Trade Unions and the Internet
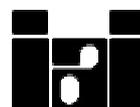
Project int.unity – building up an international trade union community in the net

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The int.unity project team "Trade Unions and the Internet – E-Union"

"The e-trade union is one which embraces other unions' ideas, offering support and co-operation. Now physical proximity as the primary precondition for solidarity can make way for virtual organization and enable trade unions to communicate easily across distance and time zones with the barriers of language broken down. (source: CWU)"

1.   The Tasks

The aim of the int.unity E-Union project was to consider the use of information technology in the Trade Union context. In order to achieve that aim, a number of tasks were identified as "terms of reference". These are described as follows:

To Assign Staff Of The Teams And Commence Work On Schedule

The CWU were given the responsibility of moderating the project site. A timetable was agreed for the publication of the first "sample" documents to be used to test the language translation technology. The timetable was achieved for this first phase.

To Provide A Sufficient Fund Of Suitable Documents ("basic document")/ Information Upon Commencement Of The Work

Throughout the year, documents have been submitted to the project site to the extent that we now have some forty contributions covering the E-Union subject.

To Structure The "Shared Workspace" Within The Corporation Platform

In view of the nature of the subject, initially no formal structure was applied to the E-Union workspace. As time and our experience grew, however, it became clear that a structure was required and the workspace has now been organised into five main areas. These are described later in this report.

We have learnt, however, that using a Shared Workspace does require a degree of organisational skill and a good deal of discipline!

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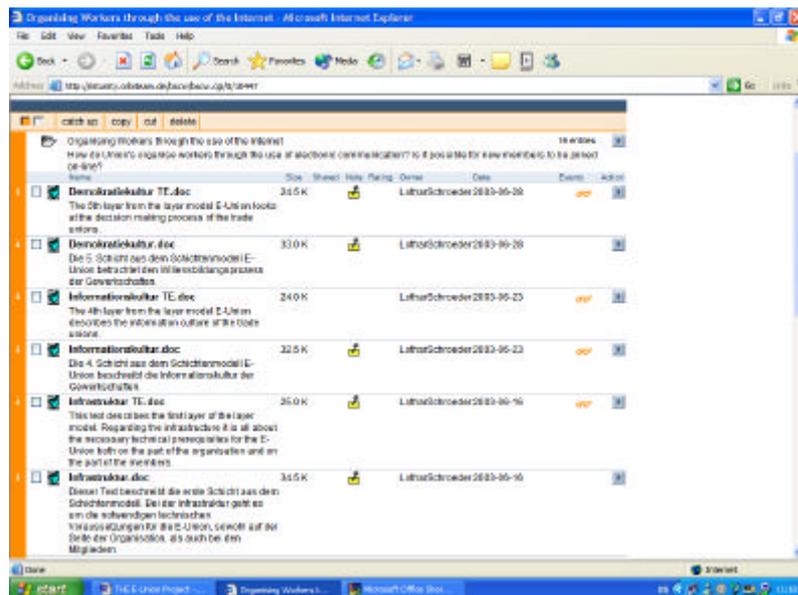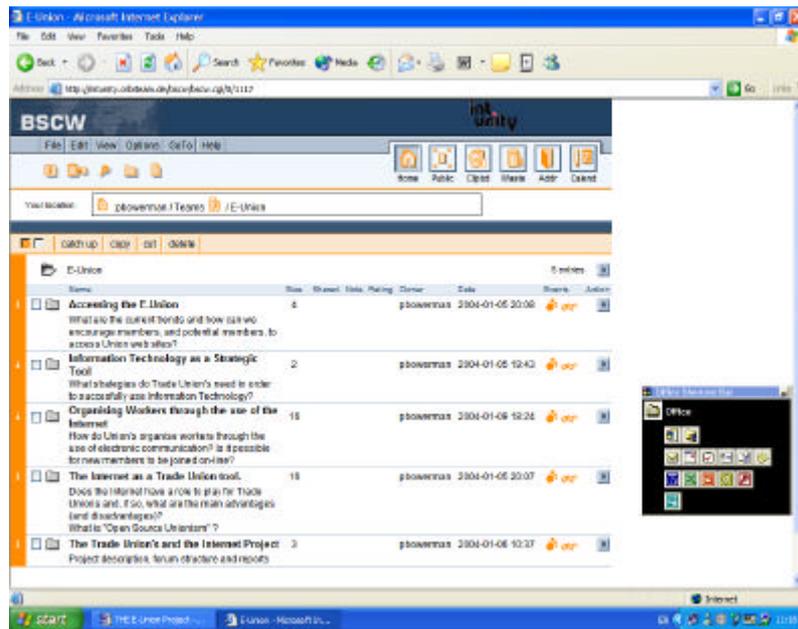
To Guarantee Intensive Cooperation With The Technical Project Partners And The Actors Responsible For Project Evaluation

Cooperation in the development of the language technology platform has been extremely good. Although correct grammatical interpretation is still not perfect, we have been impressed by the progress made in the short time available.

To Summarise The Discussions

An initial summary was produced for a presentation held in Brussels

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on the 10th September 2003. This has been published on the project workspace and a copy is attached at Appendix 1.

To Portray Intermediate Results

These too were presented to project partners in Brussels. In view of the evolving nature of the E-Union, the project will need to be updated accordingly.

2. Summarising the Discussions

I would like to take this opportunity to thank contributors for taking part in this very interesting project. The "E-Union" is a very short title for a very big subject! As the contributions submitted cover subjects' ranging from Open Source Unionism to Joining New Members Online, the following structure has been applied to, hopefully, help facilitate constructive discussion.

2.1. The Trade Unions And The Internet Project

"The Trade Unions And The Internet Project" - contains the project description, the forum structure and any reports that have been prepared.

Under this heading we have published the project description and any reports relating to the project.

2.2. Information Technology As A Strategic Tool

"Information Technology As A Strategic Tool" - asks what strategies do trade unions need in order to successfully use information technology.

The CWU commented that "If trade unions are to realistically adapt to the world of electronic communications, the first step is to ensure that they have sound IT infrastructures." Clearly, Trade Unions must be prepared to invest in equipment, which will meet the needs of the organisation and the expectations of the members they serve. The speed of change is such that the latest equipment purchased today can be out of date tomorrow! Implementing such changes is an expensive business and we must, therefore, ensure that our strategies take fully into account the costs as well as the benefits involved. For example, every new initiative should be viewed on the basis of value for money rather than its desirability. To meet this aim, there should be a strategic policy for ensuring equipment and software is fit for purpose. For example, such a policy could be based on a three year

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renewal cycle which will maintain suitable standards. If we fail to take this "balanced budget" approach then the costs will outweigh the benefits and we will cease to exist as viable organisations. Trade Unions are no different to any other corporate body in the delivery of goods and services. Personnel must, therefore, be of a sufficiently high standard to respond to the demands of this new age. Ensuring that our employee's skills and knowledge are able to meet the needs of the organisation should be a matter of great importance to us. Many trade unions have recognised the importance of a forward thinking Information Technology Strategy and are publishing high quality web sites, introducing virtual private networking, intranets and many other initiatives. With so many developments taking place, the E-Union project comes at an important time and it could and should be used as a continuing platform for the exchange of ideas and possibly the development of trade union/IT "best practices".

2.3.   The Internet As A Trade Union Tool

"The Internet As A Trade Union Tool" - questions whether the Internet has a role to play for trade unions. If so what are the main "advantages and disadvantages"? It also contains documents on "Open Source Unionism". Ver.di provided us with some very interesting source material, tracking the most important stages of development of the internet within the last ten years. The pace of change and the availability of a wide range of IT resources means that organisations have begun to rely on the internet to such an extent that without it they would cease to function effectively. Whether such reliance is a good thing or not remains to be seen of course!

What cannot be denied is the huge, and growing, impact of the Internet on our social lives and this has been identified within the project. Trade Unions as with any other organisation do see the value of the Internet in extending their influence and advertising their services. Particular contributions on this subject were received from colleagues at CWU and Connect and gave a very interesting insight as to how trade unions can develop web sites and other on-line facilities as useful tools. "We use the on-line ballots more frequently in order to allow our members a direct say in the process of negotiation. Success earlier this year came with a pay ballot for the managerial and professional group (MPG) in BT. We e-mailed the information and placed lots of info up on the website. So, people could read in some detail what the pay deal would mean for them. We then alerted the non-members to the ballot which was underway. We told them that they would be unable to influence that result as they were not mem-

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bers of the union.

Unsurprisingly, a record recruitment followed; 70% of the MPG-members participated in the ballot. We're using more of these ballots in other parts of our organisation now." (Source. Connect)

2.4.   Organising Workers Through the Use Of The Internet

"Organising Workers Through The Use Of The Internet" - contains varied discussions on how unions organise workers through the use of electronic communication. It also contains a specific discussion on the possibility of recruiting new members to be joined on line. Under this heading we considered the impact of the use of the Internet and the ability to organise workers and users. The need for trade unions themselves to change their structure in order to be able to deal with the new electronic age was also considered. If we prepare the E-Union, we must carry out changes at the organisation of the trade unions. If we understand our work, more process-oriented for example, we have the possibility of showing the processes in an information system. We must structure our work so that certain tasks are always taken care of in the same, defined form. This mode of operation demands a certain discipline of the ones involved. If defined processes are realized in an information system, these processes then also must be adhered to. Otherwise the data in the information system and the reality get inconsistent. (Source. Ver.di)

Effective information exchange, workflow system, data management and many other areas would all have to be examined to ensure that they meet requirements. Such changes however are not only common to trade unions, they are common to any organisation using the Internet and it is worthwhile, therefore, to examine their experiences in addition to those of trade unions.

The project did identify an interesting area of difference involving the recruitment of new members, for example: Ver.di and Connect have a system whereby new members can be recruited and can pay their subscriptions on line, which is unusual in the UK.

The CWU recently carried out a survey of trade unions to determine whether "end-to-end" online recruitment was a viable possibility. A problem has been identified in that a significant number of members paid their subscriptions through a system called "check off". This means that the employer deducts Union subscriptions from members pay and then passes it onto the trade union concerned. To accomplish this, the member must sign a form authorising the deduction to take place.

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This, in effect, means that the recruitment process cannot be completed on line because of the requirement for a piece of paper! Perhaps in future through our discussions on the project workspace, we can find a solution to this problem, which will assist all unions!

Another interesting contribution raised the subject of organising self-employed workers into union membership, which described how some unions are using Call Centres to contact prospective members and then recruit them online. This is an area, which may or may not be popular (there could be Data Protection issues for instance!) but should certainly be the subject of future discussions!

2.5. Accessing the E-Union

"Accessing The E-Union " - deals with the fundamental question of how we can encourage members and potential members to access union websites and other electronic services.

Statistics published on the platform, showed that by October 2003, 48% of households in the UK - some 11.9 million people could access the Internet from home compared with just 9% - 2.3 million for the quarter of 1998.

Internet Access

11.9 million households online
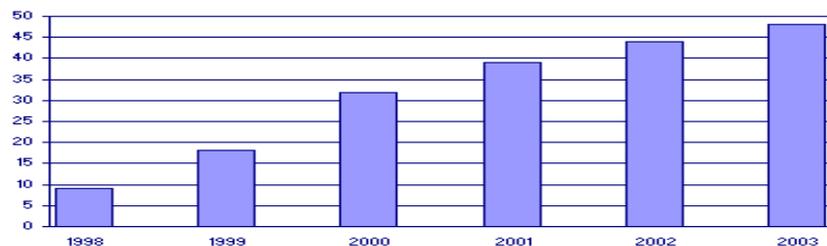
This quite clearly demonstrates the value placed on the internet but there is still some way to go. Trade unions need to play their part in ensuring that all members of society have access to the information revolution.

Many union members are in low paid jobs and simply cannot afford the cost of the equipment needed to access the Internet. This unequal social balance, if not adjusted in some way, leads to the potential of a divide between the "information rich" and "information poor". Trade Unions are the champions of equality and can (and should) take the lead in addressing this problem.

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Governments need to be encouraged to fund technology initiatives aimed at widening public access; agreements should be reached with employers to provide access for employees; and Trade Unions should consider entering the "market place" as providers of equipment and access facilities.

In 1999, the 24th World Congress of FIET recognised this important and fundamental issue in the following statement.

"It is important that trade unions play their full role in debates about more general issues raised by the transition to the information age. As has been pointed out by others, there may be several possible models of information societies, just as there have been several models of industrial societies. There is certainly no preordained way in which our societies will evolve.

From President Clinton's NII initiative and the European Union's Bangemann Report downwards, many have talked of the dangers of a divide growing between the information-rich and information-poor. This divide is already with us, to a large extent reflecting existing inequalities within societies. For example, in the developed countries, some social groups (including the unemployed, the elderly and those on low incomes) have much less opportunity to access information sources such as the Internet or applications such as e-mail. Women's organisations have commented that technology is for the most part designed by men, and that the Internet's orientation is masculine.

Some who raise these issues tend to disregard the fact that, unless steps are taken to the contrary, commercial pressures will mean that profit rather than social need dictates developments.

The risks of the 'information-gap' widening are greater if the development of the information society is left solely to market forces. The need for controls is clearly acknowledged in the telecoms field, where governments are working to ensure that liberalisation of telecoms provision is also accompanied by new regulatory measures, including making sure that basic telecoms services are available to all through universal service provision (USP).

The importance of public libraries, as central access points to digital information sources, is also being acknowledged, an extension into the 21st century of a public resource which had much to do with developing popular education and access to knowledge in the last century.

The issue of information-wealth and information-poverty must also be confronted on a global level. There are vast differences in access, even to a basic item of technology such as the telephone, in different

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regions of the world. For example, currently there are on average about 48 telephones for each 100 people in the developed OECD countries. This ratio falls to around 10% in middle-income countries and to 1.5% in the least advanced countries. As South Africa's Deputy President Thabo Mbeki pointed out to the 1995 G7 conference on the information society, "Half of humanity has never made a telephone call".

The PC ratio per 100 inhabitants ranges from 18% in high-income countries to 0.01% in the poorest countries. Even where Internet access is available, the speed and cost of its use may vary enormously. A US academic may be able to download a journal article in a few seconds at no measurable cost; a researcher in Africa connecting over an unstable telephone line might find that the same article took ten minutes to retrieve, at high cost.

At that conference affiliates were set the task of considering "What practical steps can FIET and its affiliates take to promote efforts to redress current inequalities in access to information and to ICTs?"

Perhaps we, in the Int.Unity E-Union Project, are in a perfect position to examine just what progress has been made since 1999 and propose steps to address the issues raised?

3.   Conclusion

The E-Union project has served to demonstrate the huge potential of electronic communication. It also highlighted how wide ranging this subject is.

Electronic communications are developing at an ever-increasing pace and clearly we cannot say that a final position has been reached at any particular time. The project has shown that there is still a huge amount of work to be done, if we are to truly harness the advantages available to us. Through shared experiences, the project has helped us gain a greater understanding of the problems facing us and the benefits to be gained. If we rely too heavily on electronic communication at the expense of human contact with our Members then Trade Unions will certainly cease to exist as we know them.

By using the knowledge gained and by developing our experience within the E-Union Project we can ensure that we use the new technology to its fullest potential as one of many tools in our trade union "toolkit". This in turn will lead to ensuring the future of trade unions in the modern World.

"The pressure on unions to use the internet to improve their recruitment and services is a powerful one. Natural selection will

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weed out unions that fail to exploit the internet while rewarding those that find the right mix of services and activities on the web with growth of membership and influence. Unions will copy what works best and spread best practice. The lesson on the business side of the internet that success is more likely to come to firms with strong brands and products in the normal commercial world than to internet start-ups bodes well for union internet activities. Still, success in cyberspace does not guarantee a renaissance of unionism. It is one part of the process of unions' adapting to new economic circumstances and the changing concerns of workers and firms — a necessary but not sufficient condition for unions to prosper in the twenty-first century."
(Source: British Journal of Industrial Relations)

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Appendix 1

Introduction

The aim of the Int.unity E-Union Project was to consider the use of information technology in the Trade Union context.

Since the start of the project Team Members and associated Int.unity members have contributed a number of documents providing a wide range of views on the subject. We are now at a stage of the project where we can summarise all these contributions.

The following summary report represents our conclusions and this report supports the presentation to Int.unity members in Brussels on 10 September 2003.

What is an E-Union?

Communication

The E-Union uses information technology to effectively communicate with Members and Representatives

- Communication can be both internal and external and includes Training for all the Union's executive members, officials and Members through e-learning initiatives.

- Improved HQ administration moving towards the paperless office through better use of virtual private networks and intranets

- Robust and modern Electronic Communications and IT Systems which allow high speed communication both internally and externally. Such systems improve the consultative interface with members, representatives and employers.

The E-Union promotes the value of Trade Unions through the use of the Internet and other electronic media. Websites (national/local), in particular, are the public face of the Union and need to be informative, user friendly and professionally presented.

The E-Union provides services and benefits through on line marketing initiatives. Union's are diversifying into areas such as Financial Services, Insurance Products, and partnership deals with providers of goods. The use of technology to promote these services increases the Union's opportunities to enhance available Membership Benefits and improve revenue streams.

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The CWU Approach

The Communication Workers Union has been working hard to improve it's e-capability by investing in up to date equipment and software, improving IT awareness through training initiatives, and improving communications at all levels of the Union.

■ At CWU HQ the systems have now been upgraded to Windows XP for desktop users, and the local area network is now running Windows 2000 Server.

■ Line speeds for Internet access are being improved.

■ A "Branch e-mail project" has concluded with all CWU Branches now having an e-mail address and most Branches having a web site.

■ Work has started on the evaluation of a virtual private network which will enhance the two way flow of information between and within Branches and HQ.

■ Video and audio conferencing are now available. Audio conferencing has become widely used as an effective consultative tool (e.g. the recent dispute with Royal Mail)

■ Many other projects are planned (both in the UK and international) which, when finalized, will mean that the CWU has taken it's greatest leap forward into the era of the E-Union!

What next?

A formal strategy document to be prepared for the consideration of Union Executives. This document will include recommendations/protocols aimed at establishing the role of the e-union in the culture of the organizations we represent.

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Appendix 2

The Value of Web Sites

Maintaining web sites to ensure they are modern looking and up to date is, of course, extremely important for the image they want to portray. It is widely accepted that Web Sites were regarded by many Trade Unions as simply a means of being able to create an image that they were a progressive and modern organisation. The reality of course was often quite different!

That has all changed and Trade Unions are, at last, recognising the value of Web Sites. They are no longer regarded as simply a "brochure" giving a glossy view of the union. They are fast becoming a vibrant and essential part of the two way communication between the Member and the organisation he/she has joined.

In this section we discuss some of the more valuable features of the Trade Union Web Site.

Key element for e-unions.

One of the most essential elements of a union website is a facility for members to interact, both with the website itself, but also with each other. The more interaction members have with each other, the better the sense of solidarity they will have. It also follows that they are more likely to revisit the site, and recommend it to colleagues.

Building a union community means finding a common interest shared by the members. It means providing them with a way to voice their opinions and a way to respond to them.

Bulletin Board/Discussion Forum.

Discussion Forums can be easily integrated into a website. They allow members to pose questions directly to other members and enable those members to respond. If there is a fear some members may misuse the facility, discussion forums can be monitored, which, while time-consuming, ensures the content remains relevant and accurate. Members can interact with one another and develop topics that are of special interest to them; Air their views with other like-minded people who share similar goals and interests.

Obtain answers from their contemporaries should they require infor-

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mation. This also gives them the feeling of contributing to something and making a difference.

Encouraging union officials to participate also helps promote member interaction and generate more interest.

Our strength comes from uniting everybody and moving forward together.

Members Only Area

A good way to create a community on a site is to provide a members' only area. This will require some form of registration on the member's part. It will also give members the feeling that they are afforded certain levels of privilege, and are getting added value from being in the union.

For the union, there are also benefits to be had in offering a members' only area, such as insight into what the members are currently most interested in, a better understanding of their interests, more direct contact, and the ability to attain usable feedback.

Direct Email

E-unions can also directly email their members at little cost and minimal effort. Email newsletters are easy to implement and control, and are a good way for unions to get information to their members cheaply, quickly and efficiently. These can be created so that the sender can moderate any responses where necessary, and forward them accordingly, or allow immediate open participation between those on the list, increasing information flow. Listservs are a simple way to carry out low-cost information sharing and contact with rank-and-file membership, with branches, or to promote coordination between different branches, or different organisations.

Opinion polls.

Balloting members with regular questions about current union proceedings or policies and then posting the results is a good way to bring members back to the site each week as well as providing the union with indications of what members feel about certain events.

Recruiting online.

Full electronic application facilities to expand recruitment with on-line

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credit/debit card payment should be considered. This is not currently being exploited by most unions.

Content

The main content sections of the e-union site should provide detailed information on the union, what it does, who it represents, what it stands for. It should be the ultimate source of information for who the site is aimed at. Identify who the site is for (members, non-members, potential members, activists, the general public, the media, other trade unions), and create it accordingly. Be prepared to tailor it again and again according to the feedback received. A constantly evolving, functional, operational, regularly updated site is a sign of a union that listens to its members and reacts to their needs. It also encourages users to return. But it has to be more than an online brochure, to encourage interactivity, as detailed above, but also in the form of offering posters to download, the ability to order promotional material or publications etc.

Unions should also encourage departments within the organization to be responsible for updating their own material, using a content management system, which would not require the contributor to know anything about specific internet-language such as html.

Look at other websites, especially other trade union sites, and work out what works and what doesn't. "Borrow" ideas from other sites, develop relationships with other webmasters and share information with them.

Campaigning

Unions, by their very nature, are campaigning organisations. Many important social changes would not have occurred had it not been for the involvement of Trade Unions in some form or another. The Web Site is an ideal tool for creating interest and giving motivation to campaigns.

One particular example is the 'Pink Elephant Campaign" being organised by the CWU. This campaign is targeted at opposing the loss of UK jobs and services through offshore outsourcing of Call Centres to the Far East.

In addition to the Union's own Membership, the campaign has attracted huge interest from other Unions affected by the same issue. The Web Site is continually updated to show the latest news and keep Members in contact with campaign activities.

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Additional benefits

Unions should consider offering their membership discounted, if not free, Internet access. Many members will not have access to an Internet terminal. It is all well and good designing the perfect web-presence, but this is of little use if the members are unable to access it or receive email. Ensuring that branches are online in order that they can disseminate information should be a start.

Unions should demand Internet access at work via company-provided terminals.

Investing in technology for members can realise significant savings by reducing the costs of printing, copying, circulating and posting paper documents.

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