

Unions and High Performance Working

Trade unions play an important role in helping organizations tap into the embedded knowledge in their workforce said Denis Gregory at the recent IPA/UKWON conference on Unions and High Performance Working.

Gregory argued for a new management paradigm which recognises that effective organizations mobilize and apply the maximum intellectual capacity of the entire workforce to problems. Unions are, he said, able to add considerable value to this process, quoting examples such as Ford whose EDAP initiative unlocked considerable knowledge and talent, Dwr Cymru and Vertex in the utility sector and in particular health and safety in the UK. Much of this was down to the strong culture of shared learning which has grown between management and unions around the health and safety agenda.

Unions and knowledge

Unions add considerable value to the process as possessors of knowledge and conduits to embedded knowledge within the organization. As managers move on more and more quickly, union representatives are at times the only stable group linking today's needs to the organization's accrued knowledge pool.

Too many employers only involve unions in the management of change when decisions are already made and they are seeking to implement. This means that unions become involved when their knowledge input is already highly constrained. Unions are unable therefore to contribute to key early stages in the discussion:

Willy Coupar, IPA

- the formulation of ideas when an opportunity or threat, which needs a decision, is perceived
- the shaping and testing of options, risks, costs and benefits to seek optimal outcomes
- the debate to shape how thinking is rolled out to get buy-in, agreement and workforce endorsement.

The learning organization

A learning organization seeks out and manages knowledge across the entire firm. Gregory quoted the DTI, "the knowledge base which the firm possesses plays a key role in the survival profitability and growth of the business."

This theme was echoed by Liz Smith of Unionlearn at the TUC. She pointed out that the UK is still falling short on key objectives in the area. A classic example is the inadequate supply of workers with Level 2 skills and adequate soft skills which the policy makers call "Skills for Life." This is a chronic deficit and employers struggle to get to grips with it. Union learning representatives are often far better placed to address the needs of the people concerned.

Unions also help to improve performance by pushing learning and training further up the agenda with employers. This means that access to skills are more fairly distributed across the organization. In the area of learning and skills, unions are a key partner in finding the best solutions.

GMB and the whisky sector

A concrete example of unions addressing high performance in practice was given by Harry

Donaldson of the GMB trade union. In 2003 the union started a project with major employers in the whisky sector to raise the competitive performance of the industry. Their objectives included greater employee involvement and collaborative working. They also sought to give employees a clearer sense of the inputs expected of them. The project also set out to build stronger common cultures in organizations around behaviours and increase the competences and skill profile of the sector.

The union recognized that in a highly competitive, globally traded business, ensuring that your employer was a high performance organization was not a matter of choice for his members.

Rather it is essential for job survival. It therefore has to be central to any strategy to sustain members' medium term employment prospects. Crucially too their plants must be seen as an investment location of choice when they are benchmarked across Europe and beyond.

As a result the GMB has put in place training modules on:

- business awareness
- communication with your team
- problem-solving
- team-working
- the leader in you
- coaching your team

Overall the GMB has put great effort into ensuring that its members and representatives both understand the business challenges of the whisky sector, and also into crafting a strategy for union engagement in the sector which seeks to sustain its members' long-term job prospects by ensuring their skills and competences stay ahead of what the sector needs.

UNITE Merger

On 1 May 2007 the long awaited merger between Amicus and the T&G to form UNITE, took place. Launching the new union, its joint leaders, Tony Woodley and Derek Simpson, said it would reassert the central role of TUs as the only force in society which can collectively represent those working for wages and compensate for employment inequalities.

They stressed too that, with some two million members, it would have over fifty per cent of all private sector trade unionists in its membership which will range from banking to airports, from print workers to bus drivers and from lab technicians to car makers, as well as workers in chemicals, insurance and food processing.

This spread of membership is a challenge. Simpson and Woodley are quite candid about the task facing the new body. They may well now be the biggest union player in the private economy but they also admit that total membership in private industry now stands at seventeen per cent. In overall terms their membership amounts to less than one in ten of the workforce in manufacturing and services.

Perhaps this explains why employers seem to be sanguine about a new super union. The CIPD's Mike Emmott felt that the impact on individual employers would be limited – the merger had more to do with the politics of the union movement and gaining clout in Brussels. The CBI's Susan Anderson added that big unions were not new – the T&G alone had over two million members just thirty years ago. The leadership knows the challenge which UNITE is facing. It wants to broaden membership into categories like contract cleaning and organize the workforce in the difficult world of gangmasters across rural England. The T&G has already made impressive progress on both these fronts.

However the approach which works with manual workers on the margin of the economy is very

different from the union model which will be successful in financial services. In these companies a range of specialist high value union services is called for.

This raises a question over the merger logic. Amicus, a union with growth prospects in finance is joining up with T&G whose areas of strength are focused on the "contracting out" economy of cleaning, security and support services. In business terms a parallel might be a merger between Barclays Bank and Rentokil Initial.

Of course trade unions are not the same as companies and their business models need not replicate those of a FTSE100 business. However they have more in common than may, at first glance, be apparent.

In common with business, unions need to recognize their market and target key segments vigorously. If Amicus membership is growing in the knowledge economy more synergy would be achieved by tying up with unions like Prospect, parts of the CWU or even parts of PCS.

The question of synergy becomes even more important at international level. For a decade UK unions have been acutely aware that, in a globalised economy, their national base is too small. UNITE see this as the next big challenge and are already in discussions to set up a transatlantic merger.

Yet the proposed partners, the American and Canadian steelworkers, seem an unlikely choice. Neither Amicus nor T&G have a background in steel making. And in terms of global arguments about jobs, the relocation of steel capacity to China or Brazil is now a lost battle. The future global pressure on UNITE members will come in sectors like chemicals, aerospace and finance. This suggests that these are the areas where they need to be making common cause in future, with their colleagues in Europe and elsewhere.

IPA director to stand down

IPA Director Willy Coupar is to stand down early in 2008. He took over as Director in 1997 from Bryan Stevens, having previously been the IPA's Partnership Director for four years. He told the Bulletin,

"I think that after eleven years in the post now is the time to hand over the role to someone who will bring new perspectives to the IPA. The world of work has changed considerably in the last decade and the recent strategic review which we carried out in 2006 recognises this. Performance, employee engagement and equality issues are what are high on our members' priorities."

During these eleven years he served for six years on the council at ACAS and chaired the government's partnership fund panel. In 2005 he received an MBE for his work in the field.

What is "flexicurity"?

Flexicurity is the latest buzzword at the heart of the latest European Commission green paper, but what does it mean?:

- "Blending flexibility and security" – an employment system that has been successful in Scandinavia.
- Standard employment contracts are more flexible, with reduced notice periods and costs involved in switching jobs and dismissing employees.
- Lifelong learning, upskilling and social security designed to empower workers to switch jobs and careers easily.
- Temp and agency workers given more job security by their employer being given responsibility for their working rights.

Flexible working is good for business – so why is UK business missing out?

In a recent survey undertaken by Personnel Today with Red Letter Days, 92% of the HR professionals who took part agree that flexible working hours help improve job satisfaction. However only 68% say their organisations are going some way to address work-life balance. Less than one fifth are focussing on achieving it. About half of the respondents to the survey believe that their organisation does not offer enough in terms of flexible working benefits. Whilst organisations may argue this is because of cost and extra administration a comparison with the cost and time involved in replacing staff who leave because their need for better work-life balance could make the case for flexible benefits.

More information about the Personnel Today/Red Letter Days survey from: www.personneltoday.com

Employers identify the business benefits of reducing pay inequalities between men and women

Eight out of 10 employers claim they are actively tackling pay gaps between men and women, research has found.

A benchmarking survey conducted by Opportunity Now of 94 employers found that 60% of employers have a detailed business case addressing the benefits of gender equality.

The impact is measured through employee recruitment and retention, customer satisfaction, increased revenue and effective financial governance, as well as creativity and innovation. The figure is up by 25% on the 2006 survey result.

More information from www.opportunitynow.org

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DIRECTOR

Salary Package £70000 plus defined contribution pension

The Involvement & Participation Association (IPA) is the leading body in the UK dedicated to employee involvement and participation in the workplace. We are appointing a new director to take over from Willy Coupar our current director when he stands down in early 2008

The new director will provide strategic leadership and enhance the organisation's high level profile with its stakeholders. We are looking for an excellent communicator able to represent the IPA and its values externally while also offering leadership to the internal teams who deliver IPA services. You will welcome the challenge of growing our activities across the world of work with special emphasis on:

- developing services to IPA corporate members and other clients
- expanding the range of services which the IPA offers the social partners, UK government and Europe
- representing the IPA to government, policy makers and others.

This is an exciting opportunity for someone who wants to make a high profile impact in the field of employment relations generally and employee involvement more particularly.

The post will interest professionals working across the field of employment. This could be either in management, consultancy, research, or within the trade union movement. Excellent interpersonal skills will be required in this post. Candidates are likely to be educated to degree level, and will have a demonstrable track record in their career to date.

PROGRAMME MANAGER

employee involvement and engagement

Salary Package £35000 plus contributory pension

The IPA is also looking to recruit a programme manager to lead the team working on its employee involvement and engagement programme

As well as managing the programme you will have an important role supporting the work of the IPA generally by providing your colleagues with information and research.

The post will interest professionals working in a personnel management, research, consultancy or a trade union role. Candidates are likely to be educated to degree level, with a demonstrable track record in the field.

For an application pack for both posts please write to William Coupar, Director, IPA, 42 Colebrooke Row, London N1 8AF or e-mail to William.Coupar@ipa-involve.com

Closing date for applications for both posts is 6 July 2007

