

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

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Innovation & Skills

**ASLEF –
TRANSFORMING COMMUNICATIONS
WITH UNION MEMBERS**

ASLEF – transforming communications with union members

Introduction

The locomotive industry is generally advanced technologically and ASLEF, 'the train drivers' union', wanted to improve its own technology to reflect this – not just through an enhanced website but also by using mobile phone communications, which had the capacity to reach the majority of members. The Union Modernisation Fund project offered a welcome opportunity for affordable, enhanced communication with members, with more efficient use of resources.

Why this project?

The union felt that by enhancing their web offer they would be able to:

- communicate better with members;
- enable members to access document libraries, including house documents which would otherwise not be available to them, either because of size or cost;
- encourage members to express their views through surveys, discussion forums and online voting; and
- identify training needs.

By giving members greater opportunities to have their voice heard, individual needs could be better met and membership services improved. And by placing more emphasis on paper-free communication, they would be able to cut down the time and money spent on circulating paper documents.

Background

Founded in 1881, ASLEF represents more than 18,500 of the UK's train and freight drivers, London Underground drivers and light rapid transport drivers.

The union applied for a two-year UMF project because, although the initial implementation would not take a great deal of time, they anticipated that it would take at least a further 18-20 months to encourage members away from 'the paper chase that they are attached to'. As Sarah Francis, Policy & Communications Department, explains:

'We felt that enhancements to our union website would help to bring us in line with other unions in terms of technology and communicating with the membership in a modern environment, as well as helping to create sustainability for the union's future. We hoped that when they got used to information being available for them to download from the website, it would alert them to the fact that there is no longer a need to have dozens of reports circulated annually and we may be able to save a few trees in the process.'

Methodology

Website design

In discussion with Poptel, who had created the union's initial off-the-shelf website, it was decided to opt for an interface with the membership system which would allow the creation of a 'members only' area of the website. This in turn could be segmented to provide different areas for members, representatives and branch secretaries.



Being able to create web-based forms would mean that the union could communicate with members via questionnaires and create a sign-up form for SMS text messages, so that crucial union matters such as urgent news, important events and consultations could be relayed immediately to drivers. Consequently, an SMS sign-up form was to be put on the website so that members' mobile phone numbers could be gathered and texts sent out about union issues on an ad hoc basis.

Initial meetings were set up with Poptel to discuss colour schemes, branding and page layout for the new site. Meetings were also held with APT, who supplied the membership system, as this was going to be linked into the website to create the members only area. However, these revealed more complex technical issues than were initially anticipated – such as

ensuring security in the members only area – and this produced a knock-on for the timelines, as Sarah explains:

'By the end of the first quarter, we were already three months behind schedule. However, we had allowed more than sufficient time to deliver the training, so we decided we would be able to make up the deficit. By the end of the second quarter, 80 per cent of the work had been completed on the new website and it was on the evaluation server, ready for the final part of the build and testing. But, during the second quarter of the project, we experienced further time slippage, due to technical difficulties. In order to counteract delays, our plan was to showcase the new site at branch secretaries', officers' and reps' meetings at Head Office. By doing this we thought we would be able to disseminate the website faster and recoup some of the time that had been lost at the beginning of the project.'

Trailing the new site

The union's Locomotive Journal was used to trail the new site in a series of articles. The first introduced it and explained its capabilities; a subsequent article highlighted the discussion forum and how to use it, in the hope that it would encourage the members to access the forum, ask questions of other drivers and voice their opinion on union matters. A later article helped keep the site on members' radar.

Advertising

Advertising the site was fundamental to its success and was informed by the first survey posted on the website, which was orientated towards gathering feedback about the site. The findings showed that members felt it needed to be advertised more, so that more people would use it. In contrast, only nine per cent felt that training would encourage members' usage. Says Sarah:

'These findings led us to believe that we should find an alternative to the branch site visits (which we had intended for training on using the site), as the members felt we would only be reaching out to the activists in the union rather than engaging newer members. This is reinforced by the fact that branch meetings have similar attendees, union activists rather than new members.'

Site visits were, therefore, replaced with an enhanced advertising campaign to reach out to more members:



- An **A5 leaflet** about the website was produced, which can be put into new members' packs and sent to all 180 branches every six months. (Three quarters of respondents to the survey had said the site should be highlighted in the new members' packs.) Branch secretaries can use the leaflet to draw people's attention to the website at their branch meetings and it can be put in the depot's display cabinets for everyone to see.
- The leaflet was adapted into a **quarter page advert** for the Locomotive Journal, updated every few months, to draw awareness to the site and highlight new features.
- A **'Get Online!' article** was written for the journal to celebrate the website's first year, promote the site, advertise the recent additions and introduce possibilities for the future. Since some of

the members were unlikely to be familiar with the internet, the article also trailed a short web course on the BBC's website to help members get to grips with the internet and enable them to use the ASLEF site.

- **Cross-referencing** to the website via web links in Journal articles helped reinforce the messages.

Outcomes and benefits

The union met its project objectives, with encouraging results:

Site hits

From the start, with the exception of the first month, the number of visits to the ASLEF website has remained consistent, with an average of around 31,000 visits a month. In the first couple of weeks alone, the site had more than 2000 visitors each day, compared with 800 for the old site. Within the first 18 months, 93 per cent of **branch secretaries** accessed it: Indeed, the total target for branch secretary usage was met within 12 months of the site going live. And, despite not all reps having access to a computer, the site has attracted an encouraging 59 per cent of **reps**. Attracting ordinary **members** to the website was always going to be a hard task, as Sarah explains:

'Train drivers aren't at a desk from 9 till 5 and usually work considerably longer shifts than office workers. To encourage them to sit in front of a computer after work, or on their day off, was going to be very challenging. However, efforts are being made to attract ordinary members by providing more and better quality news items and we hope that we can attract increasing numbers in time.'

Storage capacity

The secure **members only** area houses a section for all members, with Executive Committee, Company Council and the Equality Committee's minutes, union booklets, contact numbers and the union's discussion forum. The 'Representatives' area gives full details about their role and job specific information; and a 'Branch Secretaries' area provides access to booklets, templates and a guide on how to carry out their role, thus giving them better access to tools to make their job easier and benefiting them greatly.

Website navigation

Page navigation is now at the top of every page and the 'home' navigation bar is organised in a more efficient order, so the members can find their way around the site much easier.

Two-way communications

Two-way communications between the union and members have improved and members are taking opportunities to have their voice heard, using the **polls and online questionnaires** now on the website. The polls feature on the union's homepage and questionnaires can be used throughout the site. A new poll is added each month on topical issues, and an archive of polls from previous years is available on the site for people to view. This facility is proving invaluable and the union is listening and responding to members' views and suggestions. For example, one poll on the union's homepage showed that 75 per cent of members thought education and lifelong learning were important for trade union members. Since then, the union has seconded a full time education officer and training courses are being run. Questionnaires on the site have covered website usage and cab ergonomics respectively.

The Locomotive Journal carried an industrial story regarding a four-day week debate, which had taken place in its pages in previous months. In order to carry on the debate, it was transferred to the website **discussion forum**, so other members could contribute to it, and its relocation was highlighted in the journal. **SMS** has proved a useful way of reaching members with mobile phones.

Cost efficiencies

The website has had wider implications in terms of transforming elements of work processes for both members and head office staff, with consequent savings. For example, it has changed the way materials are ordered or produced. For instance, posters, leaflets and stickers are now always produced in a web format, too, and added to the website. Previously, the union's rule book was reproduced annually, or every other year, and sent out to all 18,500 members at great cost to the union. Now the rule book can be produced for branch secretaries and reps only and then added to the website, where every other member of the union can access it, whether to print it off or save it to their computer. The cost for producing the rule book for every member has, therefore, been reduced from almost £12,000 to just over £3000 – a huge saving to the union. The same applies for the union's organising booklets, which now appear on the website, thus saving around £5500 in printing costs.

- The Administration Department has noticed a reduction in the number of change of address requests, since members can now update their address details online.

Lessons learned

As well as the considerable achievements of the project, there have been setbacks along the way:

- Had the union not allowed for time slippages in their initial bid, the project would have over-run considerably. Therefore, it is crucial for anyone setting up a computer/website-based project to add a contingency into the project, allowing for changing timelines.
- Another learning curve has been to accept that there is a high possibility that the project might change slightly, especially if it runs over a long period of time.
- At the outset, the union's approach was to carry out training in all branches. However, the direction of the project changed to reflect members' preferences – and that shift has proved well-founded, since it has indeed been found that the longevity of publicity outweighs that of branch training and also reaches more members who do not normally attend branch meetings.

'We feel that it is definitely worthwhile to plan for every eventuality, no matter how big or small, at the beginning of the project and have contingencies in place in case any of these arise.'

Looking ahead

The union plans to extend the website to a more local level by providing ASLEF representatives in each company with their own sub-site. Each of these would act like a notice board for members within that company and provide them with minutes of local meetings, agreements and contact details of local representatives. If an initial trial in three companies is successful, it will be rolled out to other companies.

In an attempt to encourage more member participation on the site, a moderated comments facility has also been suggested, so that members can comment on the union's news stories.

Conclusion

The end of the two-year UMF project has left the union feeling positive about the development of the website in the future and about offering members the best communications possible. Sarah concludes:

'All the transformations in terms of cost reductions and working practices will form a permanent part of the working life of the union and are considered a very positive element of the project. The outcomes have been pleasing. We have increased the number of visitors to the website, given our members an area that holds sensitive information which is easily accessible to them, provided them with a discussion forum to debate and discuss issues within the union and beyond, and achieved a new look, streamlined website. While the project has been a success, we feel there is still a need to promote the site and encourage members to use it as a source of information. There is plenty of growth potential within the membership and we hope to increase usage in the future. We will continue to promote the site through the Journal and in the new members' packs and also highlight it in training sessions.'

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