

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

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**THE UNITED ROAD TRANSPORT
UNION (URTU): BUILDING FOR
SUCCESS – SUPPORTING THE
GROWTH OF A SMALL SPECIALIST
TRADE UNION**

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Introduction

The United Road Transport Union (URTU) is the UK's only union dedicated to serving the interests of workers in road haulage, distribution and logistics, with a membership comprising HGV, LGV, van and fork lift truck drivers, as well as warehouse operatives.

The UK logistics sector faces a chronic shortage of qualified drivers entering the industry; and new recruits, whether drivers or ancillary staff, have been increasingly from Eastern Europe.

Background

- Founded in 1890 as the United Carters Association.
- Became URTU in 1964.
- Membership stands at approximately 17000.

Why this project?

The URTU recognised the importance of positioning itself so that it could understand how best to support the recruitment and workforce development strategies of employers, as well as how to develop best practice approaches to engage and recruit within an increasingly diverse workforce.

Improving the organisational effectiveness of officers through a strategic programme of training was seen as a key way to ensure that officers and activists are well placed to cope with the sector's challenges.

The URTU's existing IT infrastructure was deemed inadequate to cater for the demands on it. Its limitations meant that communications with the geographically dispersed officers and members was cumbersome and inconsistent. The UMF project was to provide an innovative approach to updating the technology with industry best practice, whilst at the same time upgrading areas of the IT infrastructure that had not previously had investment. URTU Education Advisor Alan Irwin explains:

'We wanted to embrace the availability of technology in order to improve integration with external systems and to enable us to deliver a more direct level of service to members. Integral to this was addressing any weaknesses in systems that are critical to the union's reliance on IT. This would have the knock-on effect of improving the organisation's ability to present itself more effectively to what is now a large and growing potential new membership. Our in-house publicity facilities had hitherto focused really on cost savings rather than quality, so

we were acutely aware of the need to bring our facilities and staff training up to date in order to compete in a more competitive marketplace.'

Improving the technology also meant that the union could enhance online access for members via its mobile facility, an adapted HGV truck which opens up at the front so that it can be used for training and strategic recruitment. An invaluable marketing tool, the mobile facility goes to employers, truck stops and service stations, taking union services and information to members and potential members.

The union needed to tackle more local issues as well: for example, a large proportion of its membership is in workplaces with fewer than 10 members. Typically, trade union organisation in these branches had been weak, as had the union's capacity to develop the branches. UMF support meant that services to members could be strengthened through an improved website and

a better internal IT infrastructure (for monitoring membership growth, for example), alongside the more strategic use of the mobile office facility. What's more, since many officers are based at their home address, improved IT would help them with:

- managing their workload
- increasing their capacity for recruiting and organising activities
- engage in training and development opportunities

Methodology and outcomes

The URTU's UMF project focused on modernising the union significantly in two main areas:

- Training
- In-house IT

Training

The project began with a review of the union's education and training needs, and a bespoke suite of training courses was devised to plug these gaps. Courses were designed specifically to support the management and organisational needs of trade union officers and staff, with the accent on improving professional competence. Training included:

- time management
- organising and managing teams
- project management
- understanding and managing stress

In parallel, specialist courses were provided for senior stewards and trade union officers, which looked at understanding, implementing and monitoring the Information and Consultation Directive and other relevant legislation applicable in road haulage, such as the Working Time Directive. These courses were seen as an important route to strengthening and expanding the URTU in current and future workplaces. In addition, raising awareness of the long-term strategic changes to the logistics sector was given priority, alongside specialist courses to support the growth and stability of smaller branches, with support links to the Union Learning Fund and access via the union's website.

In-house IT

The in-house IT systems were given a thorough overhaul and the benefits have been considerable, including, for example:

- the ability to email membership reports and for the main membership system to send information automatically to officers
- linking up via an 'ADSL network', which has brought substantial improvements to email and web access; in the future, this will also encompass the software which provides membership access
- a centralised email server, enabling head office and remote users to be combined in messages and mass mailing
- email delivered to head office recipients immediately, rather than using a sporadic remote connection
- emailed officer reports fully implemented
- modernisation of the mobile office facilities

Modernising the union's mobile office facility meant fully integrating its technology with central administrative systems, so that information held on the union's website could be viewed by members. This enhanced facility has been a crucial element of the project. It considerably improves the capability for union officers to work effectively from the travelling facility and has been 'a resounding success'. As Alan Irwin says:

'The union sees this work on the mobile office, along with the revitalised website, as central to the modernisation of its external relations with existing and potential members as well as with employers.'

Staff feedback

Evaluation of the use of the new IT infrastructure suggests that it is of great value to the union. Anecdotal evidence indicates the following:

- Officers are now receiving information more quickly and can access information faster than before.
- Limitations such as file size restrictions have been overcome, allowing documents and reports to be emailed when previously they had to be sent 'snail mail'.
- Officers are all linked through the same system, which has made it easier for relevant information to be passed to everyone.
- Head office can now cope with documents from members and companies being sent electronically. The system installed in the mobile office also helps greatly in information dissemination, ensuring that it is not lost in the system.

Looking forward

The UMF project highlighted that, separate from IT training, there now needs to be continued progress made in relation to the wider core skills training for all staff. In particular, there needs to be a learning needs assessment of all union officers and staff. As a matter of priority, the union needs to schedule a programme of training which systematically introduces at least full-time officers to the full range of benefits arising from the new IT infrastructure. This will involve practical examples showing how the new technology will help simplify tasks and free up time, and will be reinforced by a one-day seminar to evaluate project outcomes so that progress within the union can be sustainable. A final seminar/conference

is also planned for all staff and full-time officers.

Alan Irwin sums up:

'With the bulk of IT modernisation now fully implemented it is important that the union move forward quickly with ongoing training so that we can maximise the value of the work undertaken. In particular, it is important that IT specialists lead on producing best practice examples of the benefits of the modernisation programme. Indeed, their advice on the details of the training programme should be intrinsic to future full-time officer training. Also, in readiness for the final project evaluation, the union will need to ensure that it is possible to report on actual evidence of use by officers. We envisage that we will be able to do this after the final conference takes place.'

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