

## Unions and engagement

*Engagement has been championed by managers and HR practitioners, but they are not the only ones who have a role to play says Tom Wilson, director of Unionlearn*

**B**usiness and organisations function best when they make their employees' commitment, potential, creativity and capability central to their operation."

This statement, made in the introduction to the report *Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement* is one that trade unions can readily agree with. The most important role of unions, ever since they were founded, has been to fight for workplaces that are safe, fair and offer the staff learning and training opportunities. Unionlearn, the learning and skills arm of the TUC, was set up in 2007 to support union learning.

So what is employee engagement? Largely it is jargon for a process in which employees and their managers speak, and, more importantly, listen to each other, where there is mutual respect and shared values about their enterprise. It is about, as the report by David McLeod and

Nita Clark says, transforming the working lives of many people for whom Monday morning is an especially low point of the week. The authors quote figures showing that only three in ten of UK employees are actively engaged with their work, that a fifth may be disengaged and only four per cent exhibit high levels of engagement.

The report also provides evidence that improving engagement correlates with improving performance. A major report by Leeds University\*, commissioned by unionlearn, including a survey of 415 employers with one million employees, backs this up. It discovered that almost nine out of ten employers, who work with or have formal arrangements with unions for learning activities in their workplace, want to continue to do so. Two-thirds say that their organisation has benefited and eight in ten believe it benefited the individuals taking it up.

It showed that unionlearn's projects have led to better workplace morale and improved relations between management and staff; almost a third of employers surveyed said that organisational performance had improved and 42 per cent said that levels of trust between management and unions had increased.

Unionlearn's greatest asset is its union learning reps. Since 1999, more than 25,000 reps have been trained to act as advocates, encouraging and advising their colleagues on the advantages of improving their skills. They recruit their colleagues at the bus depot, factory or office water cooler to workplace learning. A survey conducted by the University of Central Lancashire, to be published later

this year, discovered that three-quarters of union learning reps have helped arrange courses for their colleagues and almost half obtained funding for learning. Almost two-thirds of managers, reported that ULR activity had increased the provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills and a majority agreed that there had been increases in job-related training and courses leading to qualifications.

ULRs play a vital role as facilitators of employee engagement. A bakery in Barnsley introduced a learning centre for its workers. To get to it, staff had to pass through the human resources department and sign in: nobody used it. When a new HR manager started, he consulted the union reps and the upshot was that the managers were turfed out of their restaurant (so they had to eat with the workers) and the room was transformed into a learning centre with a computer suite and library. The management and union reps now have regular meeting to keep the learning centre on track. And yes, it has become exceedingly popular with the bakers.

The MacLeod review makes the point that an employee is more likely to go the extra mile if he or she feels valued and that loyalty is rewarded. There is evidence that increased employee engagement can lead to lower accident and sickness rates and retention of staff. A happy workplace is a fair workplace and that is why unionlearn champions those who often miss out on opportunities at work, because of race, gender, disability or because they work night shifts. A third of Union Learning Fund projects are targeted at a specific ethnic or minority



Tom Wilson

group. An evaluation of a project promoting basic skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages courses found that they had a direct, positive effect on safety on building sites and improved productivity in a range of settings; one company identified a 20 per cent increase in productivity. And as one NHS hospital put it: "If people cannot read notices and they cannot deal with instructions on things there is risk involved."

The Leeds University report highlights the need for *formal* arrangements between employers and unions. The study found that in the in 53 per cent of workplaces where learning agreements are signed, the learning experience and the benefits to the organisation were the greatest. Merseytravel, which runs transport services in the Liverpool area, is a good example. It has seen great strides in the improvement of its workforce's skills since working with unionlearn. In 2002, one quarter of the staff had poor levels of literacy and numeracy. Today, 98 per cent have an NVQ Level 2 or higher qualification. The improved learning has been linked to a reduction of 2.5 days sickness per employee per annum and far more employee engagement.

We live in challenging times as the UK is fighting its way out of recession and looking towards meeting the economic needs of the future. The UK Commission

**URLs play a vital role as facilitators of employee engagement**

for Employment and Skills says that in order to achieve world class employment and skills, we will have to attain more than 20 million additional qualifications – equivalent to more than one for every second adult of working age. While our skills profile is improving, we are still in the position where one in eight adults of working age have no qualifications, more than a quarter are not qualified to Level 2 (roughly equal to GCSE) and just below half are not qualified above Level 2.

Unionlearn believes that employee engagement is vital if the UK is to improve its position from having the lowest growth in highly skilled jobs within the OECD. As the McLeod review reports, "59 per cent of engaged employees say that their job brings out their most creative ideas against only three per cent of disengaged employees". There is a vast, untapped source of talent and people who can make a greater contribution to the business they work in.

But, the biggest barrier to employees improving their learning is managers refusing to give them time off their duties. That is why unionlearn is supporting workers to exercise their new right to request time to train.

The Leeds report notes that unions have played an important role in engaging with employers and employees "to help them navigate economic uncertainty and prepare for better times".

Our *Skills: Recession & Recovery* project has been helping workers to gain skills to improve their employability as well providing them with job seeking techniques. Reps have been agreeing to workers doing fewer hours or accepting pay freezes in order to weather the downturn and stave off redundancies. The report found that joint working with unions increased at almost a third (30 per cent) of workplaces as a response to the recession. At Chamberlin & Hill Castings Ltd, the Black Country foundry worked with the Unite union to set up courses in literacy and numeracy (and one employee is now studying metallurgy at degree level) during down-time caused by the recession.

It is the mission of the trade union movement to create a learning culture in the UK's workplaces. ULRs are major force for employee engagement and it is unionlearn's job to challenge the managers who are not engaging with their staff to provide quality training and unleash their talent. We all stand to benefit.

**Unionlearn believes that employee engagement is vital if the UK is to improve its position from having the lowest growth in highly skilled jobs within the OECD**

*\*"Assessing the impact of union learning and the Union Learning Fund: union and employer perspectives," by Professor Mark Stuart, Hugh Cook Jo Cutter and Professor Jonathan Winterton, of Leeds University Business School's Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change*

*can be read in full at [www2.leeds.ac.uk/CERIC/index.php?id=373](http://www2.leeds.ac.uk/CERIC/index.php?id=373)*

By **Tom Wilson, director of Unionlearn**

## Engaging the human resource; public sector productivity and performance

An IPA and PSCA one day conference, The Barbican, London, 29th June 2010, Chaired by IPA director, Nita Clarke

*Speakers include:*

- Brian Etheridge, director, *Civil Service Capability Group, Cabinet Office*
- David MacLeod, *chair of the MacLeod Review on Employee Engagement*
- Stephen Moir, *director, People Policy & Law, Cambridgeshire County Council*
- John Adler, *chief executive, NHS Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals*
- Detective Superintendent Gary Linton, *ACPO Criminal Records*

To book call 0161 832 3787 or go to [www.publicserviceevents.co.uk/event/overview.asp?ID=149](http://www.publicserviceevents.co.uk/event/overview.asp?ID=149)

IPA members receive a 30% discount



## Statutory Employee Consultation: Five Years on

**F**ive years have passed already since the introduction of the Information and Consultation (I&C) Regulations. The Regulations, which transposed an EU Directive on this matter, established for the first time legally-based forms of information exchange and consultation between management and employees on a permanent basis in Britain. An important aspect of the legislation is that employers, employees and trade unions have been able to choose among a variety of legal options which can be used as they see fit. These options include doing nothing, pre-empting the use of the 'standard' information and consultation provisions through the conclusion of the so called pre-existing agreements (PEAs) or negotiated agreements or applying the 'standard' provisions. The Regulations initially applied (from 6 April 2005) to undertakings with 150 or more employees, but were extended in two further stages to cover undertakings with at least 100 employees (from April 2007) and then those with at least 50 (from April 2008).

Despite the fact that there is no requirement to register I&C agreements with any public or other authority, research conducted so far highlights a number of interesting issues. First, the most common employer response has been to undertake reviews of their existing I&C practice. Based on such reviews, a number of employers, mostly larger undertakings, have proceeded to the introduction of new, or formalisation of existing, arrangements. The majority of these arrangements are in the form of PEAs; negotiated agreements have been less widespread and the application of the 'standard provisions' is reportedly very low.

While attention needs to be paid to the conditions for the validity of PEAs, surveys have shown that in some cases the arrangements are not designed in consultation with employees, do not cover the entire workforce and are not in writing. While the coverage of the legislation extended progressively, the evidence of take-up has become weaker. The absence of take-up is partially explained by the lack of awareness by individual employees of their statutory rights to information and consultation. Employers see no need to establish/amend I&C arrangements as they believe their existing practice

complies with the legislation and/or their employees will not trigger the process for negotiated agreements.

Under the Regulations' 'standard' provisions, employee representatives are to be elected by the entire workforce. While there are some disparities between the approach of individual trade unions, they continue generally to be interested primarily in collective bargaining and recognition but have expressed concerns about the high thresholds required for the conclusion of negotiated agreements. Some exceptions are noteworthy such as Unite GMP who have concluded model I&C agreements with the relevant employers' federations and tested the legislation through applications to the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC). In unionised organisations, I&C arrangements can be found in different varieties, i.e. supplementary arrangements for non-union groups of employees alongside traditional collective bargaining arrangements; I&C arrangements for which elections are held for all seats; or 'hybrid' arrangements made up of representatives both union and non-union groups. There is so far limited evidence that the division between issues for negotiation and consultation is being blurred, as distributional issues continue to be channelled into collective bargaining with the unions. However, other discussions over, for instance, production, employee welfare and even bonus arrangements have been channelled into information and consultation with the newly established/amended I&C arrangements.

It is true that the evidence on the take-up of the legislation appears wanting. It is perhaps now time to pay more attention to any qualitative changes that have taken place in organisations where I&C arrangements have been put in place in light of the legislation.

Dr. Aristeia Koukiadaki  
Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge

IPA will be publishing a new case study next month on information and consultation at Standard Life, researched and written by Aristeia Koukiadaki. It will be available at [www.ipa-involve.com](http://www.ipa-involve.com)



## Cuts hit civil service first

The new government announced plans to cut the costs of Whitehall by reducing the size of the civil service.

In plans announced this month, the government will freeze civil service recruitment 'except in important front line and business critical areas'. They also plan to reduce the number of temporary staff.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS union responded to the announcement saying, "These cuts will damage the economy, will undoubtedly lead to people losing their jobs, and will put the delivery of vital public services at serious risk at a time when they are most needed. A recruitment freeze now, when tens of thousands of civil service posts have been cut in the last few years, will further add to workloads and put at risk the services our members provide to the public.

"We would welcome the opportunity for a full and honest debate about the public sector and its role in the economy, but the government appears intent on short-circuiting that by cutting first and asking questions later."

The government has established an Efficiency and Reform Group, headed by ministers from the Treasury and Cabinet Office, to identify savings across government departments.

The Group's priorities will also include looking at ways to simplify civil service pay structures and terms and conditions, simplify HR functions across Whitehall and freeze all consultancy spending.

Cabinet Office minister Frances Maude said; "Good government can cost less. It won't do just to carry on as before. By joining forces and concentrating our efforts where the money actually gets spent, we can make sure the maximum amount gets taken out of government overheads, not front line services."

## New employment relations minister announced

Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat member of parliament for Kingston and Surbiton has been appointed as minister for employment relations and postal and consumer affairs in the new government.

Davey will report to Vince Cable at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. One of his first tasks is to prepare a plan to restructure the Royal Mail with the aim of injecting new capital into the organization and addressing the pension deficit.

Davey was shadow foreign secretary for the Liberal Democrats before entering the government.

## IPA AGM and summer reception

The IPA will be holding its annual general meeting and summer reception on June 17th. All members and friends of the IPA are welcome to attend.

For more information, or to RSVP please contact Lorraine Modeste on [Lorraine.modeste@ipa-involve.com](mailto:Lorraine.modeste@ipa-involve.com)

### AGM

17.45

1, Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9BT

### Summer reception with guest speaker

18.00

1, Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9BT

## IPA Seminar

### Challenges facing the workplace A UK/Australian perspective

Speakers: Ed Davis, Macquarie University  
Mike Emmott, CIPD  
John Lloyd, trade union adviser

4pm - 5.30pm, 17th June,  
1, Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9BT

This seminar is a chance to explore the impact of the recession, public sector cuts and the new government on the world of work.

We will be discussing:

- What, if any, long term impact will the recession have in the private sector, and what challenges do private sector workforces now face?
- How can change be delivered effectively in the public sector? Can this be an opportunity for public service improvement? What role will the unions play?
- What does the new government mean for employment relations and the workplace? What are the key challenges for the government? What will government – union relations be like, and what impact will this have?

If you are interested in attending this seminar, please email [hannah.jameson@ipa-involve.com](mailto:hannah.jameson@ipa-involve.com)