

Name: Boots
Site: South-West distribution centre
Union role: Union Learning Representative
Union: Usdaw
Size: 92 employees
Sector: Retail
Location: South-West England

The organisation and the role of the workplace representative

Boots is a leading UK health & beauty retailer. In 2007, it merged with the Italian company Alliance Pharmacies in a bid to become a global leader in health, beauty & pharmaceutical retailing. Union organisation is well established and there is a partnership agreement with Usdaw. The South-West distribution centre is one of 17 across the UK and has one elected union representative and two ULRs. Relations between management and union have historically been good. The site employs 92 personnel, with over 70 per cent working in manual distribution, and the remainder in management, administration and implementation. Just over half of employees are female and of those who do not work night shifts, the majority work part-time.

The issue

Boots' long term strategy is to improve the efficiency of its national distribution. A policy to update the distribution and logistics at Boots' headquarters site in Nottingham has led to an investment in a programme of centralised, automated distribution. As a direct result, all 17 regional distribution centres (DCs) are closing. The announcement of the DC closures was made in March 2006 with all closures scheduled for no later than September 2009.

The roll-out of closures has resulted in several, related initiatives. First, the company developed a three stage redundancy programme, around announcement, consultation and redeployment. Second, each site has been allocated an Implementation Co-ordinator to assist with closure. Third, a 'Network Work Stream' has been set up to aid redeployment. The primary role played by the union at the site was working in partnership with the Implementation Co-ordinator to support and guide employees through the closure process. This included advising employees about opportunities for external and in-house training to improve external employability and/or facilitate redeployment within Boots.

Under redeployment, Boots are giving workers the opportunity to learn new skills to enable them to work in others area of the company. For example, all distribution workers may train as fork lift drivers and all employees have the opportunity to work three shifts in Boots retail, to see if they find that work appealing.

In terms of skills for the external labour market, the ULRs coordinated their work on learning under the banner of “Skills for Life”. Demonstrating commitment to the learning agenda, Boots has opened training accounts with £300 allocated to fund externally based training and qualifications for each worker facing redundancy. An impressive 64 per cent of staff are engaged in learning of some kind. The money can be used for college based qualifications, such as NVQs, and a third of employees are currently using their funds to complete nationally recognised qualifications. The accounts can also be used for more practical life skills, such as driving lessons.

The work of the ULRs has been essential in helping the Implementation Co-ordinator gain the trust and buy-in of employees. The manager of the DC admitted that morale was low after the closure announcement in March 2006 and that the Implementation Co-ordinator was viewed with some suspicion in the workplace. Given this, the union reps were instrumental in forging better employment relations and greater trust between the workers and Implementation Coordinator. This culture change was achieved in part through union reps talking to and advising workers about the in-company provided training opportunities available and encouraging take-up.

How we benefited from effective collaborative working

Once a positive working relationship was forged between the union reps and Implementation Coordinator, a common goal of facilitating the workers’ learning and redeployment opportunities was then established. This resulted in some significant and positive developments. The two ULRs spoke informally to each worker to understand more about that individual’s intentions and how they might benefit from the training and redeployment opportunities. The Implementation Co-ordinator claimed the ULRs had been excellent at ‘selling training’, as evidenced by the high levels of take-up.

The majority of the workforce willingly entered discussions about their perceived futures and potential skill requirements. The aim, according to one ULR, was that ‘everyone would leave with a better CV’. The buy-in from employees was initially slow but the creation of a DC Learning Centre with 8 computers, internet access and digital cameras, funded by Boots with a contribution from Usdaw, was a step forward. Additionally, events such as college open days and career fairs were arranged with some taking place at the site. Together these investments and activities facilitated employees’ buy-in to the redundancy programme.

In terms of collaborative working, there were clear benefits for all concerned. The DC manager highlighted staff retention through the commitment to redeployment. He also felt that staff motivation had improved and the flexible approach to learning within company time had fostered better employment relations. This was not without challenges, however, as there was a need to reconcile training with operational demands.

The union reps also felt Usdaw had benefited from strengthening its reputation and membership at the site, as the union was seen to want to help all employees and not just union members.

Both union and management representatives claimed they had collaborated effectively and this process had produced some very positive outcomes. The union reps said they had put 'maximum input' into helping employees engage with learning activities, something management agreed with. The reps were organising frequent classes with a view to engaging the more disengaged workers with the learning agenda. An attempt was made to make learning 'more fun', by including more relaxed activities such as flower arranging alongside more academic endeavours such as improving maths and literacy skills. Overall, this was a very positive collaboration which took place under challenging conditions.

What we would do differently

The manager of the distribution centre thought that the 'Network Work Stream' could have been implemented more effectively and admitted that getting this strategy off the ground in terms of scheduling initial meetings with other managers had at times been difficult. This had impacted on the communication of strategy with the union reps as to their specific role within the redundancy programme. Both reps interviewed stated that they had to 'learn the role as they went along' as did the Supervisors. Earlier briefing and training regarding their role might have brought about earlier benefits to the employees and seen further improvements in the employment relations between staff and management at the site.