

Name: The British Museum
Union Role: Environmental representative
Unions: PCS, PROSPECT, FDA, Unite
Size: 1,000
Sector: Heritage
Location: Central London
Issue: Environmental policy

The organisation and the role of the workplace representative

The British Museum, located in central London, is over 250 years old and holds in trust a collection of art and antiquities from ancient and living cultures. It employs 1,000 staff, equally balanced by gender. The museum has a long tradition of union membership and, with the exception of a short period from the mid to late 1990s, collaborative relations have prevailed. Union membership stands at 70 per cent, and includes many senior managers. Union facilities have been provided for four unions: PCS (the largest in terms of membership, with 18 reps), PROSPECT (12 reps), FDA (7 reps – for senior managers and professionals) and Unite (1 rep). Each union also had a branch chair and branch secretary.

The issue

Since 2004 the organisation has made efforts to address the issue of reducing its carbon footprint and become a green, environmentally aware workplace. A number of catalysts brought this issue to the fore. First, it was considered the 'right thing to do', particularly as a public funded organisation. Second, central Government had set efficiency and cost saving targets for the museum to meet, which included an energy cost saving of £1million. And finally there were plans for the museum to expand and build a new building. However, to be granted planning permission a large environmental audit had to be carried out and any new build had to be carbon neutral. These factors made the environment a considerably higher priority than before.

In 2006 the TUC received funding from the Carbon Trust to run six pilot projects under the title of the 'Green Workplaces Initiative'. The British Museum was one of the pilot organisations. A 'Green fair' event was held in late 2006 to launch the pilot, led by the unions. This included exhibitions, stalls and talks for staff held at the Museum. In attendance were Envirowise (government funded organisation delivering free independent environmental advice), the Carbon Trust, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the heads of departments and union officials, the TUC, a local councillor and Camden council's environmental officials.

The event was designed to stimulate interest amongst employees in reducing the carbon footprint and to identify individuals interested in becoming 'Green Workplace reps' (also referred to as environmental reps). Out of 100 registrations of interest, 25 were selected to represent every area/department within the museum. Most were union members and many were union reps as well. This initiative also drew in for the first time other employees into this arena so succeeded in engaging the wider workforce. All reps attended a two day training course provided by the TUC (irrespective of whether they were or were not union members) on conducting energy audits. The role of the rep was to gather information about their specific department or area, talk to other employees and identify ways to reduce the carbon footprint. These findings were then reported through a six-weekly environmental forum (also known as the 'Green Workplaces team'), so that management could judge whether they were achievable and assist in implementation. One full time on-site union official described the day-to-day role of the environmental reps as:

"Representatives from all the different areas of the museum tasked with helping their managers, heads of department, or central management even as well as fellow work colleagues to get the green message ... to act as green champions, identifying how each area can make efficiency savings, making people aware of environmental issues at work and at home and then to meet on a regular basis to push out and share ideas between departments. It's all small stuff on a day to day basis, it saves pennies, but pennies add up to a lot of money at the end of the year!"

How we benefited from effective collaborative working

The environmental initiative was predominantly union led. However, there was a strong commitment to the project from senior management who involved and collaborated with the unions throughout the scheme. Colleagues were encouraged to identify themselves as 'environmentalist' first and employees or trade union members second. Much of the success of the project was due to the unions' involvement. It was important for management that employees understood that the initiative was not simply a cost cutting exercise being imposed upon them, but rather that they were helping address a serious social concern. (In this sense the unions' involvement was invaluable and helped to reinforce that this was interpreted as a grass roots initiative being led by employees.) Relations between management and union representatives had, typically, always been good and the initiative solidified this relationship.

As a result of the Green Workplace Initiative a large number of suggestions emerged from the Environmental Reps around the museum which had not previously been identified by management. Some of the changes that have been implemented to date include:

1. Switching to energy saving light bulbs throughout the museum
2. New switches to reduce needless use of lighting at night
3. Recycle bins located in the restaurant, around the offices and the museum
4. Drinking water plumbed in rather than using bottled water containers

5. Signs in the offices and chocolates left on people's desks with notes saying 'thank you for turning your monitor off over lunch' (i.e. do not leave it on standby)
6. Computer printers and photocopy machines not left on standby
7. Encouraging recycling at home and supporting cycling to work

The six-weekly meetings have provided an effective communication from employees to management as well as sharing information between departments. Information and environmental actions were presented on a specially designed intranet site giving management a new means of communicating achievements to staff. Office notices and an 'environmental tip of the week' were also posted. Relations between management and the unions remained excellent and employees felt engaged in the decision-making processes relating to the environment. Moreover, a large reduction in energy consumption was recorded (around £700,000 worth) although it was unclear exactly what component of this was a direct result of the Green Workplaces Initiative. Furthermore, re-cycling increased greatly.

What we would do differently

The main challenge identified was the conflict between the primary duty of care to the Museum's collection versus the need to reduce its carbon footprint. Some exhibits require a controlled environment – that includes air conditioning, temperature, humidity and light control. The large conditioning systems required to do this use a lot of energy. A good compromise was identified through the environmental rep scheme, whereby such valuable or vulnerable pieces were located in smaller areas, with lower ceilings, so less of the environment had to be conditioned.

It was also a challenge to stimulate and maintain people's ongoing interest in the initiative. This was achieved by management at all levels continually raising the environment as an important issue, whilst the reps encouraged employees to attend meetings, in addition to organising staff breakfasts where employees were reminded about the initiative.

One area that management felt they could do little to address was international travel, as it was part of their responsibility to send items to other museums around the world. A programme of carbon offsetting was in development to address this problem.