

Seeking the views of employees to take the business forward

A case study describing how Acas helped an equipment manufacturing organisation to engage with their employees in order to identify where improvements in employment relations could be made. This led to the development of an action plan clarifying steps to implementing improvements such as improving communication within the organisation.

This organisation is a global manufacturer of equipment with three sites in the UK and further sites in the US and Canada.

This case study is focused on the organisation's UK Head Office, where approximately 270 employees – skilled manual, operational and professional – are based. Employees at this site have an average age of 49, an average length of service of nine years and there is an even split of male and female employees although segregation by occupation is high.

Shop floor workers are represented by the recognised trade union GMB. With over 100 members in the organisation, a density of 69 per cent was reported by the HR Director. Three shop stewards provide representation in grievance and disciplinary procedures, take part in annual pay bargaining, and have a broad responsibility for a range of employment relations issues in relation to these members. A small additional number of clerical staff are also in GMB membership, but no recognition agreement covers this group.

Acas ran two opinion-gathering exercises for this organisation over a period of two years. The second project, largely to track progress against actions flowing from the first, ended in November 2008. Two Acas advisers were involved in the first exercise and one of these advisers ran the second follow-up project.

This case study charts the progress of this project and the impact it had on the organisation.

The challenge

The workplace project was the idea of the new Group HR Director. On joining the organisation at the end of 2006 she said she was motivated by the need to know more about, and gather evidence on, employee views in order to be able to move forward in her new role, and to take the business forward.

A significant motivator in using Acas was a positive experience of Acas in previous roles and in particular the successful use of Acas for a similar past project in another organisation. A further reason was the need for assistance from an external party to best elicit staff views.



"I did think about solving it internally but again my very quick gauge of where we were at with employee relations was that it wouldn't be the right thing to do, we wouldn't get the right information coming out unless we used Acas. I think I was right about that." HR Director

Trade unions were originally somewhat sceptical of using Acas to lead this project, associating Acas with workplace disputes, but Acas advisers involved local representatives in the process from the outset, thus addressing any union concerns satisfactorily. Nevertheless, there was no strong or formal union role in the project, as the representatives felt that the union should not dominate this opinion-gathering exercise on what were perhaps non-union issues.

How Acas helped

The first project was devised as an exercise to elicit employee opinion 'about management style in the business'. At the planning stage, face-to-face meetings took place between the Acas adviser and the HR Director to discuss and refine key objectives and devise a programme to meet these needs. It was decided that focus groups should be used and a discussion guide for these groups was developed jointly by the Acas adviser and the HR Director containing a series of broad questions on the organisation and management style to prompt focus group discussion. Nine questions were agreed on topics such as relationships, communication, voice and training but that employees could also raise any other concerns.

A total of 57 employees participated in focus groups during the first project; and 59 in the second project (approximately 15 per cent of the workforce). Participants were randomly selected, by Acas, to obtain the views of a cross-section of employees. Participation was voluntary.

Over almost a week, small numbers of staff – three or four at any one time – spent approximately half an hour in mixed occupation/grade focus groups. These groups were facilitated by the Acas adviser and took place without management presence.

Once the focus group phase was complete, the Acas adviser prepared a report on issues raised highlighting the key themes. These findings were presented to senior management and trade union representatives in a joint meeting. Wider dissemination took place through managers and supervisors.

The outcomes and benefits

One of the main findings from the focus groups was that improvements to communication in the organisation were needed. For example, employees felt that they did not have enough face-to-face contact with the managing director or the senior management team of the business. The perceived contrast in management style between old and new teams also highlighted some serious communication issues, with employees feeling that the new management team was not accessible enough to employees.

In addition, issues raised about team leader attitudes and competence in roles were traced back to inadequacies in training.



Based on the Acas report, the HR Director developed an action plan to tackle the problems identified by the focus groups. These included:

- regular Managing Director's lunch time sessions with invited employees
- monthly newsletter and improved email contact
- communication materials in the canteen
- improved reporting of business trends for employees
- specific instructional training programmes
- introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)
- grade restructures
- a drive to obtain Investors in People (recently achieved)
- a drive to improve the company works council.

The HR Director said that the involvement of Acas helped facilitate these changes and notably raised awareness around these issues.

The focus group exercise was replicated around two years later, in order to measure progress and identify any further issues. In particular, the second exercise focused on perceptions of progress in relation to training and communication.

In terms of communication and employee voice, training carried out by the same Acas adviser in June 2007 to improve the knowledge and effectiveness of works council members was described as a direct outcome. Evidence from the focus group discussions also pointed to the importance of increasing contact between shop floor employees and senior management and, in part, managing expectations in light of a new team with a different style and focus.

In terms of training – particularly given the nature of the business and the tacit knowledge of long-serving employees – evidence from the Acas focus groups had allowed the HR Director to address the mismatch between company data on training spend and time against perceptions of training received and to implement specific programmes and standards.

The findings from this second exercise demonstrated progress on both measures, albeit with some improvements still expected.

In addition to these benefits, there was also evidence of improved employment relations, which were attributed in part to the intervention of Acas.

"I think overall probably these have improved ... there seems to be a general feeling of wellbeing out there, most people are content with the way things are."

Trade union representative

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