

The Employee Perspective on Pay Transparency

By Dow Scott, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, Aino Tenhiälä, Ph.D., IE University, Madrid, Spain; Aysegul Karaeminogullari, Ph.D., Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogota, Colombia; and Arup Varma, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago

Abstract

This study asked a random sample of employees about their perceptions of pay transparency with regard to pay processes, guidelines and methods employers use to communicate pay information. The results affirm that employee perceptions of pay transparency and a culture of pay secrecy differ substantially across employees from various organizational contexts. Employers should anticipate that there will be increasing demands from governments and employees for pay transparency. Given the positive outcomes commonly associated with pay transparency, it benefits employers to be more open with their rationale for employee pay practices. However, employers must be aware of the challenges associated with pay transparency, which include having sound pay systems based on clear policies and rationale, and providing individual pay privacy. Employers are advised to make sure that managers understand the pay system and pay transparency policies, so they can accurately communicate pay programs.

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THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE ON PAY TRANSPARENCY

By Dow Scott, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, Aino Tenhiälä, Ph.D., IE University (Madrid, Spain); Aysegul Karaeminogullari, Ph.D., Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogota, Colombia; and Arup Varma, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago

Pay transparency refers to employer practices of sharing information with employees about salaries, incentives and benefits. Employer transparency ranges from a culture of pay secrecy (where employees are discouraged or even punished for sharing pay information) to organizations, such as government agencies, where employee pay is part of the public record. Disclosure of pay information to employees may be simply descriptive or may provide employees with information as to how pay decisions are made. This information can include how jobs are assigned to different pay grades, the reasons employees performing the same or similar work are paid differently, what an average merit increase is, and how performance and position determine employee merit increases. What constitutes pay transparency or secrecy is not straightforward, and developing a policy as to *what* pay information should be shared and *how* this should be accomplished is complex. Therefore, policies about the content as well as procedures of sharing information may each have unintended consequences.

Attitudes toward pay transparency have undergone significant change in recent years, and transparency has become a major issue for organizations worldwide. In the United States, a presidential executive order and legislation at both the state and local levels are increasingly mandating, at minimum, salary range disclosures for employees and job applicants ([Green](#) 2023). The courts and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) have affirmed the right of employees to discuss their pay with peers, in person or online, if they do not disparage their employer ([NLRB](#) 2023). According to media

reports, younger employees are demanding more pay transparency and are more willing than previous generations to share pay information with their peers and in online surveys (e.g., [ResumeLab](#) 2023). Further, given the severe competition for talent, management must consider employee preferences and demands more carefully than ever before.

Research indicates pay transparency is associated with numerous benefits and challenges ([Bamberger and Belogolovsky](#) 2017; [Colella](#) et al. 2007; [Smit and Montag-Smit](#) 2019). Those benefits include:

- Compliance with pay transparency laws and regulations
- Enhanced ability to attract and retain employees
- Improved employee-organization relationships (in the form of trust in the organization, perceived fairness and engagement) and as a result higher performance and better business outcomes
- Elimination of workplace pay disparities based on gender, race, ethnicity, and other biases.
- Enhanced motivation by clarifying “line of sight” between pay and performance
- Elevated communication of employer values toward performance, loyalty, etc.
- Reduced informal discussion of pay and pay-related decisions among employees.

Numerous challenges are also associated with pay transparency policies. These include:

- Exposure to problems and inequities with employer pay policies and structures
- Pressure to increase employee wages
- Fostering a climate of envy that adversely affects employee cooperation
- Enhanced perceptions of inequity, leading to dissatisfaction, turnover, reduced performance, and even theft
- Violation of employee privacy
- Threats to self-worth for employees who are paid less than their peers.

These challenges are real, as demonstrated by the reluctance of management to share pay information with employees and a corporate culture that encourages pay secrecy ([Scott and Jordan](#) 2018; [Scott et al.](#)2020).

In this study, we surveyed a random sample of employees about their perceptions of pay transparency with regard to pay processes, guidelines and methods employers use to communicate pay information. We also asked about their perceptions of pay secrecy, the norms or culture in their organizations about discussing pay and what might happen if they share pay information. Furthermore, we asked about their pay transparency preferences and what they think about company policies of sharing individual pay information. The specific statements that define these measures can be found in Tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively. We also explore how employee characteristics (i.e., gender, age, income, and education level) are related to perceptions of pay transparency and pay secrecy and their pay transparency preferences. Then, perceptions of pay transparency and pay secrecy, as well as pay transparency preferences, were examined as to how they related to employees' intent to leave, trust in management and feelings of pay fairness in the workplace. We specifically examined how employee differences in gender, age, race, income levels and position related to their preferences for pay transparency.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service, we surveyed 300 full-time employees in the United States. Given the nature of the sampling process, it is unlikely any of the respondents worked for the same employer. Amazon MTurk connects researchers to potential respondents (workers) who complete an opinion survey for a

fee. In this case the fee was \$2.50 to complete a 12-to-15-minute survey, which is consistent with payment for other surveys of similar length. MTurk worker responses are both anonymous and voluntary, as per the human subject guidelines established by Loyola University Chicago. To ensure that MTurk workers completed the survey responsibly and that the responses collected are not from a “bot,” we required MTurk workers to indicate their consent to complete the survey and indicate that they were not a “bot” (Captcha). As an attention check, we eliminated respondents who took fewer than 6.5 minutes to complete the survey (about half the time we estimated that it would require an average person to complete the survey) and those who responded inconsistently to reverse-scored items. After eliminating respondents as per these rules, we had a sample of 261 respondents. This sample was 87% of the 300 MTurk workers responding to the survey.

As shown in Table 1, the sample of 261 employees was 60% male and 40% female, with one respondent indicating they were non-binary/third gender and one who responded, “prefer not to say.” Most respondents were from 25 to 55 years old (85%) with only 4% under 25 and 11% over 55 years old. On average, the respondent sample was well-educated, with the top education level for 13% being a high school degree, 10% an associate (college) degree, 57% a college undergraduate degree, and 20% a graduate degree.

Reported income levels were diverse: 8%, earning less than \$25,000; 23%, \$25,001 to \$40,000; 25%, \$40,001 to 55,000; 21%, \$55,001 to \$70,000; 15%, \$70,001 to 85,000; 4%, \$85,001 to \$100,000; and 4%, more than \$100,000.

In addition, most respondents reported working in professional or managerial positions (68%), with 32% working technical or hourly jobs. Most respondents worked for private for-profit companies (87%), with only 10% working for government or the public sector, and 3% for a not-for-profit. Finally, respondents worked for organizations of differing sizes: 25% with fewer than 100 employees, 48% for organizations with 100 to 1,000 employees, 25% over 1,000 employees; and 2% did not know the number of employees working in their organization.

The confidential Likert Scale Survey was used to measure employee perceptions of pay transparency ([Day 2007](#)), pay secrecy culture ([Scott and Jordan 2018](#)), pay transparency preferences (Scott, et. al., 2020), trust in management ([Scott 1980](#)), intent to leave ([Shields et al. 2012](#)), and pay fairness ([Colquitt 2001](#)), as described later. Cronbach alpha and factor analysis (with Varimax rotation) were used to demonstrate the internal validity and reliability of the scales in this study (Cronbach alpha scores for each of the measures are provided in Table 6. The factor analysis information can be obtained upon request from the first author.) Partial Pearson correlations among the scale variables show the relationships between study variables, controlling for age, gender, annual pay, and education of the respondents.

FINDINGS

Employee Pay Information Sources

Table 2 shows where respondents obtained information about pay. Respondents relied most heavily on employer sources of pay information, with 57% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they received their pay information from HR or a compensation department and 53% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they received their information

from their supervisor or manager. Respondents relied to a lesser extent upon family members or friends (25%), websites such as Glassdoor, O'Net, or Salary.com (25%), and union leaders (28%).

Pay Transparency, Pay Secrecy and Pay Transparency Preferences

Respondents were asked about employer pay transparency policies and communications, employer pay secrecy culture and their personal preference for pay transparency. As shown in Tables 3-5, the pay transparency measure consisted of nine items, the pay secrecy culture measure had four items, and the pay transparency preferences scale had three items. Tables 3-5 show each of the items, item mean scores, standard deviations and frequency of responses to the six-point Likert Scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" through "strongly agree."

The mean scores, standard deviations and response frequencies indicate that considerable variation exists in the information employees receive about pay from their employer (see Table 3). Specifically, item two that 52% agreed or strongly agreed with, "*My employer communicates pay issues of concern to me.*" Thus, almost half of the respondents (48%) disagreed or slightly agreed that they receive communications that pertain to them. For Item 6, "*My employer publicizes pay ranges for jobs within the department or business unit,*" 35% of respondents indicated that their employer did not share pay range data. Item 7 also indicates approximately a third of the respondents did not receive information about the average merit increase. Examining the frequency scores for the items in the pay transparency measure and the overall mean for this scale indicates that about a third

of the respondents disagreed that their employer provided information about their pay system (i.e., how they are getting paid).

Table 4 shows employee perceptions related to their employer's pay secrecy culture. When asked about pay secrecy norms, 40% of respondents agreed that *"There are strong norms where I work about not discussing with other employees how much one is paid."* Thirty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that, *"How people are paid is a secret where I work."* Thirty-five percent agreed that, more formally, *"My employer has a policy or rules that forbid employees from discussing their pay with employees."* Twenty-seven percent agreed that, *"I will be disciplined or fired if my employer learns that I told other employees how much I am paid."* These responses indicate that a sizable proportion of employees thought their employer had a culture of pay secrecy and there would be negative consequences if they shared pay information.

Table 5 shows results for respondent preferences for pay transparency. Almost half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their personal pay information should be confidential:

"Information on my salary should be kept secret." (39%)

"Other employees should not know how much I am paid." (42%)

"Individual pay information should be confidential." (44%)

Comparing the results of Tables 4 and 5, company practices largely align with employee preferences, with about two-third of employees at least slightly agreeing that salary information is kept secret and should be.

Thus, similarly to pay secrecy culture, almost two-thirds of employees want the amount of their pay kept confidential (see Table 4).

Relationship of Pay Transparency, Pay Secrecy and Pay Transparency Preference with Attitudes Toward Work Environment

Table 6 shows a correlation matrix that controls for differences in respondent age, gender, income level and education. This table lists the 10 variables examined in this study, their means and SD (standard deviation) for the measures created with Likert-scale items, correlations identifying significantly related measures (marked with asterisks).

Gender was not found to be related to any of the variables of interest. Similarly, age was not found to be significantly related to any of the variables except for a negative correlation with pay transparency preference. This indicates that younger employees had a stronger preference for pay transparency than did older employees. Pay level was found to be positively related to feelings of pay fairness and trust in management. Pay level was negatively related to intention to leave. This indicates that respondents who were paid more had more trust in management; were more likely to perceive their pay as fair; and were less likely to leave their employer. Finally, education level was negatively related to pay secrecy and positively related to both trust in management and intention to leave.

On one hand, employees with a high preference for pay transparency assessed their employer as having less pay transparency ($r = -.19$), which indicates that in contexts of low pay transparency, the employees desire more information about *why* they are paid what they are paid (see Table 6). Thus, if

employees reported lower levels of pay transparency, then employees were more likely to crave more of it, which is consistent with an overall preference for pay transparency. On the other hand, the pay secrecy norms correlate negatively with pay transparency preferences ($r = -.41$). In other words, those employees who perceive that they should not discuss or share their own pay at their workplaces do not want to do so either. Although these results seem to be in contradiction, one has to remember that pay transparency refers here to information distributed by the employer about *how* decisions about pay are made (i.e., the transparency about the pay *procedures*). Pay secrecy culture indicates that there is a pay communication restriction that sharing more specific information about one's pay is discouraged or forbidden (i.e., about *what* exactly is being paid).

Pay transparency was found to be positively related to both trust in management and perceptions of pay fairness, and negatively related to intent to leave. Thus, higher levels of pay transparency are associated with positive outcomes for management. Conversely, pay secrecy culture was negatively related to trust in management and positively related to intent to leave, both negative outcomes for management. Pay transparency preferences were positively related to trust in management but negatively related to intention to leave and pay fairness.

Finally, as one might expect, employee perception of pay fairness was positively related to trust in management and negatively related to intent to leave.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on pay transparency from an employee perspective. Amazon MTurk provided 261 usable responses from full-time employee respondents who were paid to respond to a Likert Scale Survey about their employer's pay transparency and secrecy policies as well as their perceptions of the work environment, including trust in management, intent to leave, and pay fairness. Employee differences (i.e., gender, age, education and annual pay) were examined, and these differences were used as controls when examining the relationships among measures of pay transparency, pay secrecy, pay transparency preferences and attitudes toward work measures.

Although employees reported that they had multiple sources for pay information, company sources, such as HR/compensation departments and managers or supervisors, were considered as the most important rather than more informal sources such as other employees and friends. It is reassuring that company-provided information trumps other information sources.

This study affirms that employee perceptions of pay transparency and a culture of pay secrecy differ substantially across employees from various organizational contexts. This is not surprising since the U.S. government has long required that employee information be published. Although most employees indicated a relatively high degree of pay transparency from their employer, a significant proportion of employees thought that their employer provided limited pay transparency. Almost half believed that their employer had a culture of pay secrecy, and one-third even believed they would be punished if they shared information about their own pay with their colleagues.

Respondents who perceived that their employers provided higher levels of pay transparency had higher levels of trust in management and pay fairness perceptions and indicated they were less likely to leave the organization than were employees who felt there were lower levels of pay transparency. Similarly, employees who believed their organization had a stronger culture of pay secrecy reported lower levels of trust in management. Respondents reporting higher levels of pay secrecy also reported that they were more likely to leave their current employer than were respondents who indicated that the culture emphasized less pay secrecy.

The findings from our survey of MTurk workers suggest that employers who wish to encourage higher trust in management, perceptions of pay fairness and reduced turnover should:

1. Enhance transparency about pay procedures and encourage a culture where employees can share pay information.
2. Recognize that there are major differences in employee perceptions and preferences for pay transparency, and as such, not assume that all employees want to openly share information about their pay.

Employers should anticipate that there will be increasing demands from governments and employees for pay transparency. Given the positive outcomes commonly associated with pay transparency, it benefits employers to be more open with their rationale for employee pay practices. However, employers must be aware of the challenges associated with pay transparency, which include having sound pay systems based on clear policies and rationale and providing individual pay privacy. Employers are advised to make sure that managers

understand the pay system and pay transparency policies, so they can accurately communicate pay programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dow Scott, Ph.D., (dscott@luc.edu) is a professor of Human Resources at Loyola University Chicago. He is a nationally recognized compensation and program evaluation expert, appearing in more than 100 publications. Scott's teaching, research and consulting have focused on the creation of effective teams, employee opinion surveys, performance improvement strategies, pay and incentive systems and the development of high-performance organizations.



Aino Tenhiälä, Ph.D., (aino.tenhiala@ie.edu) is an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at IE Business School, IE University in Spain. She conducts research on employee and executive compensation with an interest in enhancing equity, well-being and effectiveness. Tenhiälä received her Ph.D. from Aalto University. She is a native of the happiest country in the world (as per the "World Happiness Report"), Finland.



Aysegul Karaeminogullari, Ph.D., (ay.karaeminogullari@javeriana.edu.co) is an assistant professor of Human Management at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogota, Colombia. Karaeminogullari's research focuses on person-environment fit, internal and external corporate social responsibility, cross-cultural comparisons and scholarship of teaching and learning. She conducted studies and shared results with organizations in the United States, China, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Netherlands, Malaysia, Colombia and Mexico. She has published in outlets such as *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *Personnel Review* and *Frontiers in Psychology*. Karaeminogullari is an active speaker at national and international conferences.



Arup Varma, Ph.D., (avarma@luc.edu) is the Frank W. Considine Chair in Applied Ethics at the Quinlan School of Business, Loyola University Chicago. Varma's research interests include performance appraisal, expatriate adjustment, and HRM issues in India. He has published more than 100 articles in leading refereed journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal*, the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology* and the *Journal of International Management*. He received his Ph.D. from Rutgers University.

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TABLE 1 Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents*

Gender

Male 60%
Female 40%

Age

Younger than 25 4%
25 to 40 59%
40 to 55 26%
More than 55 11%

Education

High School 13%
Associate's 10%
Undergraduate 57%
Master's or Doctorate 20%

Annual Pay

Less than \$25K 8%
\$25k to \$40k 23%
\$40k to \$55k 25%
\$55k to \$70k 21%
\$70k to \$85k 15%
More than \$85k 8%

*n=261

TABLE 2 Pay Information Sources

Variable Description	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I get my information about pay from:								
1. The compensation or human resources department of my organization	4.42	1.26	6 (2%)	23 (9%)	20 (8%)	62 (24%)	100 (39%)	46 (18%)
2. My supervisor or manager to whom I report	4.35	1.35	9 (4%)	26 (10%)	21 (8%)	65 (25%)	84 (33%)	53 (20%)
3. From other employees	3.46	1.55	40 (16%)	39 (15%)	42 (16%)	56 (22%)	62 (24%)	19 (7%)
4. Family members or friends who do not work for my employer	2.93	1.69	78 (31%)	44 (17%)	26 (10%)	42 (17%)	49 (19%)	14 (6%)
5. Websites like Glassdoor, O'Net or Salary.com	3.29	1.63	57 (22%)	34 (13%)	29 (11%)	72 (28%)	44 (17%)	21 (8%)
6. The shop steward or the labor union	3.07	1.68	70 (30%)	30 (13%)	19 (8%)	49 (21%)	58 (25%)	7 (3%)
7. I don't get any information	2.59	1.53	80 (34%)	51 (21%)	42 (18%)	30 (13%)	25 (10%)	11 (5%)

Source: Scott et al. 2020.

TABLE 3 Pay Transparency

Items	Mean	S.D.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My employer communicates pay policies and procedures to me.	4.62	1.11	7 (3%)	7 (3%)	20 (8%)	55 (21%)	125 (48%)	46 (18%)
2. My employer communicates pay issues of concern to me.	4.35	1.30	8 (3%)	21 (8%)	27 (10%)	69 (27%)	85 (33%)	49 (19%)
3. My employer answers questions about how my pay is determined.	4.41	1.29	12 (5%)	16 (6%)	16 (6%)	75 (29%)	92 (35%)	49 (19%)
4. My employer tells employees how decisions about their pay are made.	4.38	1.19	8 (3%)	12 (5%)	28 (11%)	80 (31%)	91 (35%)	42 (16%)
5. My employer tells employees what they must do to increase their pay.	4.32	1.32	11 (4%)	20 (8%)	26 (10%)	65 (25%)	94 (36%)	44 (17%)
6. My employer publicizes pay ranges for jobs within the department or business unit.	3.77	1.57	29 (11%)	39 (15%)	24 (9%)	68 (27%)	61 (24%)	35 (14%)
7. When merit-pay increases are distributed, my employer tells us what the average merit increase is.	3.78	1.52	30 (12%)	35 (14%)	20 (8%)	71 (28%)	76 (30%)	24 (9%)
8. My employer provides employees with written information about how pay levels are determined. *	3.89	1.52	27 (10%)	29 (11%)	30 (11%)	68 (26%)	71 (27%)	35 (13%)
9. If I ask, my supervisor will explain how pay levels or pay increases are determined for my job.*	4.48	1.31	12 (5%)	14 (5%)	17 (7%)	70 (27%)	89 (34%)	58 (22%)

Source: Scott et al. 2020. (* Two Likert scaled items designated with asterisks were taken from Day [2007])

TABLE 4 Pay Secrecy

Items	Mean	S.D.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. There are strong norms where I work about <u>not</u> discussing how much one is paid to other employees.	3.80	1.53	26 (10%)	38 (15%)	33 (13%)	61 (23%)	69 (27%)	33 (13%)
2. How people are paid is a secret where I work.	3.57	1.59	35 (14%)	45 (18%)	33 (13%)	47 (18%)	72 (28%)	23 (9%)
3. My employer has a policy or rules that forbid employees from discussing their pay with other employees.	3.44	1.68	51 (20%)	39 (16%)	19 (8%)	53 (21%)	69 (27%)	20 (8%)
4. I will be disciplined or fired if my employer learns that I told other employees how much I am paid.	3.24	1.75	64 (26%)	34 (14%)	31 (12%)	53 (21%)	35 (14%)	33 (13%)

Source: Scott and Jordan (2018). (Previously labeled as a pay transparency measure.)

TABLE 5 Pay Transparency Preferences

Items	Mean	S.D.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Information on my salary should be kept secret. *	3.89	1.50	23 (9%)	34 (13%)	32 (12%)	71 (27%)	63 (24%)	38 (15%)
2. Other employees should not know how much I am paid.	3.79	1.59	28 (11%)	40 (15%)	36 (14%)	48 (18%)	73 (28%)	36 (14%)
3. Individual pay information should be confidential.	4.02	1.57	25 (10%)	25 (10%)	37 (14%)	58 (22%)	62 (24%)	53 (20%)

Source: Scott et al. 2020

TABLE 6 Means, Standard Deviations and Correlation Matrix (controlling for gender, age, pay level, and education)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Pay Transparency	4.22	0.98	(.89)								
2. Pay Secrecy	3.52	1.35	.08	(.84)							
3. Pay Transparency Preferences	3.64	1.42	-.19**	-.41**	(.91)						
4. Trust in Management	3.73	1.12	.30**	-.50**	.19**	(.72)					
5. Intent to Leave	3.08	1.44	-.20**	.40**	-.22**	-.59**	(.90)				
6. Pay Fairness	4.33	1.24	.61**	.02	-.29**	.32**	-.21**	(.93)			
7. Gender			.05	.02	-.05	-.05	-.04	.01			
8. Age			.00	-.07	-.15*	-.05	.04	.08	.12		
9. Pay Level			.04	-.02	-.07	.18**	-.13*	.17**	-.05	.03	
10. Education Level			.07	-.19**	.00	-.25**	.27**	-.02	.20**	-.07	0.46**

** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$. Cronbach's alphas (scale reliabilities) in parentheses.