

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

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**CERAMICS & ALLIED TRADES UNION
(CATU) – WIDENING THE UNION'S
REMIT IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**

Ceramics & Allied Trades Union (CATU) – widening the union’s remit in a changing society

Introduction

The Ceramics & Allied Trades Union (CATU) (now Unity) has always had a dual focus. It has represented members from the ceramics industry, nationally playing a collective bargaining role and maintaining industrial representation priorities. At the same time, it has played a key role as a social partner at the local and regional level. Before the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) project, however, most activity had been weighted towards the former.

Why this project?

The union recognised the need to shift its focus to reflect the current climate, as Garry Oakes, Assistant General Secretary, explains:

‘With the changing face of employment, both in the ceramics industry and in particular in North Staffordshire, the union was keen to address three interlinked areas – labour market diversification, restructuring of the union, and communication. It was through these aspects that the union felt it could increase its footprint to reach beyond its industrial roots by adding a whole raft of community activities to its traditional industrial imperatives. The UMF project offered a valuable opportunity to address these issues.’

Background

CATU has long been the recognised trade union for the ceramics industry (predominantly in North Staffordshire), with a membership at its peak of 50,000.

During the project development stage, however, it was recognised that the aspirations of the union to address change in just one UMF project were too ambitious. As a result, it was decided that the project would focus specifically on a research and review activity and, if necessary, develop a response to the review in further UMF bids for possible future funding.

The aim of the project therefore was ‘to identify changes that would improve CATU as a trade union’. The project focused on what changes needed to be made to the historic role of the union, the changes in the industry and the role of the trade union in modern society. The research would then form the basis for a transformation strategy which would enable the union to ‘develop and play a wider role in civil society’ in Staffordshire and South Cheshire.

Methodology and outcomes

Keele University were engaged to undertake the research project. The research included:

- **Labour market analysis** of North Staffordshire and South Cheshire – this part of the research outlined the labour market structure of the area, based primarily on data and documents available, supplemented by interviews with relevant government, local government and business officials. The labour market in North Staffordshire continued to restructure and is characterised by low skill, low wage work, primarily in manufacturing (including food processing, warehousing and distribution and call centres). Given patterns of employment growth and traditional union demarcations, it was argued that manufacturing and warehousing and distribution are the sectors that would provide the best organising opportunities for Unity.
- **Interviews with employers** – based on the key areas of economic and employment growth, around ten employers in the South Cheshire area were selected to establish the type of labour they needed and which forms of labour (such as migrant) they used. This work complemented the interviews that Keele had already conducted in North Staffordshire during the Low Pay Commission and Nuffield Foundation research projects. Says Garry:

'Results showed that agency work was prevalent in the area and that many of the firms in the area that used it were non-unionised. While the problems of organising agency staff cannot be overlooked, it was pointed out that there have been successes in these sectors.'

- **Interviews with migrant workers** in South Cheshire (primarily Polish, Czech and Slovakian) – these identified the type of work they did, the problems they encountered at and outside work, and their intentions in terms of staying in the area.
- **Review of civil society** in North Staffordshire and South Cheshire – this was complemented by interviews with local and regional trade unionists from within and beyond the union to highlight the role a trade union could take in wider civil society and the issues around union organisation of new economic sectors. Results indicated that there was a role for trade unions to play in the local area, as Garry explains:

'Particular emphasis was given to the role that the union could play in regeneration initiatives and partnerships. Indeed the union had already successfully initiated some projects to retrain its members with funds from the European Union.'

Additional outcomes

Some of the developments over and above outcomes anticipated as a result of the UMF project have been:

- CATU has **changed its name** to Unity, reflecting its wider role in civil society.
- The **staffing structure** has changed significantly. The union recognised that as a result of the restructuring within the industry it, too, needed to reduce its central overhead costs.
- There has been a move towards delivering **services** that fall outside a traditional trade union role, such as establishing ESOL language courses and dealing with benefits and housing issues for migrant workers.

- A **committee** has been established to **drive change and modernisation** within the union. The membership committee is a sub committee of the NEC and is focused on recruitment and retention, both within the migrant worker community and the wider community in general.
- Unity is now involved in a region-wide **consortium of trade unions** dealing with the impact of industrial restructuring.
- Unity is included in the **North Staffordshire Task Force**, which is the key regeneration body in North Staffordshire.
- A **Polish migrant** is employed to advise the union and liaise with migrant workers.
- All Unity literature is **translated into Polish**.
- The union attends **seminars on migrant workers** at Keele University, which help promote greater understanding and match employment needs.
- Unity has established **links with Crewe City Council** and is working in partnership to establish ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses in the local area, which will help both employers and prospective and current employees.

Lessons learned

Slippage

The project milestones and deadlines proved especially challenging, for the following reasons:

- **Inexperience** – the project provided the union with new challenges, since they were not experienced in this type of venture. Specifically, project management skills were underdeveloped, which meant that *'all involved were on a steep learning curve'*, exacerbated by the fact that the project was more complex than at first envisaged. Consequently, there was some slippage in the timeline.
- **Time pressures** – the matched funding element of the project meant that delivery had to be carried out by union staff over and above their normal duties. Says Garry:

'This factor was a critical flaw, given that the union faced the onslaught of vast waves of redundancies from the ceramics industry during the project's lifetime. Because of these pressures, project delivery was forced onto the back burner and deadlines and milestones were missed.'
- **Research** – the project relied heavily on the findings of the research by Keele University. As a result of illness and restructuring within the Trade Union Studies department, the research was eight months later than scheduled.

Project management

The project had established a project team and a project steering group, setting clear milestones and objectives. The project team held monthly working group meetings and the steering group met each quarter, with a BERR representative invited to attend. In future, the union would approach such a project slightly differently, adding in:

- **A dedicated project manager** – whose remit would be solely to deliver the project, without the distraction of other pressing duties.
- **A robust approach with project partners and subcontractors** – to avoid delays in project delivery (such as that caused by the late delivery of the research report).
- **More guidance and support** – given the lack of project management experience, extra guidance and support from BERR could have been maximised.

Change within the union

The project has also led the union to re-evaluate some of its own processes, as Garry explains:

'Through the project the union has gained an insight into its own working methods. This has highlighted particular instances of overcapacity and a need to take a fresh look at our day-to-day role. Communication at all levels is a particular area of weakness that we need to address. We also learned the magnitude of the task we face as a union (as does the rest of the trade union movement) in adapting in today's globalised society. That's why we've established a committee to take on the challenge of modernisation and change within the union.'

Conclusion

The effect of the UMF project on Unity has been wide-reaching and has had a significant impact on how the union operates, as Garry sums up:

'The project and the research conducted have had a dramatic effect on the union, far beyond the changes envisaged at the outset. The research element was perhaps the most valuable, highlighting issues such as outdated practices and mindsets, which have led to attitudinal changes. The experience of managing the project, the value of the research and the changes made as a result within Unity mean that the whole experience has been a very useful one for us. The challenges that lie ahead are considerable but we are better equipped to face them. The project laid the foundations for transformation of the union by emphasising the need to change the internal culture and attitudes. It's enabled the union to develop a strategy to move away from its traditional base and towards a new position, taking on the role of an active partner in civil society.'

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