

Name: British Telecom Open Reach
Union role: Branch representative
Union: Communication Workers Union (CWU)
Size: 34,000 nationally
Sector: Telecommunications
Location: South Wales (Bridgend)
Issue: Work-life balance/flexible working

The organisation and the role of the workplace representative

Open Reach is a service delivery business within the BT company that deals primarily with the customer interface and maintenance. This includes home visits and the servicing of lines for BT and third parties. The operation employs 34,000 staff nationally, with around 700 working in Wales and 40 specifically at the Bridgend site. Operational work is typically organised in cells of around 25 workers. The branch representative was responsible for the whole South Wales branch, and is supported full-time by BT to conduct union duties. He has been in the post since 1979. The branch has a strong tradition of voluntary membership and has a well-developed structure of union representation.

The issue

The issue related to the working patterns of a single parent who was experiencing difficulty with balancing her working life with child care arrangements. The staff member, a service engineer, had previously concluded a personal and domestic arrangements agreement, but this was not working out satisfactorily. Attendance patterns at BT did not suit her personal circumstances and her attendance at work was slipping. This was highlighted in terms of the company's performance management indicators and had been picked up by management, to the extent that formal procedures were close to being invoked. This was a cause of concern and stress for the staff member, so she asked her manager if there was anything the company could do to help.

The issue was initially mentioned informally to the union representative by a senior manager. The union representative then investigated with his national union office and also, in conjunction with the relevant line manager, with BT Human Resources what the staff member's options were. The approach was careful, given the personal circumstances and the extensive framework of collective agreements that governed flexible working. The branch representative noted that he was potentially putting his 'head on the block' by looking for a solution outside traditional formal channels.

Both the CWU head office and BT Human Resources responded sympathetically to the enquiry. There was some initial concern around setting a new precedent, but a view was taken by the line management and the branch rep that 'if you're going to set a precedent, set the right one'. The branch rep and relevant line manager had worked together for many years and there was

an established relationship of trust between union and management in Open Reach in South Wales. This helped with the formulation of the case to human resources and senior management backing. Likewise, the CWU head office fully supported any resolution as the issue chimed with ongoing discussions between the union and senior Open Reach management over how to attract more female engineers into the company.

The issue was resolved by giving the staff member the choice to formulate a working hours arrangement that suited her specific needs. This was designed with the assistance and support of the branch representative. Previously, she had worked a three day week with long hours. She has subsequently moved to a five day week with shorter hours to allow her to save on the costs of child care, and she is able to take extended annual leave during term holidays, some of which is unpaid. The new working pattern is incorporated in an annualised hours arrangement to provide a stable salary throughout the year.

How we benefited from effective collaborative working

The most beneficial outcome was for the individual concerned. Prior to the innovative resolution the most likely outcome would have been a formal disciplinary procedure, resulting in dismissal. The new arrangement has greatly alleviated any stress the staff member was suffering and she is now committed to a long-term career at the company. As both the branch rep and line manager commented, 'she has got her life back together'.

There were also benefits for the company. The member of staff now works five days a week rather than three, providing more flexible labour utilisation for the company. More significantly, the company has been able to retain a female engineer at a time when there is an organisational drive to increase the recruitment of skilled women. The case provides an important benchmark in terms of retention policy.

The case also exemplifies the benefits of collaborative working. The line management representative stated that the case 'reinforces the point that collaborative work with the union can improve the business'. The branch rep was also of the view that such resolutions improve the credibility of the union by showing representatives can think 'outside the box'. The union can come to new arrangements and deliver: 'the union is there to help the individual and not just the collective'.

More generally, this particular individual resolution has not been codified in any new agreement. This is notable, because the key lesson of the case is the extent to which informal accommodations can be successfully concluded outside of necessary collective frameworks. Good workplace employment relations allowed for joint problem solving at local level. Management and union have a high degree of trust in each other, but know each other's boundaries; management is supportive of the union and direct people to the union. The exercise has also given younger and new intake managers who did not have experience of the union a positive view of what they can do.

The two challenges related to precedent and formal procedure. There was some initial concern that the staff member's colleagues would perceive any

individual resolution as a case of favouritism. The reality proved far different: colleagues were generally very supportive and any dissenters within the working group were soon brought on-board. Similarly, the resolution challenged the organisation's highly procedural and formal employment relations frameworks. The considered way in which the branch rep developed the case, with line management support, proved effective in demonstrating the benefit of an individual resolution in this particular case.

What would we do differently?

There was some initial hesitation over how to tackle the issue and face potential hurdles. Faced with a similar issue, union and management would 'pick up the gauntlet' far sooner. This could have caused a lot less personal stress. The individual did not speak up and if formal procedures had been invoked the individual would have left the company. In taking up the case and challenging established procedures and traditions, the branch rep was able to arrange a resolution for a staff member who had felt that none was available.