the end of these interviews, I asked participants for referrals. Approximately 73% of my interview sample came from cold outreach to contacts identified through press coverage. The other 27% came from snowball referrals. Men comprised approximately 60% of the sample, women comprised approximately 38% of the sample, of these individuals approximately 8% told me they were transgendered, and one interviewee identified as nonbinary.

**Participant Observation.** I also engaged in participant observation of a three-day training workshop for employee activists. Tech Workers’ Coalition hosted the event on Zoom and the organizers approved my participation. The training was conducted through webinar style lectures, interactive de-brief sessions, and a simulation; the event had more than 400 registered attendees (though attendance varied in individual sessions). The sessions were co-led by employee activists from previous decades and current tech activists. Trainers discussed how to raise awareness of issues, compared in-person and remote organizing, addressed concerns around managerial surveillance and retaliation, and hosted hands-on workshops to create zines, navigate ethical quandaries, and consider the future of organizing. Organizers used Google docs to compile community norms and collect key takeaways. After the training, I continued to receive newsletters from the organization every few weeks, spotlighting ongoing activism efforts.

**Data Analysis**

To begin, I coded interview transcripts in several phases (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, I used open coding to explore the topics activists discussed in interviews. Some of my interview codes mirrored my archival database coding (discussed above), including codes for employee tactics, leadership responses, number of employees participating in the movement, and the topic or cause of the action. Other codes were unique to the interview data, such as codes that addressed activists’ emotional states, their approaches to building coalitions, disagreements between activists over tactics, their views on leadership responses to activism, as well as their perceptions of company culture and their perceptions of risk.

I later used an axial coding approach to consider the relationships between these topics. This helped me to uncover how activists interpreted leadership responses to their contentious activism as I began to examine the movements in categories: big wins, partial wins, and losses. Using selective coding, I identified how activists framed these results and how the outcomes and activists’ framing either enabled or constrained their movement’s momentum. I also explored how activists went on to support other activists, across movements and organizations, using internet technologies.

Furthermore, I wrote memos after each interview about the interesting ideas, puzzling dynamics, and consistencies or variance with other activist accounts. I also wrote an
overarching memo for every five to ten interviews that I conducted to consider how I should adjust my interview questions to gather information on emerging topics of interest. In addition to this inductive coding and memo writing process, I grouped interviews by movement and compared accounts across organizer and joiner perspectives to examine how movement participants’ accounts aligned or differed from those of the activists leading these efforts.

Thus, I began to focus on the how movement organizers interpreted leadership responses as well as how movement participants experienced and interpreted these processes. As I re-read the social movements and organization literatures on firm responses to contentious activism, I realized there was a gap in the literature around how firms respond to employees who use disruptive tactics as well as how employee activists interpret leadership responses to their activism. Below, I discuss how employee activists interpret leadership responses to their contentious activism as well as how these responses and activists’ framing of them enable or constrain the group’s momentum. I also explain how employee activists worked across movements and organizations to train, fund, and support other employee activists, regardless of the outcome of their own contentious activism.

**EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS USED BIG WINS TO BROADEN THEIR CHANGE OBJECTIVES**

**Some Employee Activists Experienced Big Wins**

Some employee activists experienced big wins, where firm leaders acquiesced to all their demands. Among the activists I interviewed, Amazon climate change activists [Amazon Employees for Climate Justice] experienced the clearest big win as a result of their contentious activism, as employee activists told me that the demands that they initially set forth were met by leaders. To protest Amazon’s impact on the climate, Amazon employee activists engaged in a shareholders’ resolution, created a large-scale public petition, gathered statements from employees about why they believed the company should make these changes, and organized a walkout. An Amazon activist summarized these tactics; he said,

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There was a petition, there was the protest out by the spheres… a bunch of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice gathered by the Amazon Spheres, which is the main building, the headquarters in Seattle. And then after that, they recorded videos, a clip of people holding a sign that's said, I stand for climate justice… and they put together a board, a proxy vote…
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One of the movement leaders at Amazon elaborated on the contentious tactics the group used; he told me,

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[We] did a shareholder resolution… If you're a corporate worker at Amazon, you probably have some Amazon stock as part of your compensation. So, you're eligible to file shareholders’ resolution… that was a smart decision. It provided a narrative… especially as we were thinking about talking to the media… there's sort of a horse race competition that's appealing for media… The other thing is in the shareholders’ resolution process, there are these moments where the company is sort of obligated legally to respond. You submit the resolution, and they have to say whether they're going to challenge it and print some kind of… statement of “the board recommends you vote no and here’s why.” So, there are built-in mechanisms where they have to respond to you… everybody understood that the shareholders’ resolution itself wasn't going to pass. But we were using it as a tool to drive interest and to focus the media… We ended up showing up at the shareholders’ meeting, a bunch of us Amazon workers, wearing the same white shirts… we were able to then have a press conference outside afterwards. Previously, we had done other things like we circulated a petition internally and published it on Medium. That drove a lot of interest because we ended up getting more than 8,000 [employee signatures]…we managed to get a story in New York Times.

The day before their planned climate strike, Amazon leaders published a statement where they committed to using 100 percent renewable energy sources by 2030, to be carbon neutral
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by 2040, and to regularly report on emissions; in the immediate term, Amazon purchased 100,000 electric delivery vans to signal its commitment (e.g., Selyukh, 2019). Several Amazon activists pointed out that Amazon leadership almost certainly announced the concessions just before the employee protest to “take the wind out of their sails.” For instance, one Amazon activist joked that in the immediate aftermath of leaders agreeing to all the employee activists’ demands, activists were not sure how to proceed. He said,

I think it's really funny, actually… to be on the internal mailing list with all these supporters, it kind of took the wind out of [our] sails a little bit when Amazon basically like responded in the affirmative… it was like oh, what do we ask for now? Damn.

The Amazon activist quoted above told me that he believed firm leaders agreed to the concessions because they were probably planning to take some of these actions already and negotiating with employees simply meant doing so sooner. He emphasized, however, that Amazon leaders were careful to avoid acknowledging that employee pressure prompted these initiatives. He said,

I think they [leaders] played the playbook of accelerating things, slightly moved things [they already intended to do] forward. They announced their climate pledge [right] before our big protests… the classic take the wind out of their sails sort of moves. And, on the climate [initiatives], it was somewhere where they were open to that. I think workers’ rights is somewhere where they were not, where it is purely zero sum in their opinion. With climate there's a little bit of… we are prepared to negotiate here, just not in a way that directly gives any credit to the other side [employee activists], because it is Amazon. They never told AECJ (Amazon Employees for Climate Justice) [it was] because you did this… they were like, we totally did it independently. But coincidentally, we're doing what you requested. You're not the boss of me sort of vibes.

**Employee Activists Reframed Their Big Wins as Smaller Wins to Build Momentum**

In response to these concessions, Amazon activist organizers reframed their “big win”—gaining the concessions their movement set out to achieve—into a “smaller wins” (Reay, Golden-Biddle, German, 2006; Amabile & Krammer, 2011) to fuel further organizing activities. Amazon activist leaders told me that they wanted to show movement participants and potential new supporters that contentious, collective activism was an effective way to create change and cultivate momentum for other social change efforts. They did this by broadening their goals and by retelling stories of their “win” within the movement as well as externally. The same activist quoted above explained, “It bought us a lot of positive PR around [showing] Amazon is, they [leaders] are listening, they are responding.” Similarly, an Amazon organizer told me it was essential to “show” employees that disruptive collective action worked as the group decided what issues to pursue next. She said,

We found that you need to *show* people, you can't just tell them this is the way to win. They’ve got to learn it through experience. We had to start working on campaigns that would get some early wins so that people would learn through doing that, hey, this actually works. The biggest thing we got was the 2019 global climate strike, where a few thousand Amazon employees walked out and we won the global climate pledge. That was really agitational for folks more than any kind of [conversation] we could have because they could feel being part of something larger and then see very clearly… Amazon announced the pledge the day before the walkout and all the media covered it, saying Amazon workers demanded this and they got a win because they threatened to walk out. It was the best teaching moment we could have.

The same organizer explained that in addition to showing fence-sitters that these methods were effective, it bolstered enthusiasm among core supporters. She explained,

We were all riding pretty high right around that walkout and the time of the pledge announcement. It was incredible… it might be the clearest and biggest singular win in my whole life… I don't think it is that common for it to be such a big win and so clearly attributed to workers organizing… I couldn't have orchestrated it writing fiction, I would have maybe not even come up with such a clear, great story… people really felt the empowerment from it and motivation from it. Because of the order it happened… One of the things we talked about is how it's really important for us to tell our own story, even to ourselves who were
there, because it helps build up that excitement and memory of it… We were with some of our core leaders and onboarding some new leaders and telling our story again… and people who were around at the time were like, “I forgot about that; that was great.” We need to keep reminding ourselves of our wins...

In addition to energizing the movement’s existing supporters, the activist organizer explained that telling the success story externally also helped them to attract new recruits. She told me,

People have come to us and said, “I was listening to this great podcast How to Save America on How to Save The Planet” [a show] where two of our leaders were interviewed… telling the story of how we won the climate pledge. And people said, I heard that, and I got so excited, I wanted to join…

Despite some euphoria surrounding their “big win,” the organizer explained that reframing these concessions as a small step for broader social change was critical in continuing their organizing efforts after the movement had achieved its original stated objectives. She said,

This is a long-term thing that is not going to even be done in my lifetime… we [have to be] in it for the long haul. Because even the climate pledge that we've won at Amazon, it is not enough… it's too little, too late. And there needs to be accountability. And the only way to have real accountability for Amazon to follow through on it is to keep a powerful worker organization built up to hold the company accountable… tech worker organizing [needs] to go towards long-term power building and lasting worker organizations that can hold their companies accountable…

Thus, she explained that organizers of this movement emphasized loftier goals for continued action on climate and began to broaden their aspirations to include helping warehouse workers achieve better working conditions. She said,

Obviously, there's a lot we need to do about climate. There's a lot of pledges out there. Yet, emissions are still rising, we are nowhere near on the pathway we need to get to basically in a decade… there is a lot of accountability work… Amazon, for example, is still selling artificial intelligence machine learning to oil and gas companies to help them extract more quickly and find new wells and mines… we've [also] been focused a lot on the disproportionate impact pollution has on communities of color and how Amazon's warehouses are sited more often in communities of color so that's an angle we're really pushing on hard and trying to have a harder look at like how Amazon's siting policy works, how they decide to where they expand warehouses and how they're bringing more pollution and more congestion into communities of color…

A separate Amazon activist told me that the group had expanded in two ways since gaining the climate concessions from leaders. First, the group grew beyond Amazon employees to include groups at Google and Microsoft; she noted, “It [started] as white-collar Amazon employees. But then, Google also got involved and Microsoft, each of those now has an offshoot of this group.” Second, she explained that the group of activists had taken on issues outside of climate, including supporting warehouse workers in their bid for unionization. She told me,

It's [the group Amazon Employees for Climate Justice] very permanent. It still exists today, and they actually helped with the unionization efforts that Amazon recently lost, or workers won. It started off with climate change, then once the climate pledge stuff happened it was like, oh that takes all the air out of our anger now that we got what we wanted. So, it turned into how do we support other causes while still caring about the climate? So, you'll notice in some of the reports, when they're talking about the unionization efforts, they sometimes bring up this Amazon Employees for Climate Justice group, which is like, what does that have to do with unionization? But this group now has so many resources that they help other groups…

Yet another Amazon activist described the group’s new focus on warehouse workers’ rights to me. He said,

Starting in the spring of 2020, we started working together across workers’ rights and climate justice… Initially, a lot of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice was white collar, corporate workers advocating for better climate. Starting in 2020, especially around the health stuff in the warehouses, we started having more events where [warehouse] workers were involved; even, internationally, we had workers from like a warehouse in a fulfillment center, or a warehouse in Poland and a warehouse in the US…

However, Expanding Their Social Changes Objectives Was Not Straightforward
Despite their efforts to build on their achievements, Amazon climate activists told me that it was not easy to preserve a coalition of corporate employees who agreed to lobby for climate change as the group broadened its focus. Amazon activists explained Amazon leaders became less willing to tolerate ongoing demands after they committed to the first climate pledge and that the riskiness of lobbying for workers’ rights was markedly different than pressing for action on climate change. Additionally, some supporters were not as passionate about, or at times even friendly towards, unionization and workers’ rights efforts as climate change. For example, the Amazon activist quoted above told me that despite engaging in nearly every disruptive action around climate change efforts (e.g., shareholders’ resolutions, petitions, walkouts, viral video content), his manager only offered him a “friendly warning” when he took part in a “sick out,” advocating for warehouse workers. He said,

Amazon leaders started being like, “okay, we've done the climate pledge, this is no longer something we're going to allow to play out” the vibe was “we're...gonna start telling people they shouldn't be doing this.” The only time I ever had pressure applied was April 2020, we did a sick out where we had people giving speeches for the day… I enjoyed marking my calendar “sick.” I think I said something about Amazon Employees for Climate Justice like, “I'm sick of f***** with the climate…” I got an email from my boss that was basically one line, “be careful with this stuff.” And that was the only time anyone ever responded to my actions around this. That's why I say something started changing, because [I] heard… leadership had circulated memos about what was happening. He [my manager] was not surprised, he didn't ask clarification questions. He just sent me [that] email… and he's pretty liberal and he also cares about the environment…

The same activist explained that he “started to dial back [his] involvement with AECJ” and noted that many of the group’s supporters “had not signed up” for this new substantive focus. He said,

I will say after that was probably the peak of my engagement with Amazon Employees for Climate Justice… they, made a choice to focus on workers’ rights, which is correct, but also not what a lot of people who had signed up had asked them to do… I think there were a lot of people, honestly, a lot of corporate workers who were like we need to fight for the environment, then it became and we need to pay like better wages in the warehouses. Everyone's like, whoa, whoa, I was on board for the environment, but you know, I don't know if we're [ready for] “all right, Comrade.” So, it sort of petered out…

A separate Amazon activist who was heavily involved in the group tried to explain the shift from climate justice to workers’ rights by explaining that after the group’s win in 2019, warehouse workers’ welfare became timely in 2020 during covid. Still, he also acknowledged that the shift in focus brought more retaliation from Amazon leadership. He said,

The focus had been on climate issues… but, during the shock of the COVID lockdown, there was this period, where suddenly we really needed to focus on this [warehouse workers’ rights issues], because it's happening right now. All these people who are working in warehouses were at much greater risk than we were… I think if we had stuck more closely to climate, especially if we had stuck to the traditional, largely white activist approach to climate, I think they [Amazon leaders] wouldn't have cared... But the thing that really triggered the more harsh crackdown was we were starting to connect with people in the warehouses during COVID. And, they didn't like that. We tried to put together some Zoom calls and stuff between tech workers and warehouse workers. And, we did like a full day of live stream programming during the lockdown where we encouraged a bunch of tech workers to walk out virtually, don't go to work, instead go hear directly from people in the warehouses talking about conditions… trying to highlight that and to connect those folks with tech workers to support them, I think that's where the decision was made by leadership to shut this down.

Yet another Amazon activist told me his involvement with the movement tapered out as the group changed its focus. He said,

When the group [Amazon Employees for Climate Justice] shifted, when the original reason why people joined Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, was not important anymore… I was on board for climate change, but not for unionization, that changes the conversation altogether… I’m sure there is an overlap of people who are interested in both, but not everyone, so, why not just go form another group?

Still, a separate Amazon activist confirmed,
This is why coalitions are very challenging, you're bringing together people who may have completely
different interests. And, they may go along somewhat [with a new cause], but it's not really their passion.
Or, maybe with it [the new cause] you might attract more people, but you might lose people too as opposed
to being very specifically focused on climate issues and [just] pressuring Amazon into their list of demands
regarding pollution and shit…

Thus, in response to leaders’ concessions to their climate change demands, Amazon
employee activists reframed their “big win” as a “smaller win” and sought to expand both
their goals for stopping climate change as well as shift their focus to advance other issues,
such as workers’ rights. Organizers emphasized the importance of “re-telling stories about
their wins” both internally to boost enthusiasm among current supporters and externally to
attract new supporters. However, as the group tried used their “win” to build momentum for
future organizing, they attracted more retaliatory attention from Amazon leaders and
frustrated some supporters who believed the new focus was too far afield what they originally
agreed to support.

WHEN EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS EXPERIENCED PARTIAL WINS, THEIR
COALITIONS OFTEN FRACTURED

Some Employee Activists Experienced Partial Wins

Some employee activist movements experienced partial wins, when firm leaders conceded
to some activist demands or offered a meaningful gesture to acknowledge employee concerns
and offset the negative externalities that employees highlighted but did not acquiesce to all
their demands. Among the activists I interviewed, there were a few examples of “partial
wins,” including activists protesting Google’s handling of sexual harassment claims (Walkout
for Real Change) as well as Wayfair employees who opposed selling beds to U.S.
Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. Google activists compiled stories of discrimination
and harassment at work, staged a large-scale walkout, and publicly “tracked” Google leaders’
progress against the demands they made. One Google activist told me,

The walkout organizers made sure it wasn't just a let's stand arou
nd thing. There were two organizing
actions associated with it. One was during the walkout when, first, they alerted the press. So, the press
showed up and interviewed people… also, people got up and gave testimonials about their own experiences
of harassment and retaliation at Google. And everybody was there to witness. The other thing was a
[separate gathering] where people spoke out about their experiences and… they came up with a set of
demands, they publicized the demands very widely… they set up a tracker website that was “Have our
demands been met?” and listed each of the demands and the current status and just hammered on it for
months…

Similarly, Wayfair activists created a petition, staged a walkout, and publicly shared why they
were opposed to their organization selling products to U.S. Immigrations and Customs
Enforcement. An organizer at Wayfair explained,

[We] drafted this letter and started passing it around. We wanted to get 1,000 signatures…and did in the
span of like three days… and [Wayfair leaders] called a meeting… [and said] it's a business… we picked
that apart pretty heavily… then, they called another townhall meeting. And we were like… you could do the
right thing now and not sell the beds. But of course, they didn't. Looking back, that was probably never their
intention… and someone stood up and said, are you going to listen to us? And essentially, he [Wayfair
executive] said no. So, then [we] were like, we're gonna walk out. That's when people started speaking to
news outlets spreading it around. Ayanna Presley [United States Congresswoman] reached out to us, which
was very exciting. We organized the walkout in another day or two… we had something like 700 people.
Wayfair had a policy of not speaking to press… you're not allowed to talk negatively about your company
… [instead] there was someone just standing in the center with a microphone talking to the crowd… and the
press was filming, I didn't give an interview to any press directly. I know a couple other people did. But if
Employee Activists Interpreted Partial Wins as Management Co-optation

In each of these cases, company leaders acknowledged employee activists’ concerns without conceding to the full demands. Employee activist organizers often interpreted these partial wins as “management co-optation” of their movement or attempts to “manage dissent” without resolving the concern. For instance, Google executives conceded to some employee demands after the sexual harassment walkout, such as improving reporting processes for sexual harassment and, later, agreeing to end mandatory arbitration in sexual harassment cases. However, Google leaders rejected more systemic requests from activists including that the Chief Diversity Officer answer directly to the CEO and offering employee representation on the Board of Directors (Bhuiyan, 2019). Moreover, some Google leaders participated in employees’ protests. One of the walkout leaders said,

I think Google’s response to the walkout was really interesting. They wanted to frame the [employee] walkout as letting off steam, which is why they all got involved in it, well they all coopted it. A lot of executives did it [walked out with employees] because it was convenient for them to say, “this was about Andy Rubin, which was years ago, before a lot of the current leadership was in place and now, we are different, that was a mistake, it was a one-off.” But [even so] they couldn’t address the systemic issues that led to a lot of that heat, you know? The walkout, I think one of the flagship things that happened there was creating this list of demands which are really getting at shifting around the system in ways that threaten the power, and they [leaders] really hand waived over that.

An activist who participated in the walkout explained how the sentiments of movement supporters shifted from the time of the protest to after Google leaders issued a response. She said,

The walkout… felt like an optimistic act at the time, the energy was very historic. It was like… everyone thinks this is wrong. So, we are going to demonstrate that this is wrong, and the company… will see we have demonstrated, and they will take action… but, it [became] managed dissent…. it felt like there was a little optimism following the walkout. There were meetings, I vaguely know [one of the organizers] and she was being very positive about it [initially]; it felt like there was progress being made. After a couple months, it was clear that not so much… nothing was happening, there were some concessions to the demands but, it wasn’t all of it and some people were starting to talk about some retaliation and it felt disappointing. I was disappointed, I talked to some other people who were disappointed.

Another Google activist explained that despite the historic turnout for the protest, Google leaders failed to meet the movement’s full list of demands. He said,

[That] was the women's walkout at Google where 20,000 people around the world walked out in response to a widely reported news story of an executive being paid off after being credibly accused of sexual harassment. And, more importantly, a culture where women at the company had been experiencing everything from mild sexual harassment… to much more like sexual assault… And one of the things that came out of that was a list of five demands, none of which Google fully met. There were two… [that were kind of met]… One was basically, no one should have to go into HR alone when they're dealing with discrimination and sexual misconduct. This is coming from the victim side, but it's also true on the other side of it. And the other demand actually was ending forced arbitration, forced arbitration being policies that companies get their own special court system where they always win.

A different Google activist described firm leaders’ response to the walkout as “lukewarm,” explaining that Google leaders knew they needed to appease infuriated employees, but they had no interest in adopting the systemic changes organizers had requested. He said,

The walkout organizers had a list of demands or steps that they wanted Google's leadership to take to address the problem. And after some time had gone by, it was clear to me that leadership was like, well, we will say some nice words. But we're not actually taking the steps or even referencing [most of] the demands directly… They were like, look at all the [other] steps we're taking. And it was like, okay, but you haven't, mapped them to what was actually asked for, right? I felt like their response was lukewarm. Like, there's
currently a flashpoint of annoyed employees, we don't want everybody to rage quit, so we're going to say some soothing words, while not actually making any structural changes.

In a separate example, Wayfair executives made a large donation to the Red Cross after employee activists opposed selling beds to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement amid family separation policies, leaders also established a small internal group to create guidelines for business-to-business sales, and granted employees paid time off to vote, but leaders refused to stop the sale to ICE (Zetlin, 2019). A Wayfair activist leader explained,

We did [make some gains]… things happened because of it [the movement]. It definitely wasn't what we initially wanted… the business transaction still happened, unfortunately… Wayfair [leaders] created a task force that would review all of our b2b [business to business] partners based on certain ethical criteria [to decide] whether or not we would work with them, the detention centers would probably still get past the ethical criteria. But it was more than there was before. We also won paid time off for voting, instead of having to take a sick day or a vacation day… things were a bit better… I think by that point, people were so jaded with Wayfair, it didn't really feel like a win. The biggest triumph was the paid time off for voting because it was right before the election. So, people were able to take paid time off to go vote in the presidential race. But in terms of why we originally walked out, it definitely felt like a letdown.

The Wayfair activist went on to say that she thought the contentious activism “did some good” and “definitely shook Wayfair, a significant amount,” despite falling short of its original goals.

**Activist Coalitions Often Fractured as Activists Pursued Niche Change Efforts or Accepted the Resolution**

Employee activists told me that when firm leaders offered some concessions or a meaningful gesture in response to their complaints, their coalitions often fractured as momentum for their change efforts waned and some activists split from the group to pursue niche change initiatives. For example, in the case of Google’s Walkout for Real Change, one of the walkout organizers explained that the movement’s momentum declined after Google leaders agreed to some demands and several activist leaders began to leave the firm. She said,

That day my boss marched, my boss's boss marched, everyone did it all together. But then we came back, and shit got real really quickly. First, Google [leaders] reached out and said, here are the actions that we are going to take. It was like 10% or 20% of what we had asked for. Then, it turned into, so what do we do now? Do we start negotiating? Do we come to the table? Do we try to do a second walk out? Do we write up a new list of demands? There was a core group of people, we started having these weekly organizer meetings, where we would all gather and talk to each other about these different strategies… but, things kind of fizzled a little bit, it was hard to get a lot more traction. Then, we started seeing the original group of walkout organizers, one by one leaving Google. And that was really disheartening. There were some debates as to what happened to them, whether they were pushed out. I know in [organizer’s name] specific case, she and I talked about this, she was basically offered a package. They [Google leaders] were like, we'll pay you for a year and you can just go, and she decided that she was going to do it. And I don't blame her at all…

Another Google walkout organizer explained that after Google leaders announced partial concessions, the group of original movement organizers fractured. She said some activist leaders sought to avoid attention amid concerns for their careers while others found specific avenues of change to pursue, and the remaining organizers struggled to capitalize on the movement’s momentum. She first described two organizers who stepped away from activism,

It’s so sad. There were two factions of organizers. One was the normies… the people who put themselves out there for this moment in time, like this woman [name] who went to go work for [media organization] afterwards, she’s incredibly career savvy and she really cares about these issues, but she’s not an organizer. And, same with this woman [name], she will never speak to the press, she wants it to be scrubbed from the record that she was ever involved with the walkout, even though she’s a really heart-driven person…

Ultimately, she’s really afraid of retribution and wants to keep building her career. She’s an executive at [different tech company] now. She wasn’t going to keep sticking her neck out, that’s for sure…
She also described an organizer who pivoted her efforts towards one of the demands that Google leaders did not agree to initially, but later announced they would incorporate after some of the movement’s supporters lobbied for legislative change. She explained,

There was this woman [name], she went on to do this whole thing around forced arbitration. That was really her thing. She created a piece of legislation on it and created a coalition around it… she’d been through forced arbitration herself and it gave her a fire to organize around that… She quit the group because she wanted more of a plan, and she wanted to run the show. And she went on to do that, God bless her.

Finally, she explained that the remaining organizers wanted to build on the movement’s momentum, but simply did not know how, noting that Google leaders had let employee activists “blow off some steam” and “registered the complaint” just enough to lessen supporters’ willingness to press for more radical changes. Exacerbated, she said, people felt like they blew off some steam and management really registered the complaint... But, having a more radical vision is what creates the tangible effects as opposed to these management co-opted women’s programs… I feel like that is the difficulty, how do you make change? I have no freaking clue… It’s such a complicated compromise at every turn and it’s really hard to remain idealistic.

Another Google activist reiterated this point. She told me that she believed the company’s leaders made just enough concessions to allow movement participants to “pat themselves on the back,” rather than persisting. She said,

There were [some] demands that were met. They [Google leaders] did make some changes that seemed positive, like around allowing people to have a support person in like HR meetings… it’s a really minor thing but it would have been super helpful for me because I was talking to two HR people, one of whom was a lawyer. So, there were these small changes. And [another] one was around arbitration. That’s a less small change to release people from binding arbitration. But I felt like people [movement supporters] kind of moved on. Like, you can pat yourself on the back, these good things happened.

She continued to explain that many of the initial walkout leaders ultimately left Google, making it difficult to persist and push for more substantial change. She told me, “Even the walkout organizers, most of them left, the final one was the one who was on my team, and she left a few months ago under weird, bad circumstances.” Another activist who participated in the Walkout for Real Change told me he joined the smaller group of supporters focused on ending forced arbitration, referenced above. He said,

I saw the walkout as a case where it was like Google is just not going to do these [demands], they [Google leaders] were given the opportunity and they said, no. So, we've got to get them to do it. And, there was a small team of people who spun off to take on the [arbitration] issue. Googlers for Ending Forced Arbitration was led by a couple of women who had been part of the walkout… it was about ten people. We hosted internal events, we spoke at external events, we started work to inform and educate lawmakers in Washington, D.C. about the problems of forced arbitration… So, we were able to work with Senators and House representatives to introduce a bill to eliminate all forced arbitration for employment and consumer contracts. Amusingly, the day before that was that bill was published, talked about, and [publicly] launched, Google ended forced arbitration for all full-time employees. So, we are certain that they heard it was coming and they did the right thing exactly before it would have looked really stupid to not do the right thing…

A different Google Walkout for Real Change organizer told me that, in the wake of some leadership concessions and stalled momentum, she turned to organizing efforts around improving parental leave at Google. However, after leaders ignored employee concerns on this topic, she decided to leave the company. She explained,

There can be this sense that if there are no immediate results, nothing happened, and it wasn't worth it. I think it's the opposite, the fact that it happened drove a lot of conversation and, it's going to shape our history for many years to come… I do think that [the walkout] was meaningful. We [organizers] met for a while. And then, I picked up a second issue. I became the organizer for parental leave at Google… I got
3,000 signatures for my parental leave petition… It was some of the same core group of organizers because there was this thought, we just need to continue to put the pressure on Google to make sure that employees have a voice… and this was about gender equality… that was a powerful [follow on movement] because we got the petition in front of people and we continued to press on this issue of equality… but it was just a total brush off [from leaders]… I did leave Google shortly after that.

Similarly, the Wayfair activist leader quoted above explained that the group’s ability to continue to press for change was hamstrung by leadership retaliation and turnover among the group’s leaders. She said,

It was real psychological warfare on some level… they [firm leaders] hired a law firm that helped advise on walkouts and protests… Most of the [organizers] eventually were edged out or left… One of the leaders left because she was sick of the company… So, some of it was [that] these people who were the real driving forces were gone… there were two that left before me, someone else was let go within the same month as me, and then, there were a couple [fired] after me. So, it was all probably within like a six-to-eight-month span. Not all of them were fired… but the majority were. I was let go. I know pretty much everyone who was involved in the core group is gone either by their own choice or they were fired for not performing, or whatever excuse Wayfair wanted to come up with. At the end of the day, once you’re a troublemaker, they want you out…

When firm leaders granted employee activists partial concessions or acknowledged their concerns and offered a meaningful gesture to offset some of the negative externalities that employees highlighted, employee activist leaders often framed the reaction as management cooptation of their movement and employee activist coalitions often fractured as some activists split from the group to pursue niche areas of change and other activists accepted the resolution.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS’ LOSSES BECAME REFERENDUMS ON CORPORATE VALUES AND LEADERS

Some Employee Activists Experienced Losses

Some employee activists experienced losses, when firm leaders did not offer any concessions in response to their contentious activism and doubled down on the existing business practice. Among the activists I interviewed, the clearest example of employees failing to gain any concessions from leadership despite engaging in contentious, collective action, was the group of employees who protested the Dave Chapelle comedy show at Netflix. Employee activists at Netflix organized a walkout and online programming for remote offices to signal their discontent with transphobic remarks in the program. One Netflix activist leader explained,

Initially our idea was to have a day of rest for trans people because we’d been going through so much stuff around this, then we decided to make it a walkout. Two hours after I sent the message about organizing that, I was fired.

Another of the movement’s leaders told me,

We had 2500 people participate in the walkout, and we only have 10,000 employees, we had basically [more than] 20% of the employee body participate in the [protest] either by walking out or by participating in one of the educational programs that we offered in [remote] offices. It was a huge response. And, internally, the company town halls were getting thousands of people signing up to ask questions and make comments.

Netflix activist leaders recognized that they did not achieve their initial goals. These activists explained that while they did not approve of the special being created, given the comedian’s history making offensive jokes, they also never asked that the special not air as they knew leaders would not agree to such a request. Instead, the activists said they asked to be included in the content decision making process as they wanted the opportunity to shape how this special was presented to audiences, by “adding context cards” or “recommending
other programming” alongside it that might help mitigate the harm they believed it would cause. The first Netflix organizer quoted above told me,

I know you can’t stop content from hurting someone, in this setting, but you can change the processes… I was offended as a trans person and as a Black person… but still, I could take that angle of like let’s pretend or even just say you don’t care about trans people, you forget that Black people can also be LGBTQ, this pits groups against each other, and it causes serious harms… still, it was never about stopping content, it was about deciding how to frame it… if they had taken us on as partners, we could have suggested people [also] watch other things that show greater context about the Black and LGBTQ community.

The other Netflix organizer said,

The content was so appalling that… it was like first of all, you know, pardon my French, but who the f*** thought this was a good idea? Why did we put this on this service? But more so, why didn't we get a heads up? Because it was really traumatizing. Why wasn't anybody consulted about how to make it better? Why didn't they ask us [the LGBTQ community at Netflix], should we add some warnings to it or some context cards or something?

Netflix leaders responded, first with a company-wide email from the CEO standing by the company’s decision to release the special and insisting that “distinguishing between commentary and harm is hard, especially with stand-up comedy which exists to push boundaries” and in a second memo saying, “content on screen doesn’t directly translate to real-world harm” (Weprin, 2021; Donnelly, 2021). Netflix leaders also, notably, changed the company’s popular “culture code” to include language that clarifies employees “may need to work on titles you perceive to be harmful. If you’d find it hard to support… Netflix may not be the best place for you” (Melor, 2022). After the initial email from the Netflix CEO was sent, activists told me that company leaders held several all-hands meetings to communicate with outraged employees while maintaining their position; however, as employees continued to engage in contentious activism, leaders shifted their tone and who led the response. One Netflix organizer said,

There was a lot of adrenaline running that whole week because people were not afraid to say how they felt the company had let them down. And were not afraid to pick apart their [Netflix leaders'] bullshit logic about we stand for creative freedom… people were really, really mad. And so, they [leaders] had another townhall, and then another one. I think we had three that first week. And by the third one, it was like who was representing Netflix varied from session to session. I think the first one was [name, the CEO] and [name] who is the Chief Product Officer. And then, the second one had [CEO name] and [Chief Product Officer name], and [name] from I&D [Inclusion and Diversity], and then the third one, [CEO name] wasn't there. It was [Chief Product Officer name] and [name], who was communications, and somebody else…

**Employee Activists Reframed Losses as a Referendum on Culture and Leaders**

When firm leaders refused to meet activists’ demands and doubled down on the business practices in question, employee activists reframed their losses as referendums on the organization’s leaders and culture. After the movement, Netflix activists shifted their focus from initial requests that they be included in discussions about framing potentially offensive content, instead insisting that their actions had “at least” forced leaders to be clear about their dismissive attitudes towards employee concerns and that, by prompting them to respond, their actions had revealed that certain leaders could not manage with empathy. While employee activists failed to change Netflix’s enacted values or organizational processes as they might have hoped, they viewed the operational disruption and public responses from leadership as a success in terms of changing the company’s espoused values (Schein, 2010) and revealing leadership styles within the company. One of the Netflix activists quoted above said, “Under different leadership, it would’ve been different… ultimately, the [movement] referendum became, who is Netflix under [CEO name]?” The other Netflix activist elaborated,
The [leadership] response to it was such a multi-dimensional fail… It was bad in the short term, but I think helped in the long term… The walkout and huge response from employees… [led to] four company townhalls in the first ten days… by the third [townhall], they [leaders] realized that [CEO name] was making it worse because of the idiotic things that he was saying… There were a bunch of internal emails sent from [CEO name] to employees… And those emails were completely tone deaf… the response that [CEO name] sent out, not once, but twice. He made it worse… he was not capable of thoughtfully addressing the questions coming from employees. [CEO name] just wasn't cutting it. He just kept saying stupid shit… it was just making people madder, they were like you do not get it. Once it became clear to leadership that he didn't get it, they pulled him out of those situations, and [put in] people who are more capable of understanding human emotion respond.

Netflix activists also credited the employee protests with prompting Netflix leaders to re-evaluate its widely publicized culture memo. The same Netflix organizer told me,

The employee walk out was a huge success in a lot of ways. I think it ultimately forced Netflix to put down on paper that they really don't care [about employee dissent]. Whereas before, the “we don't care of it all” was sort of the unspoken barrier, that those of us who were taking the company culture and the culture memo at its word were bumping up against, because we thought we were acting in accordance with what we had been told to do as employees... Although we didn't succeed in getting any of the like warnings or context cards or commitment to not platform Chappelle in the future, we got none of that, what we did get was we forced the company to review and revise its entire culture memo… it's that the not so invisible contract now of we don't care… it's like, well, at least we got you all to say the quiet part out loud.

The way that Netflix activists reframed their impact in terms of highlighting the CEO’s shortcomings and prompting leaders to change the culture code did not appear to be simply a post-mortem justification of their actions. The Netflix CEO later publicly apologized noting he “screwed up in those communications” by failing to “acknowledge that a group of our employees were in pain, and they were really feeling hurt from a business decision that we made,” recognizing his emails “lacked humanity.” He also noted that his comment about the potential for content to cause real world harm was “over-simplistic,” as a result of the emails being leaked out of context (Chan, 2021). Furthermore, several press articles covered the shift to the company’s culture memo with headlines such as “The End of Netflix’s Culture of Feedback” (Schifer, 2022). Ultimately, when leaders refused to meet any employee activist demands and reiterated their commitment to the status quo, employee activists reframed their loss as a referendum on firm leadership and emphasized their success in forcing the organization to clarify its “espoused values” (Schien, 2010) to eliminate hypocrisy.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISTS BUILD LONG-TERM CAPACITY ACROSS MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Regardless of the outcome of their own contentious activism, many of the activists I studied went on to support other employee activists across movements and organizations. These activists created robust networks, using internet technologies to train, fund, and support other employee activists. Unlike the activists in DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca, and Creed’s (2020) study who offered advice and moral support to activists pursuing similar social change initiatives (LGBT friendly workplace policies) in other organizations, the activists I studied often provided support to activists pursuing completely different types of social change. Moreover, these employee activists engaged in both informal and formal support structures; some activists purposefully sought to build lasting structures to improve access to resources for future activists.

Employee Activists Trained Other Activists Using Internet Technologies
First, employee activists often distributed resources online and hosted virtual training sessions. For example, several employee activists suggested I read the “how to” guides posted to Coworker.org—a “peer-based platform” with several prominent Google activist contributors. These guides cover topics such as how to organize a walkout, crowdsourcing employee data to promote transparency, and how to mobilize support from colleagues about concerns at work. The “how to” guide that advises would-be employee activists on steps to organize a walkout highlights a video from Amazon Employees for Climate Justice and links the group’s website complete with the movement’s demands and statements from participants about why they supported the movement as an exemplar.

Employee activists also hosted virtual training sessions; one former Google activist sent me the slides she uses to present to would-be employee activists. Another Google activist told me he attended virtual “activist training sessions” hosted by CODE (Campaign to Organize Digital Employees), which ran every few weeks. Additionally, I observed a virtual three-day “teach-in” event, hosted by the Tech Workers’ Coalition, where dozens of employee activists led carefully curated sessions on how to organize.

In addition to these more formal approaches to training activists, the employee activists I interviewed explained that they also engaged in informal training activities. Several Google activists told me that they participated in “organizing lunches” where leaders of different movements exchanged stories and lessons learned. One Google activist explained that after leading a movement at Google where leaders rejected all the activists’ demands (No Pride for Google), he was invited to participate in these organizing lunches, and later, he helped with several other activism initiatives at the company.

There were people who had been involved in organizing various other things who reached out after that [No Pride for Google movement] and said some people were holding these post walkout [Walkout for Real Change] organizing lunches in the San Francisco office and they invited me to come give a talk about what the [movement I organized] was all about and how it had gone… I got more involved in other people's organizing, circulated a couple of other issue petitions, and helped people. I gave some advice, mentorship… We were having these very organized organizing chats at this point, with lots of people and different things happening [across Google]… [outside of that] a lot of it was very informal, people came to me or were brought to me when they were in [activism] situations and they wanted advice… Similarly, one of the organizers of Google’s Walkout for Real Change told me that employee activists often made informal information guides to pass along best practices to activist organizers from other movements. She explained,

We had a young person who was really social media savvy but wanted to be behind the scenes, and they ran the Twitter for the walkout and other stuff. And they made a best practices guide and they shared it with people; it’s like thoughts on hashtags, thoughts on dealing with press. It literally is the Google approach to doing these sorts of things.

**Employee Activists Funded Other Activists Using Internet Technologies**

Second, the employee activists I studied leveraged internet platforms to fund new activists. For example, one Google activist donated the settlement money she won in a labor dispute to create a “Solidarity Fund;” she partnered with Coworker.org to distribute grants to other activists. She explained,

My current work is focused on peer support and mutual aid from worker to worker, to support people who are afraid of retaliation or have been retaliated against to show them that other workers have their back. That’s why I’m working on the Coworker Solidarity Fund. I trust workers to know what they need and what will work for them [in their setting]… part of what we did is we funded multiple $2500 grants…
The Google activist I quoted above who led the No Pride for Google initiative explained that he helped create the criteria to provide these grants. He first explained how the idea for the fund emerged from the aforementioned Google activist’s experience; he said,

It was first and foremost the brainchild of [Google activist name]. When she was leaving Google and getting mistreated on the way out, she pledged to take the money that she was pushing them to pay her to settle the claim and put it into starting a fund for supporting others and organizing. And that was the kernel where it started, that grew into the Coworker Solidarity Fund, which is a joint venture between a bunch of us involved in tech organizing and Coworker.org.

He continued to describe how the funds are collected and distributed. He told me,

It's a 501(c)(4), which means that donations are not tax deductible. But it does mean that the restrictions on activities are far fewer. And that's important, because basically what we do is we take money from workers who want to support organizing workers and we give it to workers who are organizing and ask for support. The donations are mostly pretty small. We give out grants, I want to say they're $2,500 right now… we don't place a lot of restrictions on the nature of your organizing. And we don't place any real restrictions on what you can do with the money… So, people use them for all sorts of things. People who've been recently fired use it to pay the rent. People who are part of a union drive use it to get a good handheld camera to live stream rallies. People use it to make stickers and t-shirts, or to pay lawyer bills. And we don't have to micromanage that.

He explained that the fund had grown as Coworker.org also collected donations and that donating was “a straightforward way” for time-strapped tech activists to “help.” He said,

We're basically trying to serve as a conduit for solidarity through money, because there's a lot of people who care and ask what they can do. And… sometimes the answer is, well, you could start showing up at these people's rallies, they're in your same city, but [it’s] like I have to go to work, I have to go get the kids from school. We all have a million things going on. And then they're like, but I had a good year, will 200 bucks help? So, [Name] initially had this idea and started working with Coworker.org to set us up. And it took just under two years, to get from her initial tweet saying dammit, I'm going to take that money and put it back into organizing to the first grants that we gave out…

Finally, he described how this distribution of funds enabled white-collar employee activists to provide assistance to both other white-collar employee activists as well as blue collar activists. He told me,

The committee is made up of mostly Google [activists], white-collar people… it's a work in progress. But, we sort of had the idea that this would be the first fund and we'd figure things out from there, there was an emergency fund for Netflix and Apple workers when organizing drives suddenly got big there too, we were able to spin up very quickly using the lessons from the general fund. And now there's a fund for Starbucks workers organizing… it's been really cool to stay involved and get some stuff done… It's pretty great to see people who we've given grants to run successful organizing campaigns. We supported a bunch of people who were heavily involved in the unionization at that first Amazon warehouse in Staten Island.

Tech Workers’ Coalition also collected donations to provide stipends to individuals who needed resources to attend the virtual teach-in event that I attended. On the group’s website and in confirmation emails, the organizers included a link to donate. They explain “the event is free, and we made this fund to help people cover the costs of attending a 3-day event, and for captioning, video editing, and other accessibility. If you have the means, please consider a suggested donation of $50-500.” The site lists the 83 contributors, some of whom are named while others are “incognito.” The site also makes the budget transparent, offering a description of how the money is distributed and how much to group has in its reserves.

**Employee Activists Supported Other Activists Using Internet Technologies**

Finally, employee activists told me that they relied on other employee activists for emotional support as they faced unique challenges while trying to create change their firms, noting they often found each other online (e.g., Twitter). A Google activist told me that after speaking up about sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the organization, she
needed to connect with other activists. She said, “I think about what I needed, and I needed a support group. I literally needed a room full of other female Googlers who had been through similar shit.” A different Google activist explained that activists supported each other by providing care as well as material support. She said,

There are lots and lots of resources [from former Google activists]… it's lessons and learnings, it’s tactical, it's labor, it's care... I think care manifests in terms of solidarity, emotional comfort, emotional support. Sometimes, it’s literally sending people food and money, but it's multifaceted... I think solidarity is the better word for it... support is both physical and emotional.

One of the Google Walkout for Real Change organizers told me that she connected with other employee activist leaders both inside Google and in other organizations to provide and receive advice and support. She explained,

We all know each other in the background, like [Name] or [Name] from Apple, they always reach out. [Google Activist Name] is really Godmother of the whole scene. And women from other places who have done climate organizing, there is a lot of sharing resources, sharing best practices, and helping to facilitate press. It is such a club, like [Name] and [Name] and all these people… it’s been like a sisterhood over the years… It’s a really hard line to remain principled and remain outspoken on these issues while also being able to maintain your professional reputation. That’s a tricky balance. After a certain point, if you’re talking too radically, then you’re threatening these institutions… we need [support].

Employee activists also designed and maintained digital spaces for activists to connect; for instance, Tech Workers’ Coalition (TWC) hosted robust Slack channels and distributed electronic newsletters. TWC also offered one-on-one virtual mentoring sessions to provide customized support. At the end of the teach-in event that I attended, TWC organizers posted a link to sign up for a mentoring conversation about workplace organizing.

These efforts to build long-term capacity across movements and organizations are an important secondary consequence of contentious employee activism. Social movement scholars have shown that resource mobilization is crucial to a movement’s success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and these efforts suggest that regardless of their direct effects, employee activists may help future employee activists become savvier in launching contentious movements by training them, funding them, and providing emotional support.

**DISCUSSION**

Scholars have found that external activists may achieve direct effects using contentious activism tactics as these tactics impose disruption, reputational, and capital costs on their target organizations (e.g., Luders, 2006; Baron & Diermeier, 2007; King & Soule, 2007; King, 2008; Vasi & King, 2012; McDonnell & King, 2013). However, the vast majority of research on employee activists shows that they achieve direct effects by adopting more persuasive tactics, relying on their insider knowledge of firm culture, decision making channels, and routines (e.g., Loundsbury, 2001; Scully & Segal, 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020; Heucher, et al., 2024), creating a gap in the literature around how firm leaders respond when employees engage in contentious activism. Moreover, researchers have shown that how firm leaders respond to activism carries important secondary consequences for the firm, including the potential to be targeted by activism again (McDonnell, et al., 2015; DeJordy, et al., 2020). I contribute to these findings, first, by showing how firm leaders may respond to contentious employee activism and, second, by exploring how employee activists interpret these responses in ways that may constrain or fuel their movement’s momentum. I also explore how employee activists may use internet technologies to train, fund, and support employee activists across movements and
organizations, creating access to resources that lays the groundwork for future contentious employee activism. Here, I expand my discussion of the direct effects and secondary consequences of contentious employee activism.

**Contributions to Literature on Direct Effects and Secondary Consequences of Contentious Activism**

Social movements and organizations scholars have demonstrated that external activists may use contentious tactics—such as protests and calls to boycott—to create disruption (Luders, 2006), reputational (King, 2008; McDonnell & King, 2013), and capital costs (e.g., King & Soule, 2007; Vasi & King, 2012) for targeted firms, prompting firm leaders to respond by resisting activism (Wu & Liu, 2023), ignoring activists (Ingram, et al., 2010; Piazza & Perretti, 2020), working alongside activists (McDonnell, 2016; McDonnell, et al., 2021; Odziemkowska, 2022) or conceding to activists’ demands (Luo, et al., 2016). Researchers have also shown that employee activists may achieve direct effects by using less contentious approaches to activism (for reviews, see: Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Heucher, et al., 2024). However, there are very few studies that examine how firm leaders respond to contentious activism tactics when employees are the ones using them (for a rare exception, see: Soule, 2009, which explores employee activists’ use of protest tactics in the 1970s).

Moreover, a small but growing body of literature shows that activism often has consequences beyond its direct effects. For example, researchers have shown that when firms grant concessions to activists, other activists may use the concessions as benchmarks to sway peer firms to change their policies (Raeburn, 2004; Briscoe and Safford, 2008). Scholars have also demonstrated that when firms adopt social management devices in response to being targeted by activists, activists may leverage these tools to launch new campaigns (McDonnell, et al., 2015). Furthermore, scholars have shown that after firms are targeted by activists, they may seek to partner with moderate activists to solve social problems, offering radical activists an opportunity to criticize these alliances and constrain the moderate activists’ future support (Odziemkowska, 2022). All of these findings suggest firm leaders’ decision to grant or deny concessions in response to activism is only one important outcome of an activist movement.

I contribute to these findings by showing how firm leaders respond to contentious movements led by their employees and how employee activists interpret these responses. I also show how employee activists’ interpretation of firm leaders’ responses fueled or constrained the momentum of their movements. In particular, I demonstrate that, in some cases, firm leaders may acquiesce to all employee activists’ demands. In this scenario, employee activists may reframe their “big win” as a smaller win to broaden their social change goals and continue their activism efforts. I show that when employee activists reframe a big win as an initial step to broader social change, they may face greater retaliation from exacerbated leaders and that some employee activists may not continue to support the movement as activist leaders shift to new initiatives.

Additionally, I show that firm leaders may respond to contentious employee movements by granting some concessions or making a meaningful gesture to acknowledge employee concerns. In these partial win scenarios, I show that employee activists may frame firm leaders’ responses as an attempt to coopt their movement or “manage” their dissent. I also show that in partial win scenarios, employee activist coalitions may fracture as some activists view firm leaders’ responses as sufficient, making it difficult for activist leaders to push for more systemic change, and some activist leaders may split from the larger group to pursue
change around specific unmet demands. Finally, I show that firm leaders may respond to contentious employee activism by rejecting activists’ demands and doubling down on existing business practices. In this scenario, I show how employee activists may reframe their loss, claiming they “at least” forced the organization to clarify its espoused versus enacted values to eliminate hypocrisy and highlighted the shortcomings of organizational leadership in addressing internal dissent.

**Contributions to Literature on Employee Activists**

As mentioned above, the vast majority of research on employee activists describes how insider activists use persuasive approaches to enact change in their organizations as they are dependent on their firms for resources and have access to internal decision-making channels (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Heucher, et al., 2024). Scholars have shown how employee activists temper their goals, engage in contextual sensemaking, mobilize small coalitions of peers, and leverage organizational routines to achieve direct effects (e.g., Dutton, et al., 2001; 2002; Scully & Segal, 2002; Creed, et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2011; Truelove & Kellogg, 2016; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Soule (2009) presents a rare exception as she examines how employees at Polaroid in the 1970s used contentious tactics to oppose the company’s decision to sell products that enabled apartheid in South Africa, and how they gained some concessions from firm leaders in response to their efforts. Recently, scholars have called for more research that explores how firm leaders respond to employee activists’ use of disruptive tactics and how employee activists interpret these responses (e.g., Soule, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Heucher, et al., 2024), as scholars have observed employees embracing more contentious approaches to enacting organizational change (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021; Davis & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, scholars of insider activism have shown that employee activists may support other activists pursuing the same social change in other organizations, regardless of the outcome of their own activist efforts. In particular, DeJordy, Ventressca, Scully, and Creed (2020) studied LGBT activists in the 1990s and found that these employee activists provided tactical advice and support to other activists seeking to implement LGBT friendly workplace policies in their organizations. The authors show that some activists remained engaged in these efforts even after failing to enact change at their own firm. Their study challenged previous notions of activism “in and around” organizations (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) and suggested that researchers must examine social change efforts as they persist “between and through organizations” (DeJordy, et al., 2020).

I contribute to the literature on employee activists, first, by showing how employee activists may use contentious tactics to change their organizational practices and policies, how firm leaders may respond to contentious employee movements, and how employee activists may interpret these responses. My study builds on Soule’s (2009) example of a successful contentious employee movement by offering cases of contentious employee movements that achieved their objectives, gained partial concessions, or failed to enact change. I also show the secondary outcomes of contentious employee activism by examining how employee activists interpreted firm leaders’ responses and how these interpretations fueled or constrained their movement’s momentum.

In addition to examining a range of possible outcomes associated with contentious employee activism, I explore how employee activists may remain engaged in activist efforts regardless of whether or not they achieve their initial objectives. Scholars have shown that
access to resources is crucial to a movement’s success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and researchers have called for additional research that examines how activists are using internet technologies to mobilize, organize, and sustain their movements (e.g., Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Davis & Kim, 2021). Here, I elaborate on DeJordy, Ventresca, Scully, and Creed’s (2020) findings, by showing that employee activists may use internet technologies to build lasting capacity for employee activists across movements and organizations. Whereas the employee activists that DeJordy and colleagues (2020) studied enabled other activists pursuing the same social change initiatives, I show how employee activists may train, fund, and support activists who are pursuing completely different social change objectives. I also show how white-collar employee activists may lend support and solidarity to blue-collar organizing efforts. Furthermore, by demonstrating how employee activists are using internet technologies to train, fund, and support other employee activists, I show how the opportunity structures they are creating are widely accessible and persistent.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper has several limitations and areas for future research. First, I rely on interviews with employees who organized or joined contentious activist movements. I did not speak with the firm leaders responsible for responding to employee activism. I present leadership responses to activism based on interviews with employee activists and my archival database, which relies on press reporting of these actions; however, leaders’ intentions and perceptions might be different than the views of activists or journalist accounts presented here. Future research could explore how firm leaders approach responding to employee activism.

Second, I interviewed left-leaning, progressive activists. While I did reach out to the small number of conservative activists that I was able to identify in press and corresponded with a couple via email, I was not able to capture the perspective of organizational members who may have felt strongly in the opposite direction of the activists I interviewed. Future research could consider how managers navigate workplaces with a mix of conservative and liberal employees who hold opposing viewpoints on various social, political, and moral work-related issues. In particular, scholars might explore whether and when individuals who participate in contentious activism represent only one of two or more opposing viewpoints of employees in their organizations, and thus, leaders must decide how to respond to employee activists not solely based on the disruption costs activists may impose but also by considering the potential cost of upsetting non-activist of employees. Future research might also consider if conservative activists organize their activism differently than their progressive counterparts.

Third, I examined employee activism across organizational perspectives and causes. In particular, I interviewed 52 insider activists in 14 organizations and relied on interviews with 40 of activists in my sample that engaged in contentious, collective action for this paper. While this perspective allows me to compare and contrast outcomes of different movements and examine how employee activists train, fund, and support other activists, there almost certainly are differences between these firms, activist causes, and their tactical repertoires that are not fully explored here. For example, I show Amazon climate change activists as winning full leadership concessions, but I cannot attribute such a win to the group’s strategy or tactics because the group’s cause of action, full set of tactics, and organizational setting differs from the other cases I presented. Indeed, climate change may represent an issue where leadership interests are more aligned with employee demands due to potential interests in climate impact from other stakeholders than, how Google handles employees’ sexual harassment complaints.
Future research quantitative research could explore how employee movements fare when the topic of concern, the organizational setting, and/or the tactical repertoire is held constant. Finally, I interviewed employee activists who engaged in contentious activism between 2018 and 2022, which was a relatively strong labor market, particularly for tech employees, which constitute the majority of my sample. While some activists discussed real financial constraints or visa concerns, which influenced their perceptions of risk, most activists expressed confidence that they could find alternate employment if they were fired as a result of their activism. Thus, many activists today may perceive greater risk in participating in contentious activism, given the significant layoffs in the tech sector since early 2023 (Hirschman, 1970). Future research could consider how the labor market impacts the willingness of activists to engage in disruptive tactics.

Conclusion
In sum, this paper explores the direct effects and secondary consequences of contentious employee activism. I explore how employee activists interpret firm leaders’ responses to their movements in three scenarios: big wins, partial wins, and losses. I show how, in big win scenarios—when firm leaders acquiesce to all activist demands—employee activists may attempt to reframe their success as a smaller win as they seek to broaden their social change objectives and continue their activism efforts. I demonstrate how in partial win scenarios—when firm leaders grant some concessions or offer a meaningful gesture to acknowledge activists’ concerns—employee activists may frame the response as management cooptation of their movement and activist coalitions may fracture as some activist leaders split from the group to pursue niche change efforts and some supporters view the firm response as sufficient. Furthermore, I show how in loss scenarios—when firm leaders reject activist concerns and commit to the business practice in question—employee activists may emphasize how their efforts forced leaders to clarify espoused versus enacted organizational values and highlighted the shortcomings of firm leaders in addressing employee dissent. Finally, I examine how employee activists, regardless of their movement’s outcome, may use internet technologies to train, fund, and support employee activists across movements and organizations.
References Chapter 3—Employee Activism and Its Aftermath: How Employee Activists Frame Leadership Responses and Build Future Capacity


Mellor, Sophie. “Netflix delivers a clear message to employees in new culture guidelines: If you don’t like our content, you can quit.” *Fortune* (2022).

https://fortune.com/2022/05/16/netflix-culture-guidelines-update-for-employees-following-dave-chappelle-backlash


Figure 3: How Employee Activists Framed Organizational Leaders’ Responses to Activism and Built Long Term Capacity Across Movements and Organizations

- **Big Wins**: Firm Leaders Acquiesce to All Employee Activist Demands
  - Example from Interviews: Amazon Employees for Climate Justice

- **Partial Wins**: Firm Leaders Offer Some Concessions or Meaningful Gesture, Acknowledge Complaint
  - Examples from Interviews: Google Walkout for Real Change (Sexual Harassment), Wayfair Employees Protesting Sales to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

- **Losses**: Firm Leaders Reject Employee Activist Demands, Offer No Concessions
  - Example from Interviews: Netflix Employees Opposed to Airing Dave Chapelle Comedy Special (Transphobic Remarks)

- Frame “Big Wins” as “Smaller Wins” to Capitalize on Momentum and Broaden Social Change Goals
- Interpret Concessions as Management Cooptation; Coalitions Fracture as Some Activists Accept Resolution, Others Pursue Niche Change Efforts
- Reframe Loss as Referendum on Corporate Values and Leadership

Many Employee Activists Use Internet Technologies to Build Long-Term Capacity Across Movements and Organizations

- **Train**:
  - Create and disseminate “how-to” guides across movements and organizations
  - Host training sessions for tech workers across movements and organizations
  - Host days long virtual "teach-in" events with webinar sessions, interactive debriefs, hands-on workshops, and simulations for new activists across the technology sector

- **Fund**:
  - Use labor rights settlements from companies and donations to create funds for employee activists
  - Offer small grants to cover childcare costs, lost income, or pay for supplies
  - Create or partner with non-profit organizations to maintain structure for accepting and distributing donations to employee activists

- **Support**:
  - Connect inside organizations across movements to discuss organizing
  - Create networks across organizations via social media to provide emotional support
  - Volunteer organizations (Tech Workers Coalition) host digital spaces (e.g., Slack channels) and in-person events to bridge activists; offer mentoring relationships
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“farewell” emails from activists
### Figure 4: Theoretical Contributions

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<td><strong>Employee Voice</strong></td>
<td>How leaders encourage employee voice inside firms</td>
<td>• Shows internal voice processes may be insufficient to encourage employees to speak up inside their firms (sufficient for work product and process related concerns, not social, political, or moral concerns)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Demonstrates new forms of retaliation for speaking up, such as mental health leave and communications training</td>
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<td>• Examines types of social, political, and moral concerns employee activists raise (answering calls for more studies on ethical voice)</td>
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<td>• Explores how external factors such as political polarization and pressure for companies to grow may both spur activists’ concerns and make them more difficult to resolve internally</td>
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<td>How insider activists mobilize and exit firms</td>
<td>• Shows how internal communication tools enable insider activists to mobilize larger scale coalitions, faster than previous tactics allowed</td>
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<td>• Demonstrates how internal communications tools and external social media platforms may amplify noisy exits, allowing activists to create artifacts of dissent and encourage others to speak up</td>
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<td>• Explores how firm leaders are attempting to prevent insider activist mobilization by restricting internal communications, reverting open cultures back to more closed cultures, and shows how activists are adapting</td>
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<td>• Explores how firm leaders may respond to contentious employee activism by conceding to all demands, granting some concessions/making a meaningful gesture to acknowledge concerns, or rejecting activists’ claims</td>
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<td>Direct effects of persuasive activism (led by insider activists)</td>
<td>• Examines how employee activists may reframe these leadership responses in ways that either fuel or constrain their movement’s momentum</td>
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<td>• Demonstrates how, regardless of a movement’s outcome, employee activists may use internet technologies to train, fund, and support activists across movement issues and organizations, improving resource mobilization for future contentious employee activism</td>
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