

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

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**THE MUSICIANS' UNION – EXPLORING
WAYS TO ENGAGE MEMBERS**

The Musicians' Union – exploring ways to engage members

Introduction

The music industry has witnessed major changes over recent years. It is at the cutting edge of the digital revolution – the traditional model of bands forming, touring and securing a recording contract, for example, is crumbling. Today more and more young people are digitally adept and are more focused on performances than recordings. Some are not concerned about payment for any recording but see it rather as promotion for performances. Even orchestras are making more use of IT and digital media.

The employment arrangements of members of the Musicians' Union (MU) are markedly different from those in most trade unions – between 80 and 90 per cent of members are self-employed. David Ashley, Assistant General Secretary, Finance and Administration, explains:

'Our members don't usually relate to one workplace or employer. Indeed, many hold down other jobs such as music tutors or peripatetic school music teachers. This means that the traditional union structure of branch/region/nation is not necessarily the most appropriate or effective for our members.'

Why this project?

The union had decided, therefore, to abolish the 72 branches and now organise within six regions, with sectional structures for specific groups of the membership. The new structures provided streamlined

communication routes between individual members and the union's Executive Committee, but there remained concerns that the increase in the relatively low level of participation in the union's democratic structure which the union had hoped for had not materialised. Says David Ashley:

'We believe this may be because the reorganisation did not in fact go far enough. Members can participate in the democracy of the union through regions and, to some extent, specialist sections (such as session musicians, theatre, orchestral). Our regional structures are currently very tightly defined within the rule book. However, our membership is often not easy to categorise and it may be that this imposes unnecessary restrictions. Our members also tend to work unsocial hours, so persuading them to take part in meetings can be a difficult case to make. So it was unclear whether the structural framework set up in 2005 added enough to the overall democratic effectiveness of the union. There is a real cost to the union of maintaining and servicing these structures – if they are not the best fit for our membership, we needed to review them further. We recognised that we were suffering from a democratic deficit and failing to involve a representative cross section of our members in union matters. We are willing to develop new and innovative ways of organising ourselves. However, before taking any further steps we wanted to carry out a thorough review of the existing structures and consult widely with our stakeholders to identify their views of the most appropriate and effective structure.'

For any trade union, there is a need to strike an appropriate balance between its role in providing a service to members and its responsibility to ensure opportunities to participate in the union's democracy and policy development. Past experience suggested that the vast majority of MU members place greater value on 'service delivery' rather than democratic engagement. The union wanted to test this view and establish what this means for the way they organise themselves in the future:

'We were conscious that our membership does not reflect the real diversity of our industry – our lay structures are almost completely white and male dominated. Young people are notably absent. We want to be more responsive to their needs and priorities. Any reorganisation of the union for the 21st century must include measures to start to change this and encourage greater levels of participation by currently under represented groups. This will include women, young people, black and minority ethnic members, as well as members from specialist sections of the music industry such as jazz, orchestral, sessions.'

The union's modernisation strategy includes their successful Round 1 UMF project, which had the specific objective of increasing participation in ballots and elections through the use of internet systems. This second UMF project built upon the Round 1 work to explore:

- whether existing structures should be reorganised further
- the most effective structure for the union
- what would maximise participation
- how to encourage even greater diversity in the membership
- how to reflect the priorities of its wide-ranging membership in policies and service delivery
- innovative new ways to encourage participation
- innovative new ways to build in democratic processes in an atypical union
- priorities for union services in the future

Methodology and outcomes

Although the project was relatively straightforward, it was undertaken using established project management techniques. The General Secretary was the Project Owner and the Assistant General Secretary (Finance and Administration) the Project Manager, who had responsibility for delivery of the project on time and within budget. The project was managed by a project team, which reported to the NEC and was composed of the Assistant General Secretary (Finance and Administration), the Assistant General Secretary (Music Industry), the Finance Manager and the Administration Manager.

External consultants TCC, who had experience of trade unions and a good understanding of communications, equalities and diversity issues, were appointed to deliver the project. A good working relationship was established from the outset with TCC, and this was maintained throughout the project.

The research involved consultation with stakeholders – paid officers, activists and ordinary members – through a programme of qualitative and quantitative work.

There were four elements to the project:

- Comparative research
- Activist consultation
- Wider membership research
- Report and action plan

Comparative research

The comparative research was carried out to benchmark against other similar trade unions, similar membership organisations and Musicians' Union sections and regions, to:

- investigate and analyse strategies developed elsewhere for encouraging participation by hard-to-engage groups, and determine whether any of them were appropriate to this area
- identify differences of approach that might be required with specific ethnic groups
- research examples of best practice within the wider union movement

Activist consultation

The qualitative research had two elements:

- Discussion groups to explore members' experience of the current structures, their views on how participation in the union could be improved for the future, and messages and strategies to improve participation by under-represented groups. Quality feedback was gathered from:
 - two discussion groups of activists in a range of geographical locations
 - two discussion groups of members from specialist sections of the union, in a range of geographic locations
 - a discussion group to reflect the ethnic diversity of the union
 - a discussion group of elected officers
- A series of individual depth interviews with 20 key stakeholders at all levels of the union and at a range of geographic locations

As part of this qualitative work they also explored ideas for innovative approaches to reaching members.

Wider membership research

Wider membership research – a survey of 300 ordinary members by telephone and email – was conducted to confirm the feedback from the activist consultation.

Report and action plan

The results were reviewed and evaluated and a report produced, which included recommendations for reorganisation and review. Recommendations included consideration of the following measures:

- A clear system that would enable members to raise issues and express their views short of submitting a motion. The current rules for motions would remain but a less formal triage system would be adopted. This could include raising initial issues at regional level, registered issues on the member space of the MU website and the use of seminars to act as forums to capture member views
- Personalised communication, that exploits new technology to maintain flexible and personalised contact with members on their terms and enables quick and effective feedback
- Diversity networks that build and support the MU's equality committee
- Regional roles and job descriptions to spell out how regions can and should support engagement with members
- Sections should continue to be strengthened, with all members a member of one of them
- The composition of the EC could be reviewed to see if members' sectional interests could be accommodated
- Conference should be reviewed to ensure that it is used as an effective showcase for the union and is more interactive and inclusive for attendees and members as a whole

- This report should be disseminated to the wider TU movement as a contribution to improving engagement with members

Lessons learned

- The expertise of consultants TCC was a key factor in the success of the consultations – and TCC's independence *'made it easier for participants to speak freely at meetings'*.
- TCC provided three consultants to work on the project, all of whom remained in these positions throughout the project. *'As a result there was a consistency of approach at all consultations, as well as the resulting analysis of the knowledge gained.'*
- The union's Project Board consisted of three senior officials, one of whom took a lead role in the project. *'There was a definite advantage to keeping the management of the project to a small number of senior individuals.'*
- Having the union's Assistant General Secretary (Finance and Administration) manage the project and take the lead role in driving it forward from the union's perspective (and maintaining communications with TCC) *'proved to be a very effective way of keeping momentum going, and decisions could be made quickly.'*
- Meetings of the Project Board were held on a monthly basis. These could have been reduced in number and made more event-driven, as *'occasionally only limited progress was made towards the next outcome. Nevertheless, they proved useful in maintaining regular communications.'*

Conclusion

The project has proved successful and has achieved what it set out to do. Close control of outcomes and costs was maintained from the outset by the Project Manager, which led to the project being completed on time and to budget. All eight recommendations made within the consultants' report have been accepted by the Executive Committee. A comprehensive report, containing a wealth of data as well as recommendations for action, was produced and, as the union made a commitment to implement the project's recommendations at the outset, this is now moving forward under the overall control and management of a Modernisation Group, which the Executive Committee established for the purpose.

The findings of the project are available for wider distribution among fellow trades unions and, although the nature of the Musicians' Union's membership is such that the findings may not be immediately useful to unions with a more traditional, employer-based membership, nevertheless, says David Ashley, *'there may be useful information to share on the way in which the project was undertaken and the delivery of the consultant services'*.

David Ashley sums up:

'It seems clear that the way the project was undertaken has been welcomed amongst activists and members. The wide-ranging consultations have been generally popular and members have welcomed the opportunity to give their views. There is anecdotal evidence that individuals who took part in the discussions have been encouraged to become, or remain, involved in democratic activities. The establishment of the Modernisation Group may have a significant impact over the next few years. As well as managing the implementation of the project's recommendations, the group has also been given a remit to examine all aspects of the union's operations and is considering how it will take this role forward. The outcome of this project could be transformational in the truest sense, in that we anticipate a major overhaul of the union and the establishment of a structure specifically designed to meet the needs of a unique trade union in the 21st century.'

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