

## What next for the IPA Best Practice Network?

The IPA's Best Practice Network is going from strength to strength. In this article, Derek Luckhurst looks back at the reasons for establishing the Network and the challenges it will be addressing in the coming year.

**F**or those working in the employment relations area, the question is always 'why aren't more people doing the right thing?' Why aren't more people making the most of their representatives, engaging their employees, working in partnership?

There are many answers to that question, but one is that those who are instrumental in developing, advocating and driving forward best practice rarely have the opportunity to meet to share ideas and gain support from their peers.

It was this belief that encouraged the IPA to set up the Best Practice Network: A network for representatives – union and non union – to share what worked and what didn't in information & consultation and workplace partnership. We knew that representatives felt they needed their own network – for non-union representatives no such networking opportunity existed, and the union representatives who initially attended felt just as strongly that they needed an opportunity to network with like-minded people.

When the Network was set up in 2005 the employment relations framework for UK workplaces was about to go through a significant change with the introduction of the information and consultation regulations. At the IPA, we weren't sure what this would look like in practice, or how workplaces and employees would adapt. For us, the BPN was an opportunity not just to share best practice, but to innovate, and develop it.

Over a period of time, the Network has started to deliver on these objectives. Regular attendees from United Welsh, Standard Life, Citi/Egg, Bank of Ireland, Prudential, Steria, Accenture, Forensic Science Services, Avon, Skandia, Kellogg and Anchor Homes have provided an entirely different perspective on the importance of good consultation arrangements to studies such as WERS and others which, quite understandably, have drawn attention on the mediocre.

The importance of the IPA's Best Practice Network is that it has shown three things: That consultation is directly linked to workforce engagement; that even the most basic communication-based forums can successfully develop into the "one in twenty" – the ratio of good practice to the average; and that elected employee representatives can learn from trade union representatives and, to the surprise of some, vice versa.

The Network aims to meet three times a year and hosting privileges are shared

amongst the participating organisations. Agendas are developed between the IPA and the regular participants and always cover relevant topics relating to the world of work generally and specific issues that have been identified. Representatives face a huge range of challenges, and the forum's discussions reflect this. Over the last few years, for example, a great deal of information has been shared about pensions consultations as well as developing tools such as the 15 Strategic Questions, used by representatives in their interactions with senior managers to produce the high-quality communication that enhances workforce engagement.

From this year, the Network will extend an invitation to one of the three meetings to employee relations, human resources and line managers who aspire to improve their consultation and partnership arrangements. Although other networks exist for this group, the IPA's Best Practice Network is unique in the way in which it brings together the union and non-union participants to look at the key issues facing everyone in the UK workplace – this will be particularly important post-election.

### What next for the Network?

In the face of increasing disillusionment with the information & consultation regulations and a move away from partnership, one of the key questions facing practitioners on all sides is; what is the future of these ways of working?

At the last meeting of the BPN the attendees addressed this question reaching the, perhaps obvious, conclusion that it still matters and it is still needed. This was evidenced by their



The BPN at work

own experience but also by the recently published MacLeod Report which highlighted the real cost of disengaged staff and showed how representative structures can play a vital role in re-engaging them. It is no coincidence that several of the Network's organisations were specifically mentioned in that report.

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Although it is quite clear that a "one size fits all" approach will not meet the specific challenges that face forums, unions and their representatives, the Network is growing in confidence that it can make a major contribution to resolving them. Looking forward, the group have identified four such challenges that need to be addressed; dealing with conflict, changing how representatives are perceived, the relationship between the Network and trade unions and building relationships with managers. As it turned out, more opportunities than barriers were identified while addressing these issues and it is worth outlining some of the discussions and conclusions that transpired.

### Future challenges for the Best Practice Network

Dealing with conflict appears, on the surface, to be inexorably linked to the behaviours of the participants during consultation and negotiating meetings. Good behaviours are, of course, very important. However, as the Network discussed this in more detail, it became increasingly apparent that establishing shared understanding around the issue that causes the conflict is also of major importance. For example, one issue that seems to cause more conflict than any other is the question of time-off for representatives to perform the role effectively. If the representative and their manager can establish a shared understanding, the behaviours tend to take care of themselves. Endorsement of the importance of the role from senior managers is vital but it is not enough – line managers need to see evidence of the value of the role. A command and

control instruction from senior managers will not fix the problem as it leads to lip-service and a build up of resentment which, in turn, leads to more conflict. A solution is to recognise the contribution line managers can make to the effectiveness of any employee representatives on their team, and to adjust line managers appraisal objectives and targets to include supporting the employee representative in their role.

This issue is linked to the next – that of how representatives are perceived. For some time, the IPA has argued that representatives need leadership skills in order to become role models. Many of the representatives who regularly attend the Best Practice Network meetings have received comprehensive training by the IPA in order to develop those skills. The meetings themselves then help the attendees to gain the knowledge that breeds the confidence to actually use and display those skills. This is in direct contrast to the majority of representatives who might receive an initial days worth of training – which is valuable in itself – but do not receive any follow-up training or up-skilling. The problem with this lack of follow-up training is that expectations of the representative may be unreasonably high from both staff and managers. If those expectations are not managed and subsequently met, the perception of the value of the representative is going to suffer accordingly.

Currently, only a few trade union representatives attend the Best Practice Network meetings. In the IPA's experience, trade union representatives can benefit from greater training on how their role can link to the workforce engagement agenda or, indeed, how to ask the difficult strategic questions before moving into the detail. This is not a criticism but there is no doubt that the regular attendees feel strongly that the

Network has a great deal to offer union representatives and that an increase in their attendance would be very welcome.

Building relationships with managers is, arguably, the key to keeping the whole subject of information, consultation and partnership relevant to organisations. It sounds straightforward to do this but, if it were, it would not be such a recurring theme during training sessions or discussions about how to embed high quality information, consultation and partnership working. Essentially, it is about building trust. As with so many issues, a shared understanding of each other's role is important. For example, the IPA has received a great deal of feedback that managers perceive that representatives are there to "catch them out" or "get people off" – many representatives similarly report that managers are there to "get one over on them". There are some relationships that are built on this mutual suspicion and it is easy to see how this might develop. How to overcome it is not so easy but the Network believes that it can develop ways of helping to do so.

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In order to meet this challenging agenda, there are a number of plans being discussed by the Network. One is to provide IPA member organisations' representatives with a series of "How To Do" documents which, in conjunction with training and the on-going exchange of ideas will help to ensure these issues are addressed rather than left on the "too difficult to deal with" pile. To help this happen, the IPA is developing a member's only area of its website which will include an on-line forum for representatives and other practitioners to problem solve and refine ideas. In turn, this will inform further innovation which can be shared with a wider audience. In short, the IPA's Best Practice Network has a great deal to say on the future of information, consultation and partnership. It is already one of the most informed voices in the employee relations area – the challenge is to make sure more people hear it.



For more information on the Best Practice Network, contact IPA training and development director, Derek Luckhurst on [derek.luckhurst@ipa-involve.com](mailto:derek.luckhurst@ipa-involve.com)

## IPA confirmed as qualified scrutineer for further 4 years

A new list of organisations qualified to undertake and scrutinise statutory ballots and elections under trade union law was announced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills today.

Following a public competition, 6 organisations were recognised as scrutineers for workplace and trade union ballots and elections. The IPA retained its position on the approved list, which comes into force in April 2010.

IPA Business Development Manager, Sarah Dawson, said: 'We're pleased to be able to continue to offer our members and clients an election and balloting service.'

### Events

## Beyond the election: The future for unions

### Unions 21 annual conference

Harriet Harman MP,  
David Lammy MP,  
Brendan Barber,  
Billy Hayes and others

**March 16th 2010, 9am-4pm,  
Congress House, Great Russell Street, London**

This conference is open to all.  
To register email [dwhittle@atl.org.uk](mailto:dwhittle@atl.org.uk) or visit [www.unions21.org.uk](http://www.unions21.org.uk)

**Delegate fee: £40**



## Viewpoint

### Minister accepts MacLeod recommendations at IPA meeting

**E**mployment relations minister, Lord Young, announced his intention to implement the recommendations of the MacLeod review at a seminar organised by the IPA. He also gave his support to the work being undertaken by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke to translate the findings of the report into practical tools for business.

The seminar, which took place in December, brought together IPA clients, members and advisors to discuss what next for engagement 'After the MacLeod Review'. Participants highlighted the need for

significant change in many UK workplaces in order to shift to an engagement culture, and a better understanding of why more companies were not adopting engagement approaches. There was also some discussion of the role and limitations of current information and consultation mechanisms for supporting engagement.

The final stage of the MacLeod Review will come to an end next month with the launch of a series of guides and toolkits designed to help organisations engage their workforces.



*Lord Young and Nita Clarke*



## IPA respond to the EU 2020 strategy

This month the IPA submitted its response to the consultation on the EU 2020 strategy, the successor to the Lisbon strategy. The document suggests a focus on jobs, innovation and increased productivity as a way for Europe to grow its way out of recession. But the IPA raised concerns about the absence of the workplace in this picture.

The Lisbon strategy has largely been seen as a failure. At a recent conference in London, EU competition commissioner Joaquín Almunia admitted that there had been no mechanism in place to ensure that lofty ideals were delivered on the ground. The IPA commented in the response that commitments to increased productivity, better jobs, and improved innovation were unlikely to occur without policy measures directed at the workplace.

The IPA suggested four ways in which the EU 2020 strategy could improve in this regard: Give greater consideration to the workplace and workplace level policy; use the European Commission as a means of knowledge transfer, spreading best workplace practice between members states; use EU funding to incentivise and support member states to develop long-term workplace innovation schemes; use the European Commission as a cultural leader in good work and employee engagement. The Commission could use its role as employer and policy maker to help bring attention to these concepts.

You can read the full IPA response to the EU 2020 strategy at: [www.ipa-involve.com/news/ipa-responds-to-the-eu-2020-strategy/](http://www.ipa-involve.com/news/ipa-responds-to-the-eu-2020-strategy/)

### Government looks to implement EWC directive: IPA responds

Government consulted businesses, trade unions and academics on the introduction of the revised European Works Council directive to UK law this month. The government advocated a liberal approach in order to minimise the impact on business.

The key changes centred on the definitions of information and consultation, the provision of feedback and the relationship between national and transnational information and consultation forums.

The IPA response welcomed the initiative to improve the EWC legislation, and in particular the emphasis on training for representatives and feedback to employees. However, the IPA warned against abandoning the definitions of information and consultation agreed by the European social partners. Greater definition could help provide much needed clarity to managers and representatives.

The government will publish its response to the consultation on the website [www.bis.gov.uk](http://www.bis.gov.uk)

### New figures show hidden effects of recession

Britain faces significant underemployment, high levels of inactivity and a creeping rise in long-term unemployment according to labour market figures released by the ONS this month.

Although UK unemployment is somewhat lower than expected, the latest figures suggest that many people are underemployed; taking part-time work when they would prefer to be in full-time work. In the three months to December there were 1.04 million employees and self-employed people working part-time because they could not find full-time work.

The TUC expressed concern that the unemployment figures were encouraging an overly optimistic view of the labour market. Brendan Barber said:

'a closer look suggests that thousands of people are taking part-time or temporary jobs because they cannot secure full-time positions. A growth in insecure and low-paid employment at the expense of secure work is not good news for them or for the economy.'

Other findings:

- The number of people unemployed for more than 12 months reached 663,000, up 37,000 on the last quarter
- The rate of economic inactivity among the working age population has reached 21.3 per cent, up 0.2 per cent on the last quarter. This particularly high rate can be explained by the large number of people remaining in education rather than entering the labour market.