

# UNION MODERNISATION FUND

**BERR**

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Enterprise & Regulatory Reform

**UNION OF FINANCE STAFF –  
MODERNISING RELATIONS  
WITH MEMBERS**



# Union of Finance Staff – modernising relations with members

## Background

The Union of Finance Staff (UFS) was formed in 1988 under the name Eagle Star Staff Union (ESSU) to represent staff in that company. From the start, the union's aim was to create a constructive, forward-looking relationship with the employer, and this idea was embodied in the union rule book, which places the prosperity of the employing companies on the same footing as that of union members.

In 1998, following the takeover of Eagle Star by Zurich Financial Services, ESSU changed its name to the Union of Finance Staff. In 2000, UFS and Zurich General Business unit signed a partnership agreement committing both parties to working together and to establishing institutions to support that process.

In recent years, the range of companies employing UFS members has widened, largely as a result of outsourcing. UFS has sought to maintain its industrial relations stance with three new employers, and has signed partnership agreements covering members in IBM and CSC.

UFS now represents around 5,000 workers, the majority of whom are in the insurance sector. The union has just 13 employees, all based at the head office in Cheltenham.

## Why this project?

The union wanted to extend the service model for trade unions, developing the view of union members as customers, who have the right to a high standard of service in return for their membership subscriptions, as Alan Wood, General Secretary, explains:

*'It doesn't mean that UFS sees no role for collective bargaining, or for traditional forms of union organisation. However, we recognise that the effect of modern employment contracts, together with performance-related pay and bonuses, is to reduce the scope and impact of collective negotiation. The union seeks to fulfil its responsibilities in the field of collective bargaining, at the same time developing its role as a provider of services – first and foremost the provision of employment advice and help for members who encounter problems at work.'*

## The virtual union

UFS sees itself on the modernist wing of the trade union movement but recognises that modernisation is a continuous process. A key component of its far-reaching and radical modernisation strategy is the creation of a 'virtual union', in which most of the benefits of union membership are available instantly to members online – so that every member would be able to communicate

directly with a union official. This element of the UFS forward strategy could only be realised fully with external funding. The UMF was the ideal solution.

The union had had a static-page website for some years, which was easy to run but was not seen as a key communications vehicle either by UFS staff, reps or members. Says Alan:

*'It was not a vehicle that was expected to impress the general public, and its use was limited to occasional newsletter updates and discount offers. At various points in time the site was up to three months out of date. It was not seen as effective and so was not a priority to attract time and effort.'*

*'Communication was primarily by hard copy newsletter, sent either by post to every member or to the reps to distribute. However, many reps, for all sorts of reasons, including 'I did not agree with the content' sometimes didn't circulate the newsletters. That was added to areas that did not have a rep at the time or where the rep was away. This left us with individual posting, which was actually very effective and impressive, but very expensive. It also meant that communications were often several days behind events and lost their impact.'*

*'We'd seen a number of sites working in some of the employers where we had significant membership. However, it was really when we became involved with IBM and CSC that we saw what sort of impact an integrated and interactive system could have. They used their websites to carry out all HR and benefits functions and also to achieve instant high level contact with all staff, or at least a very high percentage.'*

## Objectives

When the opportunity came to improve the website through the UMF, the union set out first to discover what they wanted to do and what could actually be achieved. As Alan explains, this turned out to be much harder than expected:

*'We soon realised that the potential uses were substantial and we needed to focus on what was most important. What we wanted to do was to shift our processes to use an interactive capability to improve a number of our functions. The first of these was the membership records. All membership applications were made on paper and processed at the union's head office. Keeping up to date with personal details was a laborious, time-consuming and labour intensive job which required reminders to members on a regular basis to notify us of any changes. We wanted to streamline that and pass the ability to change personal records to the members on line. The other areas we felt we could address in this project were communications, surveys, email management, additional passworded areas for reps, general news, and a library of information in the form of Q&As and reference articles.'*

The union therefore set out that the objectives for the UMF project were to:

- meet the needs of a more dispersed workforce, giving them up-to-date information on workplace issues;

- optimise the union's skilled resources so that trained lay reps and full-time officials are not tied up with time-consuming and repetitive tasks – using an online newsletter so reps don't need to hand it out, for instance, and enabling generic questions to be answered on line via an interactive database;
- enable all members, regardless of where they work, to have a meaningful say in the activities and consultation processes of the union, using online surveys and bulleting boards on the website, where members can have their say;
- reduce waste and contribute to the union's environmental policy, by encouraging members to subscribe to an e-newsletter instead of the hard copy;
- improve the retention of union members and enhance the 'service package' offered when new members are recruited, offering an interactive website as a value-added part of the service;
- have a faster turn-around time for members with questions;
- offer potential members an alternative way to join the union, using an online facility;
- allow members to update their membership information remotely, logging in and changing their details online.

Only a limited amount of new hardware was required for the project, but a major software upgrade was essential, handled by a full-time IT consultant, employed for 12 months. The development of the membership database was broken down into several phases: design, build, testing and evaluation, with additional space built into the timetable for any necessary modification of the database before full launch.

## Outcomes and benefits

The UFS quickly began to see results for their hard work, steadily transforming the union from a paper-based organisation to a virtual communication network:

*'We now have all reps and around 600 members registered on the site. This gives us the access we needed for reps and the ability for instant communications to around 16 per cent of members. We've used the survey tools and email tools to target, communicate and obtain feedback on a number of key issues. All newsletters are now put onto the site on the day of issue and we've been able to reduce significantly the number of hard copies produced.'*

One important new ability is provided by the webmasters, who work an evening shift, taking all the key events from the day at UFS plus key events and relevant topics from all over the web, and putting them onto the site, making it fresh each day. They also add to the databank of Q&As and reference library. Alan is pleased with the outcomes:

*'We are now able to coordinate communication with reps on major announcements in secret and at predetermined times. We send an email to reps asking them to check the reps' area of the site, and they can access the information before any local announcement. We are now selecting key topics and telling members that information on the topic is only available on the website. We've recently been involved in a series of reorganisations which affect hundreds of members in all sorts of ways. Communication of such massive details would have been very difficult before, but now we can place all the information*

*either in the members' area if it's public, or in the reps' area if it's sensitive. It's improved our image and brings home to members exactly how much work we're involved in at any one time.'*

## Meeting objectives

It's still early days but successes include:

- 1 Registering the membership:** Although only 16 per cent of members are registered so far, there are already advantages.
- 2 Creating an on-line database:** An unqualified success. All membership records are now on line and accessible by individual members and nominated UFS staff. This has improved management information and provided the ability to produce different types of reports of membership groupings that just were not possible before.
- 3 Creating a communications channel:** The most successful element of the project. The ability to place hot news at the fingertips of hundreds of members at a moment's notice has proved extremely valuable. In addition, the ability to refer people to a single source of all communications on all matters has been very useful.
- 4 Creating a reference library with Q&As.** This has been 'reasonably successful'. The actual work of putting on a significant body of information has been more time consuming than expected. The information, because it was accessible and would be used by reps in actual cases, had to be written, checked and proofed. The union has been surprised that it has not been used as much as expected, although they are now referring reps and members to the website for standard queries rather than answering them from the office.

- 5 Switching reps to use the website first before contacting the union office.** This has been a huge success. Reps are the main users of the site and appreciate the ability to access confidential information at their convenience.

Some of the best results from the project were not actually part of the original plans. Email and survey tools on the site, for example, have been used extensively and have proved to be very valuable assets.

## Lessons learned

The main lesson learned has been that everything takes much longer than anticipated:

'We discovered that simple things in IT terms can take an inordinate amount of time to produce. The discussion of the topic is easy and the general agreement about what is to be the final result is quite quick. What is not so obvious is that:

- the actual programming of the topic can take from a few days to a few weeks. What is simple in principle can have impacts on all other aspects of the site – which then need to be reprogrammed;
- testing of the new topic needs to be done in controlled circumstances and needs to be done to destruction. That is, testing needs to occur in every type of situation, some of which are as difficult to reproduce as the original programming;
- the programmers, IT developers and our understanding of what was intended, despite numerous meetings, excellent notes and apparent clear understanding, can be poles apart.

The main lesson learned is that the actual time needed to be applied to a project of this size is enormous. In actual hours there were probably double needed than was

originally expected and we could have spent more as each development led to another set of possibilities to be examined. Therefore the key to any future project is to limit clearly what is being done and not to be tempted into overdeveloping and extending the original scheme.'

## Best practice tips

In the light of UFS experience, Alan suggests the following as best practice for other unions who are considering a similar project:

- Ensure the IT developer is involved in all meetings as soon as they're appointed.
- Specify in as much detail as possible what the project is and where it ends.
- Calculate time spent based on twice the timescale that you would use for non-IT related projects.
- Avoid adding additional facilities/topics into the main project. Instead, list all potential improvements and consider them later for separate projects.
- Do not fall into the trap that 'It will be cheaper to do this new facility/topic whilst we are doing the current project programming'. It rarely is!

**If you would like more details about this project, contact:** UFS General Secretary, Alan Wood, at [alan.wood@ufsdirect.org](mailto:alan.wood@ufsdirect.org)









