

**UNION MODERNISATION FUND –
ROUND 2**

**ASPECT : The next generation –
Modernising Communications for
Trade Unionist in the 21st Century**

Case Study written by ASPECT

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The next generation - Modernising Communications for Trade Unionists in the 21st Century

Introduction

This report evaluates Aspect's website development project which aimed to strengthen the website as 'a central point of information for members and Aspect's wide range of non-office based staff.'

The concept included developing a host of interactive communication channels, such as membership/staff discussion groups, blogging facilities, e-alerts and downloadable materials. A key task was to enable the union's leadership and officials to develop a better understanding of the increasingly diverse needs of its membership the better to inform the future policy direction of the organisation.

Within the framework of the broad UMF scheme the Aspect bid centred on two priority themes:

- assessing the potential to improve communication between the union apparatus and its members with a perspective of developing greater participation in union activities
- developing the professional competence of union officers and applying more modern management methods to the running of the union.

The project proceeded on the basis of an audit of the union's communications machinery and the first round of feedback from union activists and members which suggested that greater

innovation and a more varied content across the range of media were perceived as important as any technical changes in delivery.

It was thus decided to adopt a more holistic approach, ensuring that measures to improve the website would be reinforced by improvements in the union's own printed media and in its press and public relations operations.

Proving of the newly developed intranet element was extended following discussions at the 2008 annual conference of Aspect.

The evaluation focussed on two issues.

They were:

- 1** The viability of the intranet element in maintaining effective communications with union members and activists on basic trade union questions.
- 2** The potential of the facility for providing discussion fora.

The context for this focus lay in the rapid changes that were taking place in the professional framework in which Aspect members' work, the pace of which had increased in the intervening period.

The changing context was conditioned by the rapid integration of the school

improvement and education-based services with children's services overall and by the entry into the field of new groups of professionals

Developing closer working with other professional associations representing groups with which Aspect members increasingly collaborate in their professional duties was set as a key task.

Feedback from council members, local activists and key professional leaders suggested that the early model was too schematic and unresponsive to issues arising in the areas of membership growth and that the potential for lively fora on internal union affairs and in the main professional area of school improvement was, by comparison, limited.

Context

Given that the larger part of the Aspect membership are widely experienced professionals at a mature stage in their careers and, additionally, hold positions of some responsibility this changing context presented significant challenges to the implementation of the project as it was originally conceived.

In particular, it was necessary to take account of the reduction in the pool of new entrants into the traditional areas of school improvement and the growth of other areas, in particular in social care and in new (and relatively junior and low paid) entrants to education improvement via the rapidly expanding sphere of early childhood provision.

The response of the union to this situation was to recognise the need to rapidly integrate new areas of activity and potential membership growth, modify its communications and recruitment

strategy and further develop web-based initiatives.

The union's communications strategy thus developed based on the integration of long standing traditional elements with the new unities presented by technological change, and critically, taking into account the more rapid take-up of these opportunities by younger entrants to the field.

However, it was necessary to take account of the powerful feedback from both long-standing members a communications overload with disproportionate time taken up in reading, evaluating and responding to messaging.

Project tasks

1. Evaluating the viability of the intranet element in maintaining effective communications with union members and activists on basic trade union questions.

In general, our conclusion was that the closed nature of the intranet facility based on access via existing membership and through personalised logging-on did not provide a fully effective framework for the great majority of exchanges concerning the unions core negotiating, organising, recruiting and representational tasks.

A preponderance of the messaging continued to be originated centrally and did not either require, or generate, a response except at levels that are already provided for through the union's organisational, workplace and representative structures.

Feedback suggested that the established vehicles for communication; e mail, circulars, briefing, policy documents, the

growing news element in the website and the direct-mailed membership magazine, buttressed by effective press and public relations initiatives remain effective and that responses to material of this nature posted on the intranet was unlikely to grow.

The take up from material directly posted on the home page greatly exceeded the take up of material posted on the closed intranet facility. This resulted in reluctance by officials and activists to post material and pressure to re-engineer the home page to carry more visually appealing material.

2. Evaluating the effectiveness of the facility in providing discussion Fora.

A number of conclusions were reached at the end of the evaluation phase.

Firstly, that where well established networks of communication exist and have developed over time it is very difficult to effect a significant change of focus in the mode of delivery.

Secondly, that most innovative web-based technique is more readily adopted by key amateurs in emerging groups who thus perceive an opportunity to quickly reach their audience.

Thirdly, that this work is labour-intensive and the best results are achieved when dedicated full-time officials are able to devote time to the work in a context that reinforces their core responsibilities.

In testing the viability and effectiveness of the model in providing a platform for discussion around professional issues it was necessary to identify key groups of members.

Early childhood specialists form an important and very well organised sector. The main forum for professional exchanges among this group is the Aspect Early Childhood Education Group. This is a highly active group with a high profile, high status, a very well attended annual conference and very well established lines of communication.

This sector – of experienced professionals – is increasingly reinforced by growing numbers of new entrant Early Years Professionals (EYP) who are taking up a range of posts after qualifying under a new scheme to raise standards in a complex of early years settings in both the private and public sectors.

Accordingly, an active EYP Zone was developed on the site. This has gained an enthusiastic response with a high level of participation, good responses to postings and close integration with the EYP Facebook.

However, there was a more muted response to initiatives to create a web-based forum for discussion, around broader themes. Our judgment was that the existing framework was very robust and well used and that a closer integration of the work of the ECEG with Aspect's broader range of activities had proved fruitful.

Early childhood issues are given greater prominence in the membership magazine Improvement and the annual conference given greater promotion and coverage.

Education improvement professionals continued to constitute an important section of the union's membership. The institutional framework is undergoing rapid changes and there is a perception that tight budget constraints for local authorities and variations in the drive

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towards integrated services could erode professional identity and expertise.

The evaluation phase identified two factors; role confusion, and managerial structures that entailed specialists reporting to managers who lack direct experience of their discipline as pressures on effective service delivery was a threat. The evidence is that active discussion around these issues is primarily focussed on existing including e mail links based around the different, mainly local government, employers and directly in workplace meetings. There is limited demand for further web-based initiatives.

Social care specialists are increasingly central to the union's work for the reasons outlined earlier. Early in the evaluation phase it became apparent that there was great potential for the success of early year's element in the project to be reproduced in the social care sphere. Accordingly, a social care section with briefing, downloadable documents, advice was established.

Our conclusion is that where additional resources are available they should be directed at the web-based initiatives directed at maintaining a sense of professional identity and a greater focus on the individual areas of expertise. In particular the close links emerging between Aspect and education welfare managers and their association; youth service managers and their association; foster carers and other specialist groups grouped under the Aspect-hosted Children's Services Professional Network is important and there has been a renewed effort to incorporate this.

Conclusions

The project achieved measurable results in improving communication between the union apparatus and its members. The website

innovations have been supplemented by an improved press and PR operations in which Aspect-generated media stories have been much more visible.

It is difficult to quantify the extent to which greater participation in union activities results from specific web initiatives but the greatly increased tempo of activity in the areas where project resources have been concentrated is highly suggestive.

The aims of developing the professional competence of union officers and applying more modern management methods to the running of the union were given direction by the engagement of different levels of the union's membership and staff with the project.

The response of the union to the changing professional environment has been greatly assisted by the human and material resources made available through the project. Aspect is a small union operating in a rapidly changing environment with limited resources.

The staff engaged in this work were part time and worked in dispersed locations thus the project funding had enabled the union to innovate evaluate and improve its response to these changes and devise and test communication strategies that would have otherwise been beyond its capacity.

In particular the focus on controversy, engagement and innovation in two key areas of work, early years and social care, have resulted in a marked upturn in recruitment and in a significantly higher profile for the union in the professional and media environment. Key officials and activists have acquired the skills and confidence to directly manage their input into the site.

The objective of developing a host of interactive communication channels, such as membership/staff discussion groups, blogging facilities, e-alerts and downloadable material were proceeded particularly quick in those areas where the new recruitment possibilities have opened up.

Of particular importance has been the role of the **professional development** element of the website.

Aspect is the principal CPD provider in the field of school improvement and is rapidly developing its capacity in the social care field. The site has developed as a key portal for the promotion of CPD courses and for direct enrolment.

The project has provided for a substantial increase in the material presented on the site and made available for download. Although available in printed form most policy documents are now delivered through the website. The site has further developed as the principal means of advertising and promotion for Aspect events and a first port of call for journalists covering our field. The news and press release elements have been integrated and linked to a response list of members, activists, officials and journalists.

This has proved particularly valuable in promoting Aspect's involvement and sponsorship of events including annual conference, the early childhood education conference, sector exhibitions and show and, events organised through Aspect's sponsorship of the Children's Services Professionals Network and its affiliation to the TUC.

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