

Research Paper

An integrated evaluation of Acas Workplace Projects

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Prepared by:

Andrea Broughton, Daniel Pearmain and Annette Cox
(Institute for Employment Studies)

On behalf of Acas Research and Evaluation Section

For any further information on this study, or other aspects of the Acas Research and Evaluation programme, please telephone 020 7210 3673 or email research@acas.org.uk

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An integrated evaluation of Acas Workplace Projects

Based on survey and case study findings

Andrea Broughton

Daniel Pearmain

Annette Cox

The logo for 'ies' consists of the lowercase letters 'ies' in a bold, sans-serif font. A small grey dot is positioned above the letter 'i'.

Prepared for Acas by:

Institute for Employment Studies
Sovereign House
Church Street
Brighton BN1 1UJ
UK

T: 01273 763400

F: 01273 763401

www.employment-studies.co.uk

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insight in the depth which is presented in this report into the impact of Acas' Workplace Projects.

Disclaimer

This report contains the views of the authors and does not represent the views of the Acas Council. Any errors or inaccuracies are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of Acas Workplace Projects carried out by IES. The evaluation consisted of a telephone survey and four in-depth case studies of organisations.

The telephone survey refers to projects completed between 1 October 2007 and 31 September 2008 and aimed to combine the views of the lead managers and employee representatives involved. Survey participants were contacted between three and 15 months after the project to gain their views of the project and what had happened after Acas had left. Telephone interviews lasting around 20 minutes were carried out with a total of 181 respondents, of which 120 represented matched cases (an employee representative and a management representative from a single Workplace Project answering the survey independently).

The case studies were carried out between September 2008 and September 2009 and consisted of face-to-face and telephone interviews with the senior manager of the organisation that was involved in the project, a general manager, an employee representative or full-time officer, a group of two or three employees and the Acas adviser who worked with the organisation on the project.

Choosing Acas

The telephone survey and case study data show that the main reason that organisations choose Acas are its impartiality and independence, previous positive experience of working with Acas, Acas's reputation, and the need to work with an external organisation in order to find out what employees really think.

From the telephone survey, the primary reason for choosing Acas to help with a Workplace Project was Acas's independence (cited by around four in ten management representatives and just over a quarter of employee representatives). In addition, Acas's reputation and expertise was a key reason (cited by around 20 per cent of both management and employee representatives) and previous good experience of Acas's services was also important; one-third of management and one-fifth of employee representatives said that this had contributed to their decision to approach Acas.

Any initial worries about working with an organisation that is known particularly for dispute resolution were quickly dispelled when, during the project, it became clear that Acas advisers were skilled in handling a range of issues.

Project triggers and setting objectives

From the telephone survey data, the most frequently cited initial objectives for the project were for Acas to provide help with consultation in the organisation, followed by helping with stress reduction, improving employment relations and examining problems in areas such as pay, grading and job evaluation.

The four case study organisations had turned to Acas to provide help with specific projects that were either sensitive or complicated in nature:

- to help carry out a stress audit (further education college)
- to help to put a new shift system into place (NHS Foundation Trust)
- to help conduct an employee view-gathering exercise on a range of employment relations issues (equipment manufacturing organisation)
- to help improve partnership working between Human Resources (HR) and trade union representatives (engineering and manufacturing organisation).

There was consensus between the majority of management and employee representatives responding to the telephone survey that the objectives of the project had been formally agreed and this was also the case with the case study organisations.

Objectives rarely changed over the course of the project, although where they had, both management and employee representatives in the telephone survey said that the revised objectives had been formally agreed by both parties. In three of the case studies, the objectives did not shift during the project, while in the fourth (the introduction of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust), the objective of trying to find a new pay system to complement the shift system was dropped due to a linkage with national negotiations on terms and conditions.

Achieving objectives

The main objective of the project was judged to have been fully or largely achieved in the majority of cases in the telephone survey: around two-fifths of management representatives said that it had been fully achieved and around one in three said that it had been largely achieved. Around one in three employee representatives said that it had been fully achieved and a quarter said that it had been largely achieved. Around one-fifth of management and almost one in three employee representatives said that they felt it was still too early to say whether the objectives had been achieved and that achieving the objectives set by the Workplace Project was an ongoing process.

In the four case studies, there was a general consensus that the project objectives had been achieved. However, in three cases, there were views from some staff that the project had either been incomplete, or not yet fully implemented at the time of the interview.

The general consensus from the telephone survey was that the activities and initiatives put in place as a result of the Workplace Project had been sustained, to a greater or lesser extent. Fewer than seven per cent of telephone respondents thought that activities and initiatives had not been sustained at all.

Some kind of breakdown in employment relations (including a lack of commitment from the other party or lack of co-operation from the other party), or the difficulty or complexity of issues accounted for the very few respondents who stated that there had been a failure to achieve objectives.

Impacts

A range of impacts from the projects were reported, ranging from concrete project-specific impacts such as putting into place a new shift system or carrying out a stress audit, and also including measurable impacts such as a reduction in sickness absence, reduced employee turnover, reduced costs, increased efficiency, increased staff satisfaction and reduced incidence of grievance procedures.

In addition, a range of other impacts, largely linked to wider employment relations issues, were reported. These included helping the parties to understand each other and work together better, increasing trust, improving communication, consultation and negotiation, fostering better working relationships, increasing fairness at work and building employee morale. Looking at the engineering and manufacturing organisation case study, the overall objective of improving relationships between trade union and HR team members could be classed as a general employment relations outcome.

The overwhelming view from management and employee representatives was that the impacts were seen as positive: where negative impacts were reported, these were linked to heightened employee expectations, a loss of momentum, or an increase in workload as a result of the project. It should be added that employee representatives in general have more negative perceptions of the impacts and influences of such Workplace Projects – and these impacts may go unnoticed by managers.

Overall, 83 per cent of workplaces reported an improvement in employment relations following Acas intervention.¹

Action taken after the project

One of the key aims of this research was to assess the impact of the Workplace Projects on employment relations policies and practices. The telephone survey therefore included questions about the extent to which new *policies or procedures* had been *introduced*, whether existing policies had been *reviewed* or *revised* and whether actual *practices* had changed following the Workplace Project. Overall, 81 per cent of managers and 73 per cent of employee representatives said that policies, procedures or practices had been revised, reviewed or introduced as a result of the workplace project.

Around one-third of management and employee representatives planned to introduce new policies and procedures as a result of the project in the future and just over two-thirds of management and employee representatives said that there were plans to review or revise policies and procedures that had been addressed by the Workplace Project.

¹ The Acas Annual Report for 2009 quoted this figure (83 per cent of Acas's Workplace Projects resulted in an improvement in employment relations in 2008/09), against a target of 70 per cent. www.acas.org.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=1626&p=0

The journey travelled

The case study organisations all felt that they had travelled a significant distance over the course of the project, from needing external help to find a solution to a specific problem, to finding a solution and beginning to implement it. Management and employee representatives often felt that they had gained much knowledge and experience about how to work together.

In two of the case study organisations (the NHS Foundation Trust and the engineering and manufacturing organisation), all the parties felt that they had travelled a particularly long way since the outset, particularly in terms of developing mutual trust and positive working relationships between unions and management. At one organisation (the NHS Foundation Trust), although the relationship between the staff and the union remained occasionally tense, managers felt that the working groups, facilitated by Acas, had been instrumental in forging trust and acting as a bonding exercise. This was a major improvement on the situation at the outset of the project. At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the relationship, although still not perfect, was acknowledged by both sides to have been transformed from how it was at the outset of the project.

Satisfaction levels

Overall levels of satisfaction with Acas Workplace Projects were high: from the telephone survey, 95 per cent of management and 96 per cent of employee representatives were either 'fairly or very satisfied' with the project. In those cases where organisations paid for Acas services in supporting the Workplace Project (almost three-quarters of the sample), a majority of both management and employee representatives thought that the project represented good value for money (70 per cent of management and 80 per cent of employee representatives). Over three-quarters of both management and employee representatives said that they would be very likely to recommend Acas Workplace Projects to a colleague or other professional contact.

As with the responses from the telephone survey, the case study participants registered high levels of satisfaction with the service that Acas had provided. In particular, the organisations appreciated the impartiality and general expertise and experience that the Acas advisers brought with them, and the fact that the service was able to tailor its offering to the particular needs of the organisation.

Contribution of Acas advisers

Overall, ratings of the effectiveness of Acas and the skills of the Acas advisers on the Workplace Projects were positive.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the Acas advisers on the following issues:

- understanding the issues being faced at the workplace
- developing a good relationship with the participants involved in the project
- maintaining an impartial stance

- skill in encouraging discussions between participants.

The vast majority of respondents rated the Acas adviser as 'very good' or 'fairly good' on all of these issues, with reasonable consistency between management and employee representatives. On the whole, employee representatives tended to be more positive than management representatives, although the difference was small. The rating 'very good' was given by at least seven in ten of employee representatives and management representatives for each of these issues.

These skills were also evident in the case studies, which provided more detail on organisations' views on how the Workplace Project had run in practice. In all four cases, the Acas adviser had worked closely with the organisations, guiding and helping management and employee representatives to find a solution to the problems they faced. The impartiality of the Acas advisers was identified as a strong positive point, as were their technical skills and understanding of the subject matter, and their 'people skills' which allowed them to engage project participants and draw out views and opinions. Where problems or issues were seen as difficult and/or sensitive, working with an external and neutral body was certainly seen as an advantage. Almost all the respondents from the telephone survey said that they would be 'very or fairly likely' to recommend this service to a colleague or other professional contact.

1 Introduction and Background

Acas 'Workplace Projects' (renamed as 'Business and Skills Solutions' in 2008/09) are carried out in organisations throughout England, Wales and Scotland by Acas Advisers. Their purpose is to improve employment relations within workplaces by involving employers and employee representatives in joint problem solving and joint working.

Workplace Projects aim to enhance employment relations and so make organisations more effective, in terms of the increased productivity and raised morale that improvements in working relationships and employee commitment can bring. Projects are tailored to the needs of each organisation but almost always involve management and employee representatives working jointly to improve relationships and organisational effectiveness, or manage change. Where trade unions are recognised, union representatives will normally take part. Similarly, members of staff associations or consultative bodies will usually participate.

The methods used in Workplace Projects can vary in scope and length from a one-day relationship-building workshop attended by management and employee representatives, to joint working groups which meet, often over a period of months, to oversee the design and implementation of any number of organisational change initiatives. Topics typically covered in Workplace Projects include:

- managing all aspects of change
- implementation of new pay systems
- improvement to organisational performance
- absence management
- collective bargaining arrangements
- communication, consultation and employee involvement.

Advisers work jointly with managers and employee representatives, and all three parties engage in a range of roles over the course of the project's duration. These focus on the following dimensions:

- diagnosing workplace problems
- reviewing and revising existing workplace policies, practices, or structures
- developing new workplace policies, practices, or structures
- implementing new or revised workplace policies, practices or structures
- learning new behaviours and methods of working together jointly.

This report contains the main findings of a telephone survey carried out as part of an evaluation of Acas Workplace Projects. The aim of this evaluation was two-fold: to evaluate the impact of Acas Workplace Projects on client organisations;

and to illustrate why, how and to what effect a selection of Workplace Projects have been commissioned.

There were two rationales behind the research. The first was to provide reliable and clear evidence for Acas Service Level Agreement with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on whether projects meet their objectives and lead to improvements in employment relations, using hard evidence where possible. The second was to provide information – both qualitative and quantitative – on the quality of the Workplace Projects service and illustrative information on the process, outcomes and impacts on business performance of this aspect of Acas's services. Where possible, the findings will be used to improve the service.

The first part of the evaluation comprised an annual survey, which covered Workplace Projects completed between 1 October 2007 and 31 September 2008, and builds on previous research commissioned by Acas, namely an impact survey that covered projects finished up to 1 October 2007.

This report also integrates the main findings from qualitative research which comprised case study visits to organisations that had worked with Acas on specific Workplace Projects. Four case studies in total were carried out, comprising semi-structured interviews with:

- the main senior manager involved in the Workplace Project
- a general manager whose work in some way related to or influenced the project
- an employee representative or, if present, full-time officer involved in the project
- two or three non-managerial employees, interviewed as a group.

Summaries of these case studies are appended to this report.

1.1 Context and Process of Workplace Projects

The nature of the projects dealt with by Acas Workplace Projects varies considerably, ranging from one-day exercises in relationship building between the different parties to the employment relationship, to longer-term interventions involving elements of process consultation using Joint Working Parties (Kessler and Purcell, 1996¹) or other methods. These should assist in diagnosing root causes of employment relations problems, enabling parties to work together and build consensus on a way forward to tackle employment relations issues. Central to their function is the development of trust between the parties, enabled through the role of Acas as an honest, expert and independent source of advice.

¹ Kessler I, Purcell J (1996), 'The Value of Joint Working Parties', *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 663-682.

The key outcomes of Acas Workplace Projects depend on the precise problem addressed in each case, but central to all of them are the aims of improved quality of working relationships between managers, employees and their representatives, improved workplace processes and procedures, and an improved capacity to manage organisational change as well as improvements to measurable employment relations outcomes identifiable through HR statistics.

In approaching this evaluation, a number of key elements or processes of joint working within the employment relationship were identified as potentially worthy of further exploration. The report now outlines some of these and how they were explored through the research methods adopted.

Gaining a shared view of an employment relations problem, agreeing objectives and defining the most appropriate methods to achieve a solution are some of the first stages in resolving it. Some of the existing case study literature and examples of Acas's own work suggest that joint working and Acas involvement often begins when relationships have deteriorated and there is a sometimes tangled set of issues to tackle. Thus, it is important to identify the different strands of the perceived problem from the perspectives of all parties and its current and potential impact on workplace performance, so that appropriate measurement indicators of outcomes are sought. This makes surveying of both management and employee representatives a key feature of the data collection process.

Furthermore, it is important to explore and illustrate the insight that experienced Acas staff have in judging what methods may be most appropriate to recommend in different circumstances. This issue is explored through the case studies conducted for this evaluation.

Analyses of the evolution of relationships between managers, employees and employee representatives are helpful in illuminating the methods, processes and sources of numerous challenges to effective joint working. Workplace consultation processes (as opposed to negotiation processes) are argued to have received little attention in empirical literature (Beaumont et al., 2005¹), though they may be taking on increasing importance in what Charlwood and Terry (2007²) describe as an 'increasingly varied system of industrial relations' (p.321). This is also shown through their case studies of employee representation under the auspices of 'partnership' in non-unionised organisations.

Beaumont et al. found that consultation processes can be remarkably fragile, with the potential to be derailed by the impact of external events. In this context, the research sought to explore the role of Acas in building momentum and ensuring the project reaches fruition and delivers on its objectives, particularly if the

¹ Beaumont P, Fischbacher M, Hunter L, Pate J (2005), 'Explorations in building trust in joint consultation', in Storey, J. (ed.) *Adding Value Through Information and Consultation*, (Palgrave Macmillan/Open University Press, Basingstoke), 89-105.

² Charlwood A, Terry M (2007), '21st-century models of employee representation: structures, processes and outcomes', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 38, 4, 320-337.

organisational context is challenging and the project is affected by concurrent unanticipated changes.

The nature of representation and question of what employee representatives do and the roles they play is also becoming more complicated, and in some cases more fragmented (Podro, Suff and Purcell, 2008¹). In particular, managing relationships with 'mixed' constituencies of employees who are represented by union and non-union representatives can add another layer of complexity to joint working, although Charlwood and Terry (2007) suggest that such 'dual systems' may produce the best outcomes in terms of equity and efficiency. However, establishing a clear consensus on objectives and priorities *within* the employee group as well as within a management group that may also be composed of subgroups may be essential prior to establishing agreed goals between the parties.

It is also relevant to explore and illustrate the role that Acas plays in gaining consensus on shared priorities within each party to the employment relationship before helping the parties to agree on joint goals together. A certain amount of sorting through historical 'baggage' of past relationships and overcoming latent desires to settle old scores is often necessary prior to agreeing objectives, and the process of enabling representatives with different statutory rights to work together can be difficult. Here, it is important to show the function of Acas in helping the parties to agree on the *principles* of the process and how they will work together. The research sought to achieve this through the organisational case studies by identifying the techniques used by the Acas advisers to flesh out any pre-existing tensions, diffuse these and enable the parties to work together and appreciate each others' views.

Managing concerns about trust and the suspicions of the parties to the employment relationship is important in overcoming barriers to progress in joint working between managers and employees, especially where there is a history of antagonism. This is a delicate task requiring skill and sensitivity. Beaumont et al. (2005) discuss the operation of trust within joint consultation processes in different organisational contexts, flagging up in particular the effects of ground rules. The research sought to explore these issues by examining the extent to which employer and employee representatives were able to develop trust.

Representative forms of 'partnership' approaches to the employment relationship have been much heralded over the past decade as methods by which more trusting and co-operative relationships between managers and employees can be achieved. Leaving aside disputed definitions and uncertainties about the mutual benefits of partnership, work by IES (Reilly, 2002²) and Guest et al. (2008¹) has

¹ Podro S, Suff R, Purcell J (2008), *Employee Representatives: Challenges and Changes in the Workplace*, Acas Policy Discussion Paper (Acas, London).

² Reilly P (2002), *Partnership Under Pressure: How Does it Survive?*, Report 383 (Institute for Employment Studies, Brighton).

shown that partnership approaches are not necessarily a panacea to problems in workplace relationships. In particular, pressures from external sources, the nature of individual relationships between members of each 'side' and their prior experience of each other's behaviour influence levels of trust. Directly tackling tensions between individuals is therefore important in building trust. The case study research took into account the nature of existing relationships and the extent to which partnership approaches were being pursued in the workplaces investigated. Where these had historically been adversarial or had potential to become so, the research sought to capture how Acas advisers achieved any shifts in attitudes, 'turning points' or project milestones from the perspective of the parties involved.

¹ Guest D, Brown W, Peccei R, Huxley K (2008), 'Does partnership at work increase trust? An analysis based on the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 39, 2, 124-152.

2 Methodology

Acas evaluates all its services in order to ensure that they meet the needs of customers, to share good practice among Acas staff and to provide evidence of the effectiveness of Acas work to external stakeholders and funders, such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and HM Treasury.

This report builds on previous evaluations of Acas's Workplace Projects, carried out since 2004.¹ As with previous evaluations, the 2008/2009 evaluation aims to combine the views of project participants, those of the lead managers and employee representatives and the Acas Advisers themselves. The sample for the telephone survey element of the evaluation came from the Acas Management Information database (EARS). This information included project completion dates, names and contact details of the key individuals to survey, and the identity of the regional Acas office that provided the service. It also included names of the Senior Advisers and the subject or title of the project.

2.1 Telephone survey

IES subcontracted the telephone survey to Employment Research Limited. Between three and 15 months after the end of the project, the lead managers and employee representatives involved were contacted for information on project outcomes once Acas involvement ceased. Contact details for this survey were provided by Advisers. Employment Research Limited used a standardised telephone script to conduct a telephone interview with each party that lasted around 15-20 minutes.

Target respondents were sent letters on Acas headed paper approximately two weeks before first being contacted by the telephone interviewers. The main aim of this was to prime target respondents for the research and boost response rates, but respondents were also given the chance to contact Acas or the IES research team if they had any queries or could suggest a more appropriate interviewee.

The survey was based on the existing 20-minute telephone questionnaire which was developed from that used in previous Workplace Project evaluations.

The survey was conducted between 7 January 2009 and 9 February 2009 and attempted to interview one employee representative and one management representative in 164 organisations where projects had taken place.

2.1.1 Telephone survey sample description

Of the 328 employee and management representatives contacted within the duration of the survey, 181 completed survey interviews. The response rate of well over half (55 per cent) completing the survey represents an improved return

¹ Internal Acas research reports: 1) Evaluation of Acas Workplace Projects 2004-2006. 2) Workplace Project Evaluation 2007.

on previous waves of this survey. The most common reason for non-completion was the absence of an appropriate respondent to complete the survey, in around 20 per cent of the total sample. In a further 13 per cent of the sample, an appropriate person was not available during the fieldwork period, with a minority of the sample refusing to participate in the survey for other reasons.

Among 181 respondents who successfully completed the survey, around two-thirds of these (120) represented **matched cases**, whereby an employee representative and management representative from a single Workplace Project had answered the survey independently.

Of the 61 remaining non-matched cases, around three-quarters (46 cases) were management representatives, with the remaining quarter (15 cases) employee representatives. This means that of the 164 cases of organisations identified in the total sample, 60 were fully represented by both employees and management in the survey, with a further 61 represented by at least one party. Therefore, in total, information from 121 of the 164 organisations has been accessed through the survey (74 per cent).

Table 2.1: Description of sample

	Overall number of respondents	Overall number of organisations covered
Within the matched cases	120	60
Within the unmatched cases	61	61
Total number of respondents/ organisations covered	181	121

Source: IES, 2009

Table 2.2: Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases: response category

	Frequency	Percentage
Completed interview	181	55
Respondent no longer at organisation	3	1
Named contact there but not lead contact	2	1
No appropriate respondent	68	21
Refusal - company policy	2	1
Refusal - already been interviewed for Acas survey	3	1
Refusal - no time	1	0
Refusal - other reason	24	7
Not available in fieldwork period	44	13
Total	328	100.0

Note: Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

In total, there were 75 employee representatives surveyed and 106 management representatives. On the employee side, 43 per cent were trade union representatives, with 28 per cent non-union representatives and a further 28 per cent full-time officers of a trade union. Non-union employee representatives were mainly based within HR and corporate services or occasionally held the role of lay representative within the organisation at another level.

A copy of the telephone questionnaire is appended to this report. It should be noted that none of the findings of this survey have been tested for statistical significance. The findings reported in this report are based mostly on the **overall sample** of matched and non-matched cases. In some cases, where the matched sub-sample¹ data shows a difference from the overall sample or can provide further insights, the matched sample data is shown instead of the overall sample.

2.2 Case studies

Acas identified organisations that were willing to take part in this research evaluation as case studies, through the Acas advisers who had been involved in the Workplace Project concerned. Once agreement in principle had been secured, the details of the organisation were passed on to IES, which made contact in order to set up the fieldwork. Case study fieldwork was carried out between September 2008 and September 2009. The case studies comprised interviews with the following individuals:

- the main senior manager involved in the Workplace Project
- a general manager whose work in some way related to or influenced the project
- an employee representative or, if present, full-time officer involved in the project
- two or three non-managerial employees, interviewed as a group.

In addition, the Acas adviser who worked with each organisation was also interviewed.

Interviews were semi-structured, typically lasted for around one hour and were conducted in accordance with interview guides, which are appended to this report. The majority of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, with a small number carried out on the telephone due to logistical reasons. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The case study organisations were:

- an NHS Foundation Trust
- a further education college
- an equipment manufacturing organisation

¹ Which only includes projects where an employee representative and a management representative from the same project both answered the survey.

- an engineering and manufacturing organisation.

The organisations wished to remain anonymous and therefore only a brief description has been given of the type of each organisation rather than the full name of each organisation. Short overviews of each case study, detailing organisational background, the nature of the issue, the extent of Acas's involvement and the project outcomes, are contained in Annex 1.

2.2.1 Show cards

In order to foster discussion of project purpose and aims, case study interviewees were invited to consider 'show cards' stating potential Workplace Project objectives. The list of objectives was as follows:

- improve employment relations
- develop policies & procedures
- improve employee well-being
- resolve an employment dispute
- support organisational change
- create a fairer workplace
- increase productivity
- facilitate staff consultation
- support business strategy
- improve HR-related outcomes
- improve communication with staff
- reduce the likelihood of future disputes.

Interviewees were asked to place the cards on a simple 'yes/no' chart to indicate whether they were or were not project objectives in their view, or were 'borderline' (eg minor objectives). Interviewees were also asked to discuss any other objectives not listed in the cards.

The primary purpose of the show cards was to activate respondents' cognitive maps or schemata of the Workplace Project and thus help the discussion crystallise the interviewees' understanding and views of the project objectives, process and outcomes. In short, they served to give respondents something to pin their ideas to, acting as a springboard for discussion.

Secondly, the cards served as a starting point from which to analyse the degree to which the different parties to the employment relationship had shared perceptions of the problems or objectives set for the Workplace Project at its inception.

Towards the end of each discussion, we asked interviewees to reconsider the show cards and discuss to what extent each of their selected goals was achieved and whether any additional benefits accrued that had not been set as objectives. This enables us to capture potentially unanticipated and/or unrecognised benefits of Workplace Projects.

3 Why Organisations Choose Acas

In this chapter, we explore the reasons organisations gave for deciding to ask Acas to work with them and help and advise them on specific projects. Data from both the telephone survey and the case studies are analysed. Key issues to emerge include the perception that Acas is independent, that it has relevant expertise and that organisations have had previous positive experiences of working with Acas.

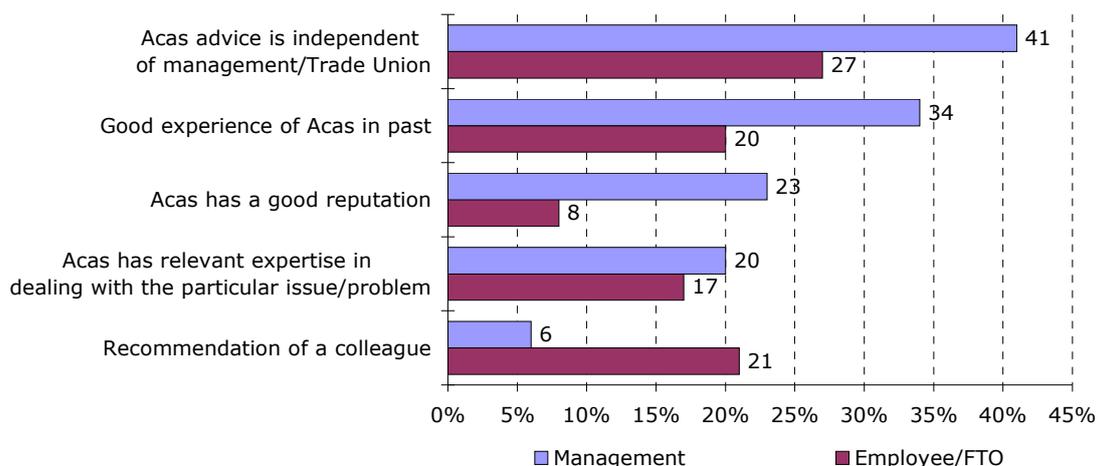
3.1 Reasons for choosing Acas

3.1.1 Telephone survey

From the telephone survey data, management representatives were most likely to cite Acas's independence as a key reason for using its services (41 per cent cited this reason). Further, around one-fifth of managers surveyed had decided to use Acas because of relevant expertise in dealing with the particular issue or problem, and a similar proportion indicated that Acas's reputation was an important factor in this decision. In a similar vein, one-third of management representatives cited that previous good experiences of using Acas had contributed to the decision to use them.

Over a quarter of employee representatives also cited Acas's independence as being important to their decision to use Acas's services. Around one-fifth stated that Acas's relevant experience of dealing with the issues in question or previous good experience of using Acas was important. Employee representatives were more likely than management representatives to cite the recommendation of a colleague as an important reason for deciding to use Acas. The sub-sample of matched cases also supported the findings from the overall sample data in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: When first considering ways of dealing with the issue, why participants and others decide to use Acas, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/full-time officer 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

3.1.2 Case studies

From the case study data, many of the same issues played a part in influencing organisations' decisions to work with Acas. Previous positive experience was a key factor, particularly on the management side. For example, at the equipment manufacturing organisation, a significant motivator for HR was a positive experience of Acas for a similar past project in another organisation – notably using the same Acas adviser involved in this project.

"I commissioned Acas to come and do an employee survey¹ for me...I had used them before very successfully in another business to do the same sort of thing."

HR Director, equipment manufacturing organisation

Experience and knowledge of a traditional industrial relations context was seen a major factor for choosing to work with Acas in the case of the engineering and manufacturing organisation, which wanted help with its partnership working. Here, the HR function decided on Acas specifically because of its knowledge in this area.

"We had a look around and we thought, where would we find the most experience in terms of traditional trade unionism and Acas has lots of ex-trade union guys in there ... so it just sort of made sense that we went to them, because we were looking for that traditional knowledge of what trade unionism was about."

Head of HR, engineering and manufacturing organisation

The impartiality of Acas was also a significant motivator for all four organisations in choosing to work with Acas. Where problems or issues were seen as difficult and/or sensitive, working with an external and neutral body was seen as an advantage. For example, at the NHS Foundation Trust, staff recognised that the issue the organisation was trying to deal with was too difficult and had too much history for internal actors to be able to solve without external help.

"We came to a standstill. Management wanted one thing, we wanted another and there was no shifting on it. They kept coming with different proposals which were not very different from the first one and there was no movement and it had been like that for over a year ... The only way forward was to bring the external company in to try and discuss."

Staff focus group participant, NHS Foundation Trust

Other organisations appreciated the value of an external expert.

¹ Although the interviewees describe the project as a survey, it was actually a series of focus groups with employees in the organisation.

“Having an external facilitator who might draw things out of staff that we couldn’t do internally. It’s having that person who hasn’t got that hidden agenda who is coming in fresh and seeing what’s going on. That’s why we didn’t do it in-house. People wouldn’t talk to us.”

Human resources officer, further education college

Nevertheless, on occasion there was doubt about calling on Acas to help with a particular project, usually due to the fact that Acas’s work is often linked to dispute resolution and industrial relations difficulties. For example, at the equipment manufacturing organisation, HR reported some initial scepticism on the part of the local trade union representatives, who automatically associated Acas with workplace disputes.

“To be honest they weren’t that comfortable to start with because they had never done anything like this before. Their understanding of Acas was Acas only come in when there is a problem. I said, no, no, no, we are using them for other things.”

HR Director, equipment manufacturing organisation

There was also a worry in one organisation on the part of managers that referral to Acas may be a delaying tactic on the part of unions. However, in this particular case, any initial management scepticism was rapidly overcome.

3.2 Chapter summary

This chapter has looked at the reasons why organisations chose to work with Acas on Workplace Projects. The telephone survey and case study data show that the main reasons that organisations choose Acas are the impartiality and independence of Acas, previous positive experience of working with Acas, Acas’s reputation, its knowledge and expertise in particular areas, such as a traditional industrial relations setting, and the need to work with an external organisation in order to find out what employees really think.

Any initial worries about working with an organisation that is known particularly for dispute resolution were quickly dispelled when, during the project, it became clear that Acas advisers were skilled in handling a range of issues. This evidence confirms the broader reputation that the Acas ‘brand’ has among employees and employers.

In the next chapter, we examine the aims and outcomes of the projects.

4 Aims and Outcomes of the Projects

This chapter charts the progress of the Workplace Projects from start to finish, beginning with the context in which they took place, the main focus of the projects, how the objectives for the projects were set, whether the objectives changed as the project progressed, whether and how the objectives were achieved and what the outcomes and impacts of the projects were. It also examines whether any action was taken after the end of the project and considers the journey that organisations travelled during the course of the project.

4.1 Starting points: organisational background and culture

Information about organisational background, context and the culture of the organisations that worked with Acas on Workplace Projects was gleaned from the case studies. Issues covered in interviews with managers, employee representatives and employees included overall employment relations at the organisations, management-union relations, communication and levels of trust between the parties.

4.1.1 Employment relations

Although some Acas Workplace Projects emerge from conflict, in other cases advisers help organisations with generally good relations between employers and employees to deal with issues which otherwise might threaten those relationships. This was the case in three organisations that featured as case studies in this research. In these three organisations, employment relations were described as relatively good, or at least acceptable, by both management and union representatives. Trade unions were present in all three organisations.

"I would say that [employment relations] were good, there's never been any major issues, we've always I feel worked quite well together ...At the end of the day, both parties I feel are working towards the one goal which is the delivery of the trust objectives."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

At the NHS Foundation Trust, two unions were active in the organisation and union density in the department affected by the Workplace Project was estimated to be 100 per cent. Most of the main management and union actors involved in the Workplace Project had known each other for a relatively long time and were comfortable working with each other. Nevertheless, the trade union representative in this organisation also stated that although there was trust between management and trade union representatives, the external context had changed over the past few years. NHS Trusts were being required to make increasingly significant cost savings, which usually had an impact on staff, and which therefore made relationships between management and trade union representatives more difficult.

At the equipment manufacturing organisation, although employment relations were described in generally positive terms, a complete change of senior management in 2006 was a significant turning point and had greatly challenged the relationship between management and the trade unions. Management stated

that relations had gone from 'extremely poor' to 'worse' during a period of potential industrial action over headcount reduction, to 'excellent' now. The local trade union representative also confirmed that relations are now good.

"As far as the union is concerned we've always had fairly good relations with the company past and present...obviously we don't always see eye to eye or agree, but we don't find them unapproachable, I've always had a good working relationship with them."

Trade union representative, equipment manufacturing organisation

At the further education college, both management and union representatives characterised relations between management and trade unions as generally good. Both parties met regularly to discuss a range of issues and there were also a range of non-union employee representatives at the college, such as those who sat on the health and safety committee. Both trade union and management representatives believed that employee representatives were adequately involved in change management and decision-making.

At the fourth case study organisation, the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the relationship between the HR function and trade unions had had a history of difficulty, due to the fact that it had in the past been conducted through senior channels. When the head of HR left the organisation, the relationship deteriorated, and was exacerbated by the fact that the trade union representatives were largely very experienced employees with long service in the organisation, and the HR team were relatively young, inexperienced and not as knowledgeable about the business in which they worked. This created an atmosphere of tension and mistrust between the parties.

"We'd ... got to the point where we recognised that the HR team that we had was relatively inexperienced in terms of dealing and resolving employee relations issues ... we have a very young team absolutely full of enthusiasm, but completely knocked over sometimes by the trade unions, you can see them panic, and you just think oh God, stay calm, just answer their questions."

Head of HR, engineering and manufacturing organisation

At this organisation, things came to a head when the trade union representatives formally stated their concern about the deterioration in their relationship with the HR function.

4.1.2 Communication

Organisations generally described existing communications as good, taking the form of staff forums, employee attitude surveys and staff being encouraged to raise issues through appropriate local channels, such as discussions with line managers, HR or union representatives. At the NHS Foundation Trust, staff forums met in addition to the trade union. In this organisation, the trade union representative thought that these forums were not particularly effective and that most issues ended up being dealt with by trade union representatives.

“A few years ago the chief exec was very keen to have staff forums here. It was a nice idea but we weren’t overly keen. They were seen to be talking shops that didn’t seem to achieve an awful lot. Anything that required a decision seemed to find its way back to the traditional negotiating. They are still there, staff forums. Within the lab structure everybody is in the union.”

Trade union representative, NHS Foundation Trust

There were nevertheless occasional complaints, such as staff at the further education college believing that there was too much downward rather than upward communication from the senior management team.

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the trade unions had been traditionally involved in the formulation of all staff surveys. The communication between management and trade union representatives was, however, seen to be not particularly effective before Acas’s project work, mostly due to the fact that the relationship was conducted at senior level and therefore much of the communication was not filtering down to lower levels on each side.

4.2 Focus of the projects

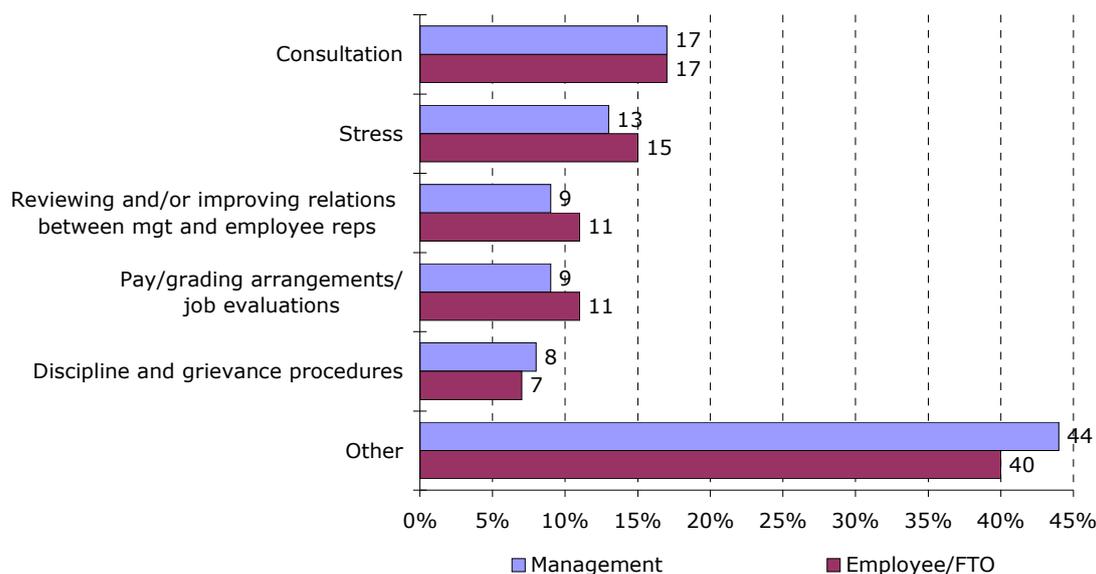
4.2.1 Triggers for the project

The triggers for the projects were similar across both the telephone survey and the case studies. They encompassed issues such as help with consultation, stress reduction, help with a specific industrial relations problem, and improving employment relations.

Telephone survey

Telephone survey data suggests that there is usually broad consensus between employee and management representatives on the subject matter that the participants wanted the project to address. Around 17 per cent of both management and employee representatives believed that the main focus of the Workplace Project was for Acas to help with consultation in the organisation. Other common objectives were stress reduction, improving employee relations between employees and management representatives or reviewing/implementing pay and grading or job evaluation. These concerns reflect a mixture of old and new themes in workplace relations: consultation remains an issue of concern for organisations, pay and grading are perennially difficult issues, while concerns about employee well-being and stress are a more recent phenomenon, and illustrate both continuity and change in the range of work that Acas undertakes in providing the Workplace Projects Service. The remaining responses covered a diverse range of issues, but were given by less than five per cent of respondents.

Figure 4.1: Views of main focus of project, by respondent type. (Overall sample – matched and un-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee 75. Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers.

Source: IES, 2009

Case studies

Data from the case studies shows that Acas was called in to address a very specific issue in each project. From the four case studies, these issues were:

- helping to put into place a working time system that would provide secure cover for a 24-hour, seven days a week service provided by a specific department (NHS Foundation Trust)
- helping to carry out a stress audit (further education college)
- to gather employee views on employment relations issues (equipment manufacturing organisation)
- helping to improve partnership working between trade union and HR representatives (engineering and manufacturing organisation).

In all four cases, the organisation felt that the project was, for a range of reasons, too difficult or sensitive to be managed in-house only and they therefore needed external help.

In the case of the new shift system to provide continuous coverage at the NHS Foundation Trust, the issue was controversial as management wanted to change the current arrangement, under which staff voluntarily worked overtime, by introducing a new shift system. This had working time and possibly pay implications, about which the workforce was nervous. In addition, there had been a previous attempt to change the arrangements, which had not been successful. Given these sensitivities and the fact that management wanted to make a fresh

start and resolve the issue permanently, enlisting the help of Acas was seen as the way forward.

In the case of the stress audit, the organisation knew that stress was a problem, and that workload and, in some cases, bullying, were particular stressors, but had not conducted a stress audit across the whole organisation before. An HSE inspector advised the college to conduct a stress audit, and managers felt that they needed help and guidance, as they had no previous experience of the process. It wanted to conduct focus groups to capture employees' honest opinions and to uncover the hotspots in terms of stress, and therefore it was felt that using Acas as an external facilitator was the only way to find out what was really going on in the organisation.

The idea of a fresh start was central to the project on gathering employee views at the equipment manufacturing organisation. Here, a new management team had recently been put into place and the objective was to gather evidence of employment relations and ways of working within the company that could be improved. In the short-term it was envisaged that better knowledge would facilitate more effective change and in the longer-term improve workforce management. The neutrality of Acas was seen as central to helping to gather honest and accurate views from the workforce.

"We were all a new senior team and we knew what was in front of our noses, we could look at financial figures and so on but that didn't tell me really what was going on with the workforce and so that was my original reason for going to Acas, you know, interview all these people and get them to tell me what they think, I don't care what it is, anything and it was from there that we needed to go."

HR Director, equipment manufacturing organisation

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, both sides felt that the relationship had deteriorated to such an extent that external help was needed. The organisation had already carried out behavioural workshops, which it thought had helped to some extent. However, the HR function believed that a fresh approach was now needed, and looked to Acas for help, knowing that it had vast reserves of experience and knowledge of industrial relations problems in a traditional manufacturing environment. The choice of Acas was acceptable to both the HR function and the trade unions.

"We got Acas involved in the early days of the redundancies [made in the early 1990s] and we found them to be very good at that particular time, so I think the idea of bringing Acas in as an arbitrator was greeted on both sides as the right thing to do. We'd had these lockaways with senior management some of our guys felt uncomfortable with that and they didn't want to do that again – we want someone in who's completely unbiased, where we don't have to go and spend the night with these guys drinking, for some of the guys it just didn't feel right and I think Acas was the obvious avenue to go down ... All we wanted from Acas really was to give a perspective to the HR team of what the trade union is about, what we do, what our role was because we got the impression they weren't really listening to us ... that was why we wanted them involved so they'd give a fair view and an honest view of where both sides were."

4.3 Setting the objectives

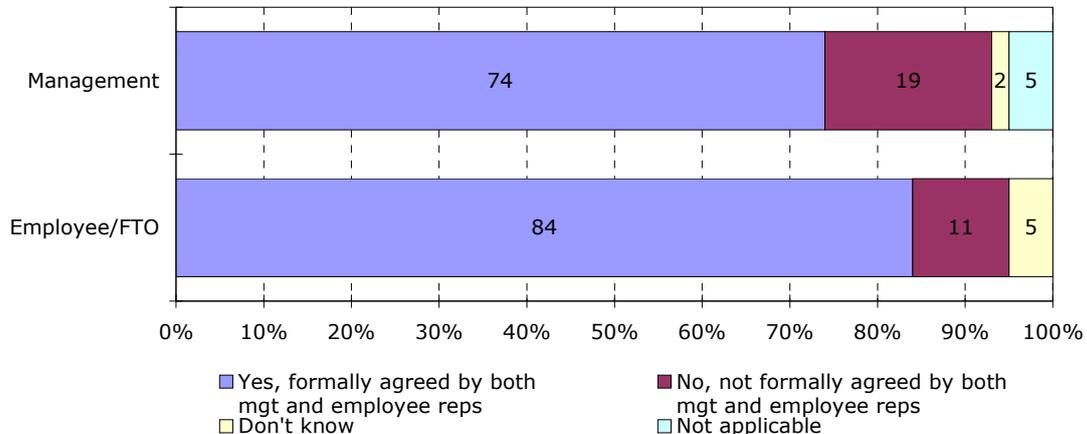
Both the organisations which participated in the telephone survey and the case study organisations had little trouble in agreeing joint objectives. This was usually carried out formally, with the involvement of the Acas adviser, and in writing. Notwithstanding, management and trade union representatives differed somewhat in their views of the overall objectives of the projects, with management more likely to want to focus on the specifics of a project, and trade unions hoping that it would fulfil a wider aim such as promoting a greater degree of fairness at work.

4.3.1 Formal agreement of objectives

Telephone survey

Most respondents reported that objectives had, for the most part, been agreed in a formal way. Around three-quarters of management representatives and over four-fifths of employee representatives indicated that objectives had been formally agreed by management and employee representatives.

Figure 4.2: Whether objectives of the project were formally agreed between management and employees' representatives, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 104, employee/full-time officer 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Case studies

This picture of formal agreement on the objectives of Acas Workplace Projects was confirmed by the case studies. However, this element of the research enabled the exploration of some of the complexities of the process. The project objectives were formally agreed in all the case study organisations. In some cases, such as the stress audit project, it was the nature of the project which lent

itself to the formal agreement of objectives – the parties involved formed a steering group, which formally agreed objectives in writing. In the case of the implementation of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, the objectives and views of staff and management differed significantly and the trade union felt at the outset that it was caught in the middle.

“Management wanted a contractual arrangement of 37.5 hours, paying £3,000 or whatever the national [agreement] said they should pay. They didn’t want a voluntary agreement. The staff wanted to keep the voluntary agreement and their £10,000.”

Trade union representative, NHS Foundation Trust

During the case study interviews, interviewees were shown cards containing a range of objectives and were asked which ones summarised their project. This was a way of trying to find out whether there were any differences in management and employee representatives’ objectives. Overall, although there was agreement between management and employee representatives on the formal goals of the project, there were some differences in beliefs about the function of the project as it sat in the wider context of the organisation.

4.3.2 A shared agenda?

As well as looking at formal objectives for the projects, the case studies also sought to explore the underlying aims of the different parties. The aim here was to explore any differences between the views and ultimate goals of management and employee representatives, as this could ultimately affect the success of the project, both in the short-term of achieving the immediate objectives and in the longer-term of having a lasting impact on employment relations at the workplace.

Management aims

Management objectives tended to centre on the task in hand, such as implementing a new shift system, finding out what employees honestly thought about issues such as stress, partnership working, workplace relations, or improving communication more generally. For example, the management view at the further education college, which was carrying out the stress audit, was that the goal was to find out what was causing stress and then to tackle the causes.

“[The objective was] to be able to develop an action plan and work on the action plan. We’ve got a stress steering group who report to the health and safety committee, our objective is to work out what needs to go on the action plan and take action on whatever needs to be done.”

Human resources officer, further education college

At the NHS Foundation Trust, managers knew that implementing a new shift system would be a difficult task, given the complexity, sensitivity and past history of the subject, but were trying to find a targeted solution to the problem in a way that would be accepted by all concerned. On the management side, the main objective was to introduce a 24-hour continuous service, and to attempt to move towards ‘Agenda for Change’ contracts as part of an effort to reduce costs, in the context of a wider cost-saving initiative within the Trust. Nevertheless, managers

were also keen to minimise the negative impact of any changes on staff. A key objective quoted by a management representative was:

"To try and work with the staff to provide a rota system that would deliver what the Trust needed."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

Nevertheless, when presented with further options on the showcards, the management representatives in the organisation said that developing a partnership approach and improving employment relations were key objectives of the project, as was creating a fairer workplace.

In the equipment manufacturing case study organisation, which wished to carry out an employee view-gathering exercise, there was a management focus on gaining employee views so that the new management team could then use this as a basis to change whatever was identified as problematic, and to move forward.

In the fourth case study, at the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the goal of management and trade unions did not really differ greatly, as the main objective was to improve the working relationship and partnership working between management and trade unions. The HR function was driving the project, but both sides were keen to improve relationships and increase understanding.

Trade union aims

Trade union or employee representative objectives did not vary significantly from those indicated by management (with the exception of the NHS Trust which was trying to implement a new shift system). This is not surprising, given that the objectives focused around a specific project, and were formally agreed beforehand. However, issues such as improving fairness at work, improving employment relations and improving general employee health and well-being were cited by trade union and employee representatives as featuring among their overall objectives.

In implementing the new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, management and trade unions had differing objectives. The main objective of the trade unions at the outset of the project was to retain the status quo in terms of the payments for shift working that staff received, to ensure that the staff did not lose out in pay terms. This clashed directly with management's focus on trying to introduce a new system that would help to save costs as well as provide a more secure continuous service. Here, the view of the trade union representative interviewed was that the trade union did not really have any set objectives before Acas involvement.

"Within the meetings before Acas got involved, we didn't set any objectives. That was what they wanted. Our objective was 'no change' or rather some kind of agreed change if we could come to a compromise."

Trade union representative, NHS Foundation Trust

In this case, Acas involvement was seen by both management and trade union representatives as extremely helpful in managing to shift the parties involved

from seemingly intransigent positions. In particular, and in keeping with the issues raised in Section 1.1 concerning previous history, Acas involvement helped the parties to overcome the historical baggage that hung around this issue, as management had previously made an attempt to resolve it.

4.4 Development and changing of objectives

The research also examined whether the objectives set at the beginning of the project had developed or changed during the course of the project. Data from the telephone survey and the case studies shows that in the vast majority of cases, the objectives did not change; where they did, the new objectives were jointly agreed.

4.4.1 Telephone survey

Both management and employee representatives in the vast majority of cases said that the main objectives of the project had not changed as it progressed (98 per cent of management representatives and 97 per cent of employee representatives). This may suggest that rather than uncovering unrecognised problems during the course of the project which may occur in some forms of joint working, the Workplace Projects process is effective in flushing out root causes of (potential) disagreements at the start.

Among the two per cent of management and three per cent of employee respondents who reported that the objective had changed at all as the project progressed, all employee and management representatives indicated that the revised objectives had been formally agreed by both parties.

4.4.2 Case studies

Data from the case studies also suggests that there was little shifting of objectives as the project progressed in three of the projects. In the case of the project aimed at gathering employee views, at the equipment manufacturing organisation, the objectives agreed were consistent from start to finish. In the case of the stress audit project at the further education college, interviewees agreed that the objectives were clear at the outset and remained broadly constant, although the detail changed as the project unfolded and more information was uncovered. In the case of improving partnership working at the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the objective remained constant throughout the project.

However, in the implementation of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, the objectives changed noticeably as the project unfolded. This was in part due to the context of national negotiations on terms and conditions in the health service, which had a bearing on local agreements. Here, at the outset of the project, management had wanted to focus on implementing a new shift system and using new terms and conditions for staff, within the Agenda for Change, which would be cost-saving. However, this objective changed when it became clear that, for a range of reasons, the payment system could not be changed, mainly as this was linked to national negotiations and a Trust Board decision would have been necessary to implement changes to the payment system. It was then decided that the new system needed to be cost neutral rather than cost-

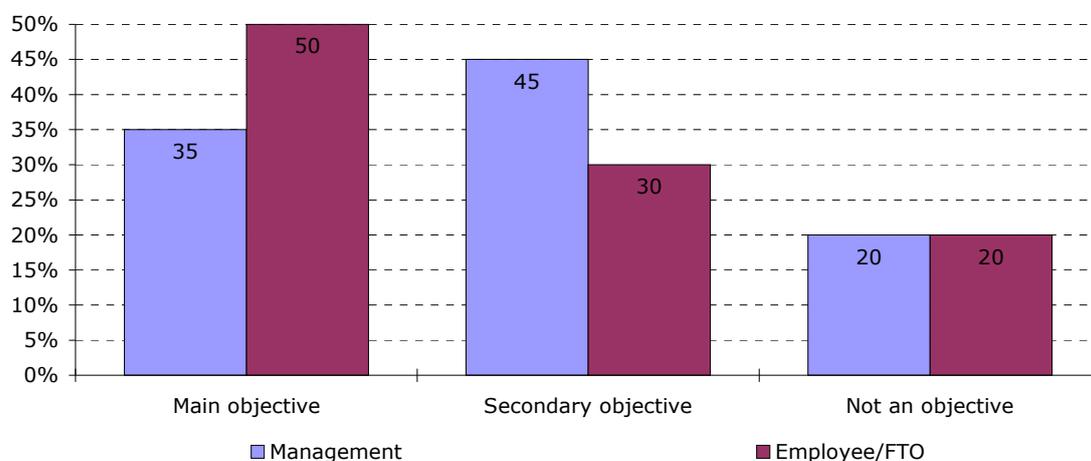
saving. Therefore, the decision was taken not to change the current payment system, thus removing a key controversial element from the project.

4.4.3 Extent to which improving employment relations is an objective of Workplace Projects

Acas' Mission is to *improve organisations and working life through better employment relations*. Trying to improve employment relations emerged as one of the main objectives of the projects, from the telephone survey.¹

Looking at the matched dataset² cases in isolation, there was not complete agreement between management and employee representatives about the extent to which improving employment relations was a main or secondary objective - although agreement about the extent to which improving employment relations was *not* an objective was similar to the overall sample. Employee representatives were more likely to name the improvement of employment relations as a main objective (around 50 per cent did so), compared with 35 per cent of management representatives. However, it seems that there was broad agreement between the two parties as to what the objectives were within the project. Whether improving employee relations was a main or secondary objective is a more subtle difference of priority.

Figure 4.3: Main objective felt to be improving relationship between management and employees, by respondent type. (Sub-sample: matched cases only.)



N=management 60, employee/full-time officer 60. Percentages have been rounded.

¹ In the total surveyed sample, the proportion of management and employee representatives who named this as a primary goal was similar. Further, around two-fifths of management representatives and one-third of employee representatives agreed that this was a secondary objective.

² Which only includes projects where an employee representative and a management representative from the same project both answered the survey.

Source: IES, 2009

Out of the four case studies, the case study at the engineering and manufacturing organisation concentrated solely on improving employment relations, through boosting and improving the relationship between the HR function and trade union representatives.

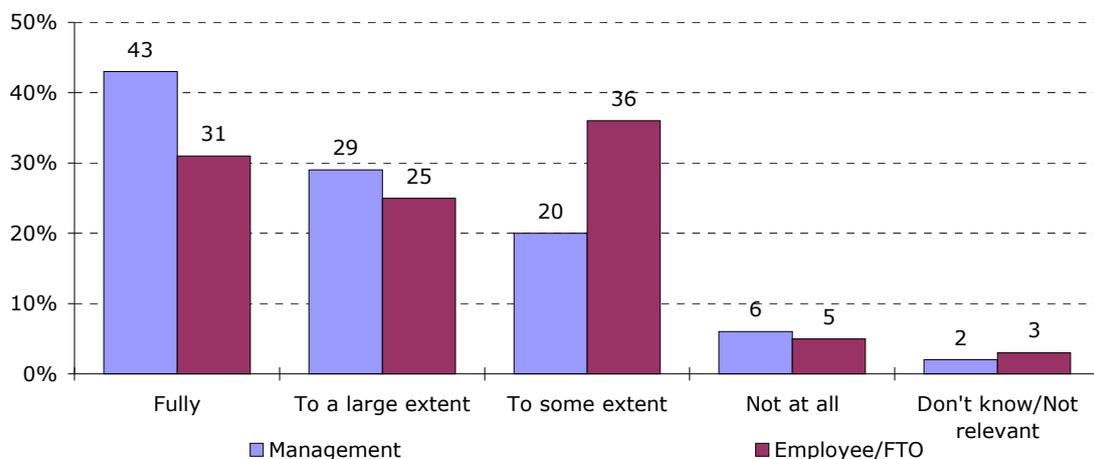
4.5 Achieving the objectives

4.5.1 Achieving the main objective

Telephone survey

Management representatives were more positive than employee representatives in their assessment of whether the main objective of the Workplace Project had been achieved, according to the survey data. Over two-fifths of managers claimed that the main objective had been fully achieved, and almost one-third stated that the main objective had been achieved to a large extent. This compared with around one-third of employee representatives stating the main objective had been achieved, with a further quarter indicating the main objective had been achieved to a large extent. Employee representatives were more likely to claim that the main objective had been achieved only to some extent. This may reflect differing expectations, but also level of visibility of outcomes. Objectives which resulted in policy and procedural changes rather than practice changes, for example, may be less noticeable to employee representatives, unless and until those changes are put into effect when policies are operated. Separately from this, it is also interesting to consider the implications of employee representatives' perceptions of unanticipated and unintended improvements following external project interventions, as these may not be recognised by managers (who are likely to have commissioned the project).

Figure 4.4: To what extent did participants feel the main objective had been achieved?, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

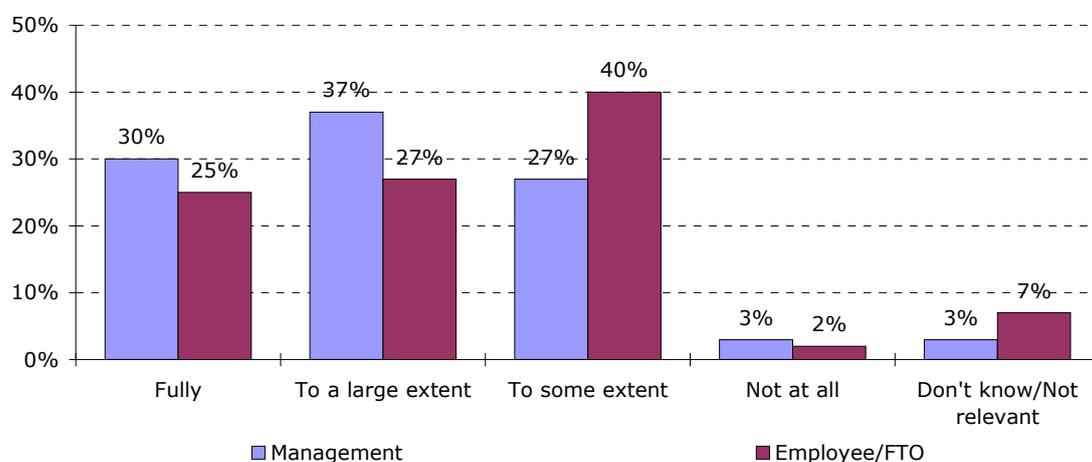
4.5.2 Sustaining activities and initiatives

Management representatives also tended to give a more positive assessment, than employee representatives, on the degree to which activities or initiatives arising from the Workplace Project had been sustained. And a very small minority of both groups thought activities resulting from the Acas project had not been sustained at all.¹

Using the matched sample, two-thirds of management representatives (67 per cent) suggested that activities had been fully, or to a large extent, sustained, compared with just over a half (52 per cent) of employee representatives. However, the total percentage of representatives that indicated activities resulting from the Acas project had been fully, to a large extent or to some extent sustained was similar in both groups (93 per cent of management representatives compared to 92 per cent of employee representatives). This showed that employee representatives agreed that initiatives and activities resulting from the Acas project had been sustained, but were less positive about the extent of this. Only a very small minority in both groups thought that the changes had not been sustained at all. Matched-case analysis reveals that in 67 per cent of cases (40 of the 60 projects) there was not complete consensus between employee and management representatives about the exact extent to which activities or initiatives arising from the Acas project had been sustained. Further examination reveals that in only three per cent of the matched projects there was a discrepancy between employee and management representatives about whether these activities had at least been partially sustained (either fully, to a large extent, to some extent), or whether activities or initiatives arising from the Acas project had not been sustained at all since Acas's involvement.

¹ Using the overall sample, almost two-thirds of management representatives stated that activities or initiatives in the workplace had been sustained either fully, or to a large extent, compared with just under half of employee representatives. However, almost two-fifths of employee representatives agreed that activities or initiatives arising from the Acas project had been sustained at least to some extent.

Figure 4.5: Sustaining activities/initiatives resulting from the Acas project, by type of contact. (Sub sample: matched cases only.)



N=management 60, employee/FTO 60. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Reasons why objectives had not been achieved

As noted above, only a very small percentage of management and employee representatives said that project objectives had not been met at all, and 20 per cent of management and 36 per cent of employee representatives said that the objectives had been partially met. Therefore, it should be noted that the following analysis is based on small numbers (27 management and 31 employee representatives).

While interviewees gave a variety of responses about why respondents believed objectives had not been achieved, the most frequently cited reasons were:

- that there had been some kind of breakdown in employment relations, with either a lack of commitment from employment representatives/trade union or a lack of co-operation between management and employee representatives cited as reasons for failure
- that the issues were too difficult/complex to be resolved in a way identified by the Acas project
- that there was a lack of interest or lack of commitment from management in implementing the solutions outlined in the Acas project.

Additional reasons given for why the objectives had not been achieved were that that it was too early to say and that there had been a change in the workplace or circumstances in the workplace.

Case studies

In the four case studies, immediate project objectives had been achieved as follows:

- At the further education college, a stress audit was carried out as planned, involving a gathering of the views of staff, via focus groups, and an action plan was drawn up to tackle identified hotspots and problems.
- At the NHS Foundation Trust, agreement was reached on a new shift system in order to allow the Trust to provide a continuous 24-hour service.
- At the equipment manufacturing organisation, two employee surveys were successfully carried out, enabling management to gather employee views on a range of employment relations issues.
- At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the relationship between the HR function and trade union representatives was reported by both sides to be transformed, compared with the situation before Acas got involved.

However, some staff believed that the project was either incomplete, or not yet fully implemented. In the case of the stress audit at the further education college, for example, staff felt that although actions plans had been drawn up, many of the actions had not been implemented and the project had lost momentum.

"I do think all the while [the Acas adviser] was here he was driving it forward and since he's left it's tended to wallow. Since he's left basically what's happened is the so called quick fixes which never get fixed anyway, anything else is just long-term. Plenty of things started but never finished."

Focus group participant, further education college

In particular, in this case, staff felt that the college had not yet tackled many of the other issues which the action plan had highlighted as needing further investigation, such as workload and bullying. The issue of bullying in particular was felt to be very delicate and difficult to solve.

"The last meeting we had with the steering group there was a long discussion on how one should handle the situation with [one member of staff] who's been fairly clearly identified I think by everybody and nothing really has come out of it."

Focus group participant, further education college

In the case of the introduction of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, the project objective was achieved in that agreement on a new system had been put into place. However, the pay issue had not been resolved – the former payment system had remained in place as it was deemed to be too difficult and complicated to change it within the context of national negotiations. However, there was recognition that this needed to be revisited in a few years time, and so this was seen as an interim solution.

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, although the relationship between the two parties was vastly improved, it was acknowledged by both HR and union representatives that the situation was not perfect – there were some sceptics about partnership working on both sides, and the nature of the relationship meant that issues were likely to arise at which the parties would not see eye to eye in the future.

4.6 Project outcomes/impacts

In this section, we examine the outcomes and impacts of the Workplace Projects, looking first at impacts on direct organisational performance indicators and then at a range of employment relations impacts. We make the distinction between impacts that are a direct result of the Workplace Project, such as immediate solutions to the problem addressed, and more indirect and less immediate impacts, such as increased levels of trust between the parties and general improvements in employment relations.

4.6.1 Concrete and measurable impacts

In this part of the chapter, we examine concrete and measurable impacts of the Workplace Projects. It is important to state, however, that not all impacts can be measured directly, as this depends very much on the nature and focus of the particular project. In the case of some projects, impact on some measurable indicators such as reduced absence levels or improved efficiency were not expected. Finally, it may not necessarily be possible to measure improvements directly, particularly if organisations had not measured the relevant indicators before the Workplace Project.

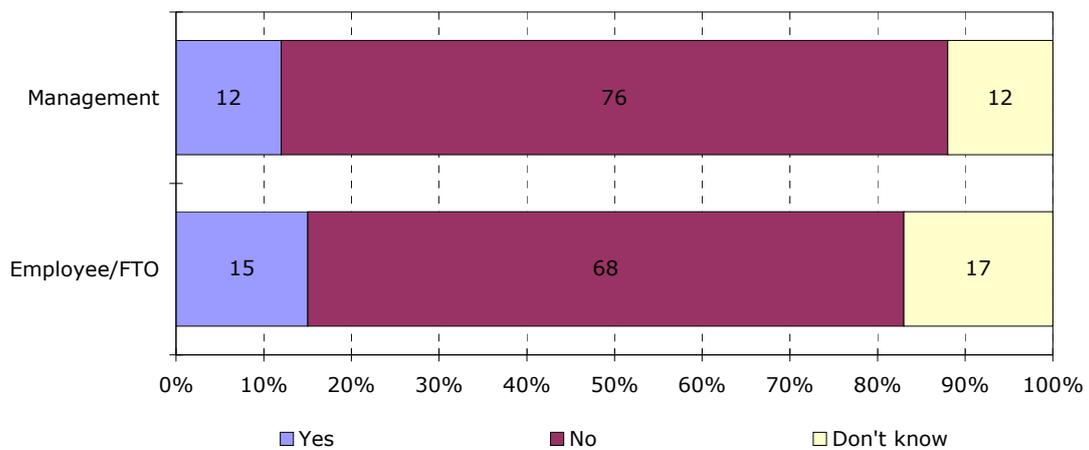
Impact in terms of measured performance indicators

From the telephone survey, across both the management and employee representative groups, a minority of respondents reported that the Workplace Project had had a positive impact on measurable performance indicators: 12 per cent of management representatives and 15 per cent of employee representatives (although 12 per cent of management representatives and 17 per cent of employee representatives did not know whether there had been any impact of this kind and it is possible that other respondents replied negatively to this question because they did not measure these indicators, rather than necessarily because there had been no impact).

Where such impact was seen it was most commonly in terms of:

1. reduced absence levels
2. reduced staff turnover
3. reduced costs
4. efficiency of output
5. staff satisfaction
6. reduced registered grievances.

Figure 4.6: Whether there was any positive impact on measurable performance indicators, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

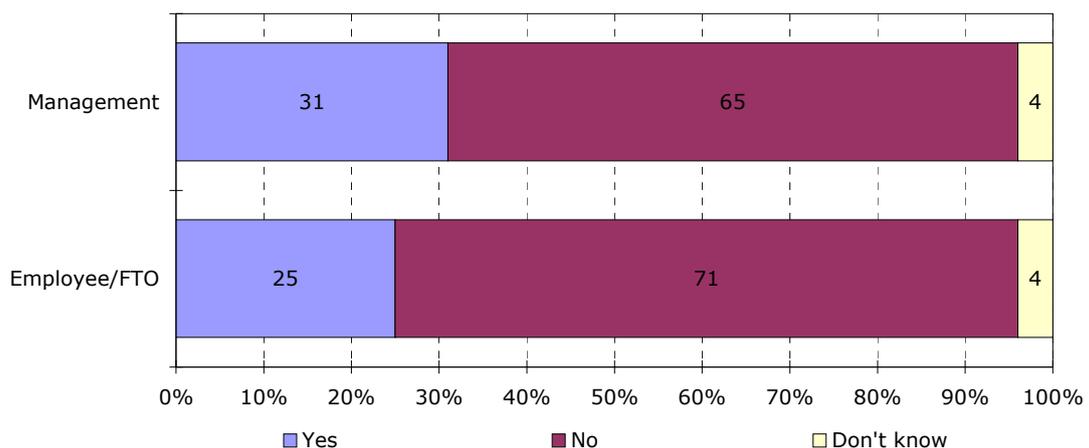


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Although only a minority of respondents could identify measurable impacts from the Acas project, nearly one-third of management representatives and a quarter of employee representatives indicated there were other positive impacts on the organisation from the Workplace Project, beyond those identified as project objectives. These included impacts such as increased awareness of an issue, increased sensitivity on the part of managers in dealing with an issue and a more positive atmosphere at work in general.

Figure 4.7: Whether there were any other positive impacts, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



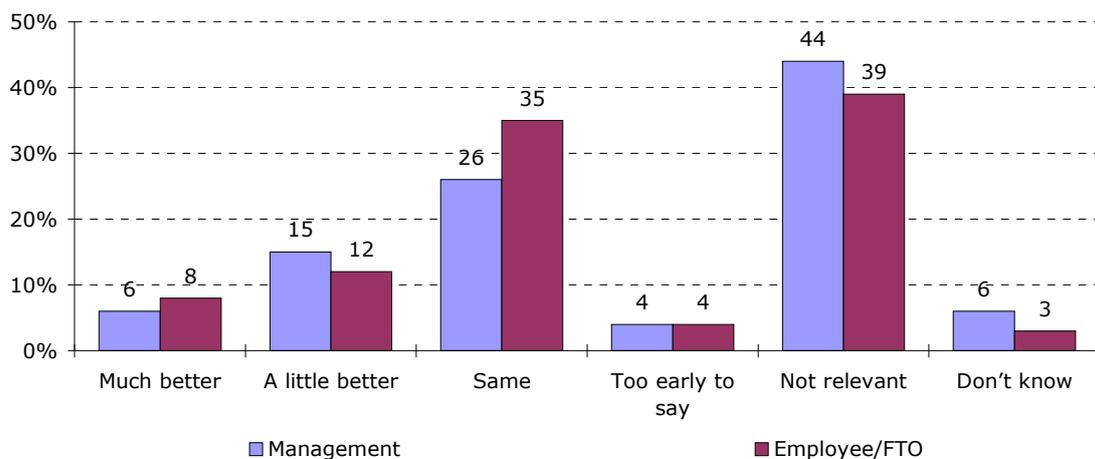
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Assessing effects on quality of service or output

There was some evidence that the quality of service or overall output had improved following the Acas project. In total, around one-fifth of management and employee representatives believed that quality had improved to some extent. A considerable proportion of both groups did not consider this to be a relevant outcome of the Acas project, or argued that quality of service or output was unchanged. No respondent reported that the quality of service or output was harmed as a result of the project.

Figure 4.8: Whether there had been any change to the quality of the service or output delivered by the workplace, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

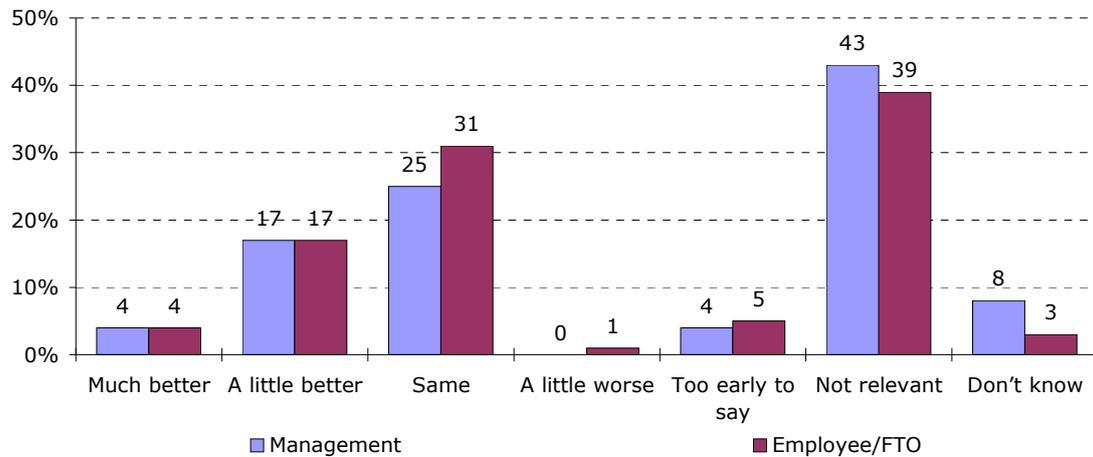


N = management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

The distribution of responses concerning improvements in productivity or efficiency following the Acas project followed a very similar pattern of responses to quality of service or improvements in output, with around one-fifth of management and employee representatives feeling that productivity or efficiency had got better to some extent.

Figure 4.9: Whether there was a change to productivity or efficiency, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

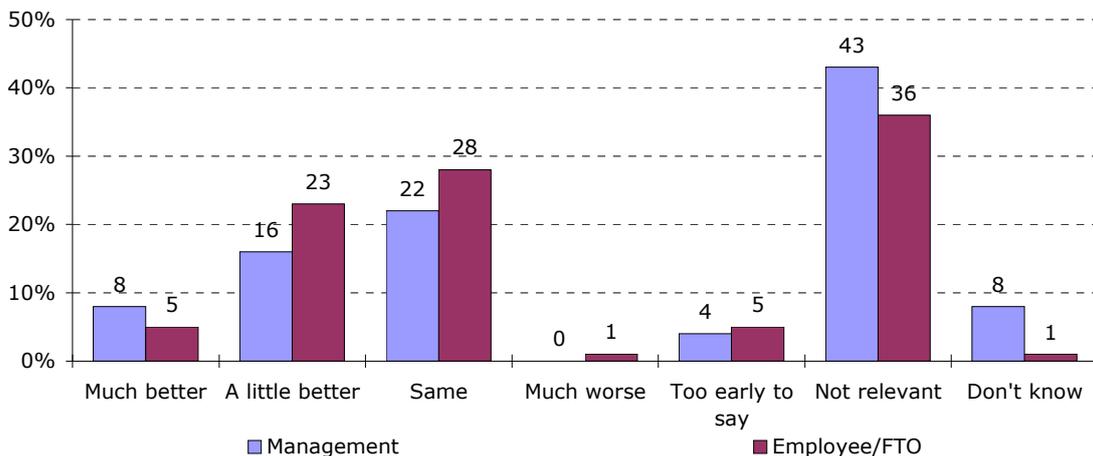


N = management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Around a quarter of both groups reported some improvements in meeting objectives or targets following the Acas project. The remainder of the respondents either did not consider this a relevant outcome of the project, reported no change or stated that it was too early to say.

Figure 4.10: Whether there was felt to be any improvement in the meeting of objectives or targets, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N = management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

4.6.2 Employment relations impacts

Telephone survey

In Section 4.4.1 above, we indicated that improving employment relations is a key objective for many Acas Workplace Projects. In this section, a range of potential employment relations impacts from Workplace Projects are explored including benefits for mutual understanding, the building of trust and improvements in communications, consultation and negotiation processes. Data from the telephone survey is considered first in each section, followed by case study data, which enables a more detailed and in-depth analysis of some of the issues to take place.

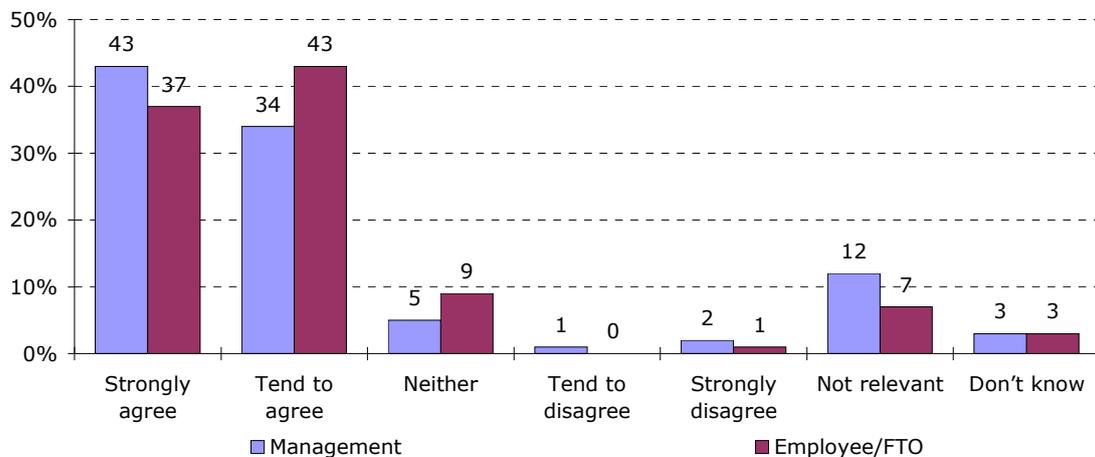
The telephone survey asked respondents a number of questions relating to the outcomes and impacts of the projects. There were a range of perceived impacts, including the following:

- helping participants to better understand one another
- building trust
- helping the parties to find solutions to specific problems
- improving communication, consultation and negotiation procedures
- generally improving the working relationships between the parties
- increasing the perception of fairness at work
- raising employee morale.

Helping people to understand other points of view

Over the whole telephone survey sample, views were generally positive on whether the project had helped the participants to understand the other party's stance better. Around four-fifths of management and employee representatives either strongly agreed or tended to agree that the Acas Workplace Project had helped participants to understand the others' point of view better. Only a small minority of employee representatives and management representatives disagreed that the project had helped improve employment relations in this way.

Figure 4.11: Whether the project had helped participants to better understand each others' points of view, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

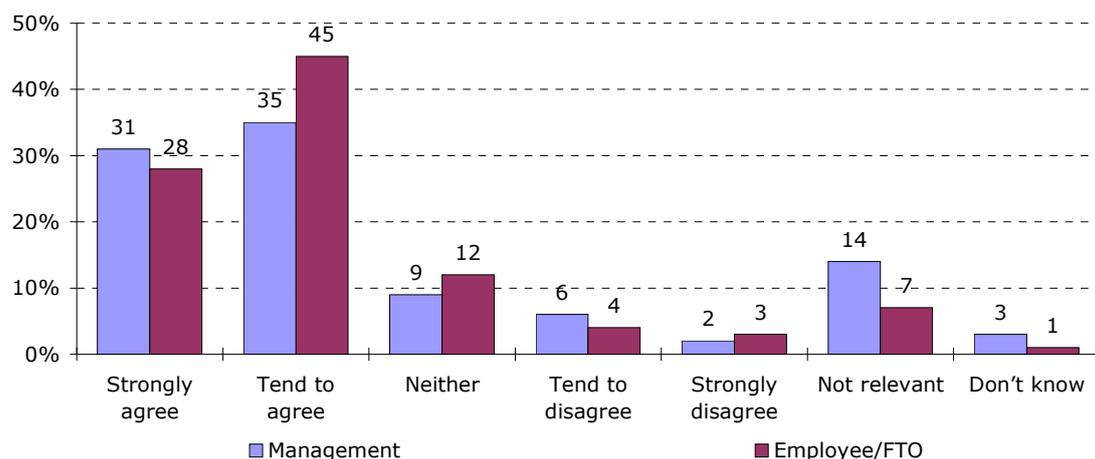


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Views on whether the project had helped the parties to develop new ways of working together were also positive, with two-thirds of management representatives and almost three-quarters of employee representatives agreeing or strongly agreeing that this had taken place.

Figure 4.12: Whether the project had provided participants with new ways of working together, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

From the case study data, it is clear that the projects helped organisations to find new ways of working together, and, in some cases, to understand the other

party's point of view. The clearest example of this is at the engineering and manufacturing organisation, where the project helped the trade union and HR representatives to work together in partnership, rather than in opposition, to understand each other better, and to build levels of trust which were absent before the project.

NHS Foundation Trust, which wanted to put into place a new shift system, had a difficult starting point in that the situation was complex and delicate, and positions had become relatively entrenched. Nevertheless, a compromise was reached which, although it was acknowledged was not perfect, at least provided a working solution and bridged the differences between the parties, which had looked irreconcilable at the outset. The view from managers in this organisation was that partnership working had improved, which was seen as a genuine employment relations benefit.

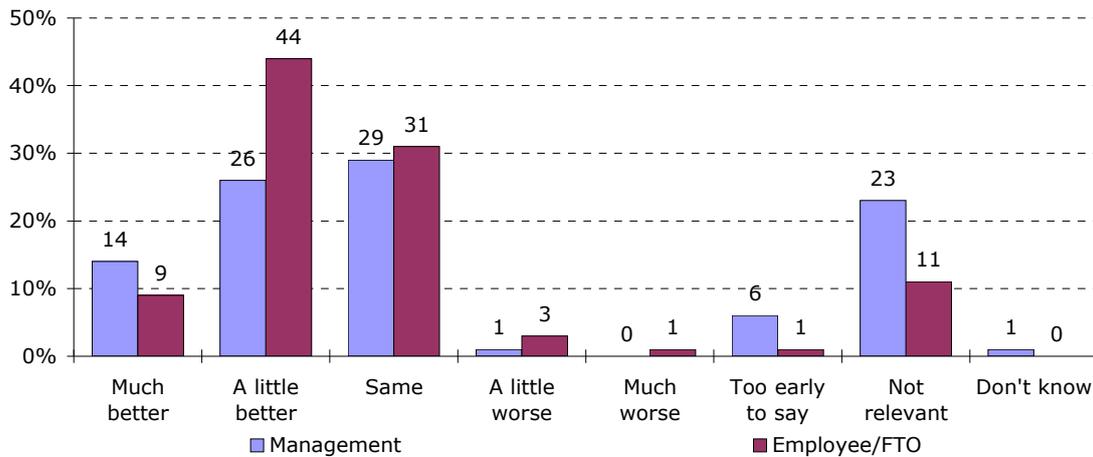
Building trust

Beaumont et al. (2005) discuss the issue of building trust within joint consultation processes. One of the issues that this research sought to explore was the extent to which employer and employee representatives were able to build trust in a context of joint working.

Both management and employee representatives in the telephone survey were positive about the impact that the Workplace Project had had on the levels of trust between management and employee representatives. Two-fifths of management representatives and just over half of employee representatives said that trust had become either much or a little better following the project. Given the sensitive nature of many of the projects, increasing trust in a significant number of organisations can therefore be seen as a very positive outcome of the Workplace Project.

Around one-third of representatives thought that levels of trust had stayed the same. A very small minority of both management and employee representatives said that they felt that it was too early to say, whereas almost a quarter of management representatives and just over 1 in 10 of employee representatives felt that this was not relevant.

Figure 4.13: The impact the project had on the levels of trust between management and employee representatives, by respondent type.

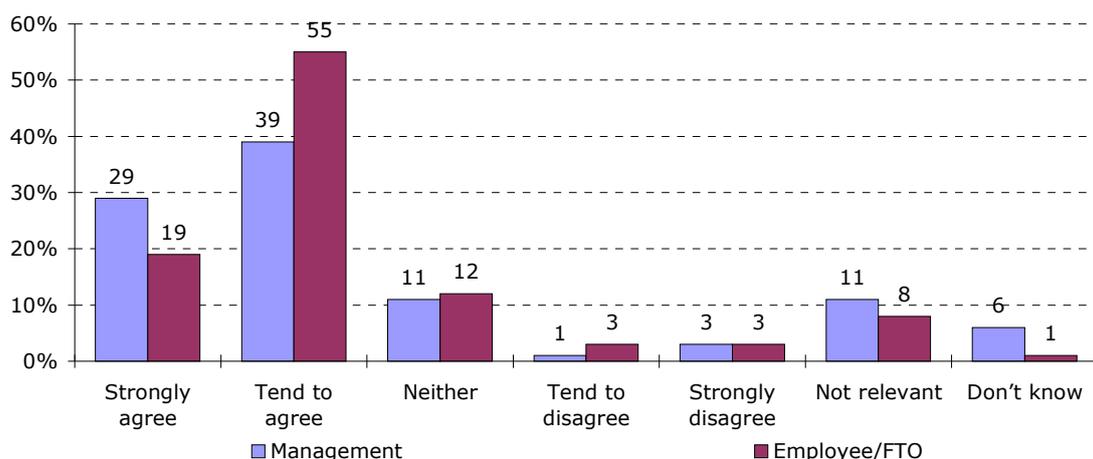


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

More management representatives than employee representatives 'strongly agreed' that the Workplace Project had helped to develop trust between the participants. If the responses of 'strongly agree' and 'tend to agree' are aggregated, just over two-thirds of management and almost three-quarters of employee representatives thought the process had built trust. Given that around a further ten per cent in both groups stated that building trust was not a relevant objective, Workplace Projects appear very successful to both parties in this respect.

Figure 4.14: Whether the project had helped to build trust, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

The case study research supported survey evidence on the positive impact that projects can have on trust between the parties. The most striking example of this was at the engineering and manufacturing organisation, where the aim of the project was to improve partnership working between union and HR representatives, and one of the central elements of the project was building levels of trust between the parties. At the outset of the project, both sides felt that there was no trust between them at all.

"No, [trust] didn't exist, because of the way we'd been organised and the trust was set in one individual at a fairly high level. Once we moved that, in terms of the trade union trusting the business, it fell away."

Head of HR, engineering and manufacturing organisation

"What about trust, do you think there was much trust before?"

"No. I think we get involved now at an early stage where we didn't [before], we always used to be reacting to something, the company did something, we'd react."

Manuals convenor, engineering and manufacturing organisation

After the project had been implemented, both sides felt that trust had been improved, largely through being able to get to know each other in a non-conflictual situation and now feeling that they could trust each other enough to work together constructively.

"For me, I know who I can go to and trust and I'd hope they [trade union representatives] feel the same about myself. I go to them if I need help ... sometimes it's good to get the other side before you go into a situation. I think there is more trust there."

Focus group participant (HR member), engineering and manufacturing organisation

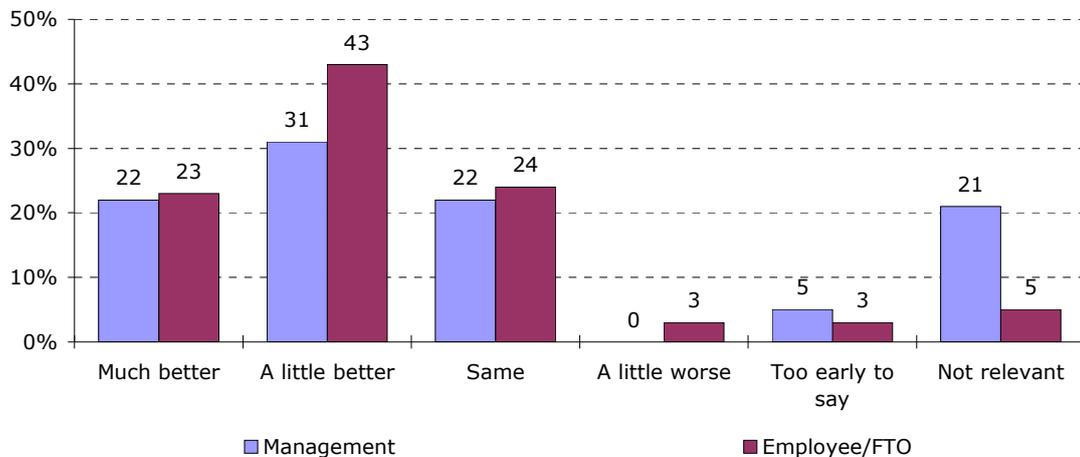
Similarly, at the NHS Foundation Trust that put into place a new shift system, management and employee representatives felt that they had travelled a particularly long way in terms of developing mutual trust and positive working relationships between unions and management, although the relationship between the staff and the union appeared to remain difficult on occasion. Managers felt that the working groups that were facilitated by Acas as part of the project had been instrumental in forging trust and acting as a bonding exercise, which was a virtually unrecognisable situation from where the parties had been at the outset of the project.

"I think the working group was very successful, I think the relationships that have developed, the trust that developed within that group was the best thing about that and being able to discuss openly and having total confidence and the confidentiality between the group, that was something that was established very early on and that was something that was maintained throughout the whole of the period because there were things said in those meetings, sometimes you had to say things to explore wider issues and that group was very secure."

Improvements in communication

Just over half of management representatives and two-thirds of employee representatives from the telephone survey thought that communication had improved to a greater or lesser extent after the workplace project. Over one-fifth in each group thought that there had been no change in the quality of communication between management and employees' representatives, with only a very small minority of employee representatives stating that communication had got a little worse. Interestingly, over two-fifths of management representatives thought that improvements in communication were not relevant to the Acas project, compared with only five per cent of employee representatives. This may indicate a slightly different focus and orientation of objectives in undertaking the Acas project between the two groups and/or differences in perceptions of the quality of existing communication. It is common to find that employee perceptions of communication are worse than management – in general, if the results of attitude surveys are segmented according to grade, managers tend to have a better opinion of the quality and timeliness of communications than front-line staff.

Figure 4.15: Whether communication between management and employee representatives was felt to have improved, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

Improvements in communication were cited as project outcomes in all four case study organisations (this was also one of the concrete targets of the employee view gathering project at the equipment manufacturing organisation). For example, after the stress audit at the further education college, managers believed that there had been improvements in communications, although more work was required.

“Obviously the positive side of it is people can see we’ve done certain things and I think we do need to do more in terms of communication.”

Head of HR, further education college

Improving communication was a stated objective of the project at the equipment manufacturing organisation to gather employee views, and indeed it led to a significant improvement in the communication channels and practices in this organisation. At the further education college, which carried out the stress audit, management and employees felt that communication had been improved as a result of the workplace project, because employees had had a chance to air their concerns and management had listened to their views. At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, improvements in communication between HR and trade union representatives were seen as one of the central outcomes of improving the relationship between the two parties.

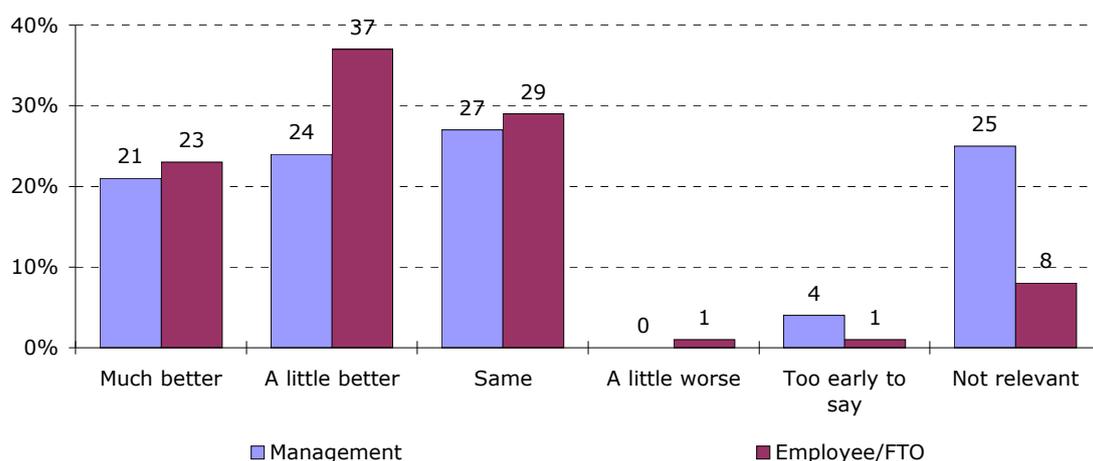
“I think we’ve improved our outcomes in terms of how we work with the trade unions in those conflict situations hugely. For me, the relationships that we’ve built just makes that so much easier and the guys automatically pick up the ‘phone now and say, ‘we’ve had this happen’. The trade unions normally tell us what their stance will be on it, so we know what we’re going into and can manage it between us.”

Head of HR, engineering and manufacturing organisation

Improvements in consultation

From the telephone survey data, there was a more positive interpretation of improvements in consultation processes from employee representatives than from management representatives. In total, three-fifths of employee representatives stated that consultation had improved to some extent compared with under half of management representatives. A similar proportion in both groups thought that there had been no change in the quality of consultation processes. Following a similar pattern to interpretations of improvement in communication following the Acas Workplace Project, a quarter of management representatives believed that this was not relevant compared with just eight per cent of employee representatives. These differences are likely to reflect contrasting perceptions of the extent and quality of existing consultation processes; it is common in surveys of managers and employees to find that managers have higher opinions of consultation processes, compared to the opinions of employees. This could result in managers believing that consultation processes are less significant to managing organisational change (and so less likely to cite this as an area of improvement), whereas employees place greater weight on the consultation process.

Figure 4.16: Whether participants felt consultation processes had improved, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

The only project out of the four case studies where improving consultation was expressly relevant was at the engineering and manufacturing organisation. The improvement in the relationship between HR and trade union representatives meant that all aspects of their joint working were improved, including consultation of the union by management. Trade unions cited this as a direct outcome of the project.

“They [the management] tend to take us more into their confidence over dealings with the MOD, they give us a little bit more information than they ever have done in the past.”

Staff convenor, engineering and manufacturing organisation

Although improving consultation was not an explicit aim of any of the other three case study organisations, improvements in consultation did occur as a result of general improvements in employment relations in some of the organisations. For example, at the equipment manufacturing organisation, the result of the employee view-gathering project was that managers had gained greater insight into employee concerns and employees felt that they had had a chance to air their views.

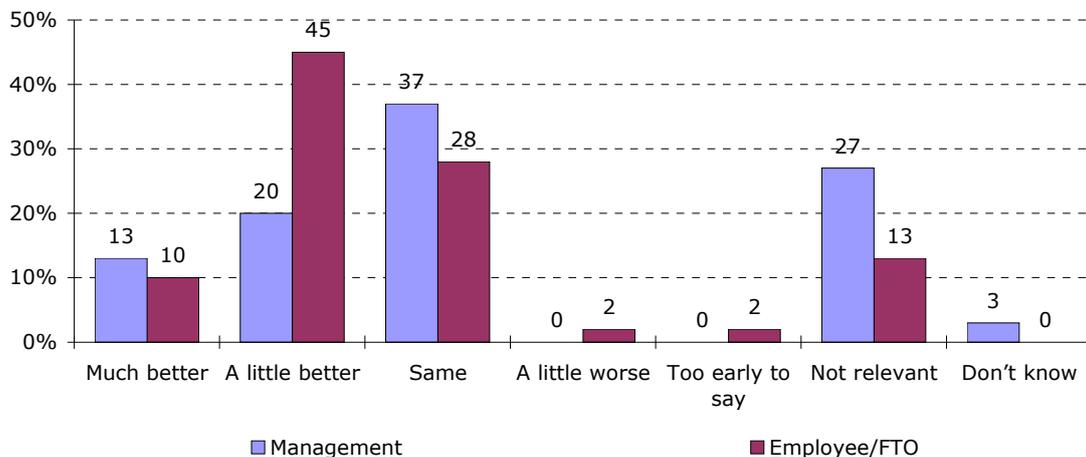
Improvements in negotiation procedures

Employee representatives in the overall survey sample were more likely than managers to have believed that negotiation procedures had improved at least a little as a result of the work with Acas. Management representatives were more likely to regard improvements in negotiation procedures as irrelevant to the Acas Workplace Project. As with consultation processes, employee representatives seemed more likely than management representatives to consider the negotiation procedures involved in the Acas project as important and managers may have different perceptions, compared to those of employees, about the quality of pre-existing arrangements.

This data indicates a lack of shared understanding of the state of workplace relations between management and employee representatives prior to the projects and the role of Acas in bringing the parties closer together.

Looking at the matched sample of cases, the data supports these differences of views between employee and management representatives. Whilst almost half of employee representatives (45 per cent) thought that negotiation processes had got a little better, with a further ten per cent stating they had got much better, little more than one-third of management representatives agreed that there was any improvement. More than a quarter of management representatives thought that the negotiation aspect of employee relations was not relevant to the Acas project.

Figure 4.17: Was it felt that negotiation procedures had improved, by respondent type. (Sub sample: matched sample only.)



N=management 60, employee/FTO 60. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Case studies

As with consultation, improvements in negotiation had been seen at the engineering and manufacturing organisation as a result of the overall improvement in the relationship between trade union and HR representatives. Here, there was more a sense, from both sides, that HR and union

representatives were sitting down together and dealing with issues jointly, rather than trade unions reacting to HR announcements or decisions.

The engineering and manufacturing organisation case study was unlike the other three that are documented in this report, in that the project focused explicitly on improving the relationship between HR and trade union representatives. Through a series of three joint workshops, facilitated by Acas, HR and trade union representatives spent time together in a non-conflictual situation, worked together on problem-solving activities, and could get to know each other and understand each other's roles and responsibilities in an informal setting. After the project, representatives from both sides felt that the relationship with the other party had been much improved.

"I think in the main the objectives it set out to do, it achieved because we certainly got better responses from HR, things definitely improved after that, so with regards to objectives I think they were achieved, although I think HR got more out of it than our people did."

Manuals convenor, engineering and manufacturing organisation

"[Now], if a line manager had an issue ... I would go jointly with the TU rep to sort it out. It wouldn't be that I went to support the manager and the TU rep went to support the employee, we were going together and heading it off. We're working more jointly on things. We're heading problems off before they become a problem. [One TU representative would] come to me and say 'just a warning in your ear, this might be happening' and we can start heading them off before they become a problem. That's a massive big deal for the company. Things are moving forward positively."

Focus group participant (HR function member), engineering and manufacturing organisation

The other three case study projects had focused on specific issues and the majority of the outcomes were related to these issues. Nevertheless, in these three case studies, there were also some broader impacts on the relationship between management and employee representatives. On the whole, relationships had improved since the project had taken place. In most cases, the relationships had not been described as bad at the outset, but they had invariably improved as a result of the parties having worked together on the project, and having gained a greater understanding of each other. In one case, at the NHS Foundation Trust that put into place the new shift system, some managers felt that they had really benefited from working with trade union representatives, as they had not worked closely with them in the past. Here, also, the parties had managed not to be derailed by the impact of external events, in the form of national-level negotiations that would affect the workplace-level negotiations in which the parties were engaged. This issue of not letting external events derail the project was identified as an important principle in effective joint working (Beaumont et al., 2005).

"I felt I had good relationships anyway with the people involved particularly the union side, but I think that's actually strengthened ... I found that I was very well supported by one of the union representatives and I also tried to return that because it actually worked out that usually when they were feeling very low that I was in a position to say just how

much we'd got and they did exactly the same for me, so even though I felt we had a very good working relationship I think it strengthened."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

One manager at this organisation said that the experience was personally useful in that it gave him the opportunity to work constructively with trade unions, something that he had not done previously.

"I'd never actually worked closely with union officials for a period of time over a project like that, that's something I'd never actually come across before in my particular working life. I approached it with some reservation at the beginning, had this vision that it's going to be conflict ... [but] it was really good. I learnt a lot from it personally, about making sure communications [are] clear, making sure that the message you think you've give somebody is the message that they've received and understanding more about why people behave in the way that they do when there's such major change."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

In the case of the employee view-gathering exercise at the equipment manufacturing organisation, the project was successful in that it identified a range of issues for managers to address. Both project phases, according to the HR Director, showed a lack of communication and training in the organisation and the project thus allowed managers to identify and prioritise these core problems.

"I think the key outcomes were identifying for the company what the views of the employees were and although there were perhaps no surprises in that, it enabled them to have something in print they could work with and drive forward any improvements or changes."

Acas adviser, equipment manufacturing organisation

After the stress audit project at the further education college, the health and safety manager believed that the project had helped trade unions to be more visible and active in the workplace, which was a positive development.

"I think that's been very very successful and it's just allowed the unions more breathing space and the attitude that the unions were very... there was enormous prejudice against them and that's gone and that's a huge step."

Health and safety manager, further education college

A number of HR-related impacts from the case studies were also evident. For example, the stress audit project at the further education college resulted in stress training for staff being 'revitalised' in that there was renewed focus on stress training and the college also ran a new programme for management staff on how to avoid bullying.

"[The bullying training] came out of [the project]. It was just to make managers aware of bullying, harassment. What it is, how their behaviour

could come across as bullying or harassment or intimidation and the way they say things, the way they ask questions."

Human resources officer, further education college

At the NHS Foundation Trust, the main outcome of the project was agreement on putting into place a shift system that allowed the department to offer a round-the-clock service. Staff continued to work a 37.5-hour week, but on a rota basis. However, they had the choice to opt out of shift working: they would only be contracted as shift workers after they had completed two whole rotas, therefore giving them time to decide whether or not they liked the new system. Managers characterised the project as successful because it delivered this new shift system. However, the management representatives acknowledged that the new system was not perfect, in that staff were not happy with the high level of weekend commitment, but had at least been agreed between both parties, implemented, and enabled the department to function on a 24-hour basis.

Employee focus group participants in this case study also noted that there was a perceived negative impact of the new shift system on work-life balance, particularly for those with young children.

"Anti-social hours has increased greatly. I feel I can't do it. It's not family friendly. People do it but the majority of people aren't happy with it but they've got to do it because they can't afford to lose the money. They've been forced into it. It suits some people but not many."

Focus group participant, NHS Foundation Trust

Overall, management representatives were particularly pleased that a new variation of the system had finally been implemented, given that previous attempts had failed: *"this was a major change it was something that had been tried several times before"*.

In the case of the equipment manufacturing organisation, the main outcomes of the project were improvements to training and improvements in communication in the organisation, which were the issues that had been highlighted by the employees as deficient. For example, evidence from the focus groups that had been carried out allowed the HR Director to address the mismatch between company data on training spend/time against perceptions of training received and to implement specific programmes and standards. In the case of communication, employees interviewed felt that there had been improvements since the project had taken place.

"It was really poor [before the project took place]. There were no monthly meetings. It didn't seem as though the appropriate information was cascading down. Yes, it's improved recently."

"They did improve communication... Grapevine came out and there's the Paragraph monthly bulletins."

4.6.3 Working relationships

Looking now at working relationships between management and the workforce as a whole (rather than just their representatives), telephone survey respondents

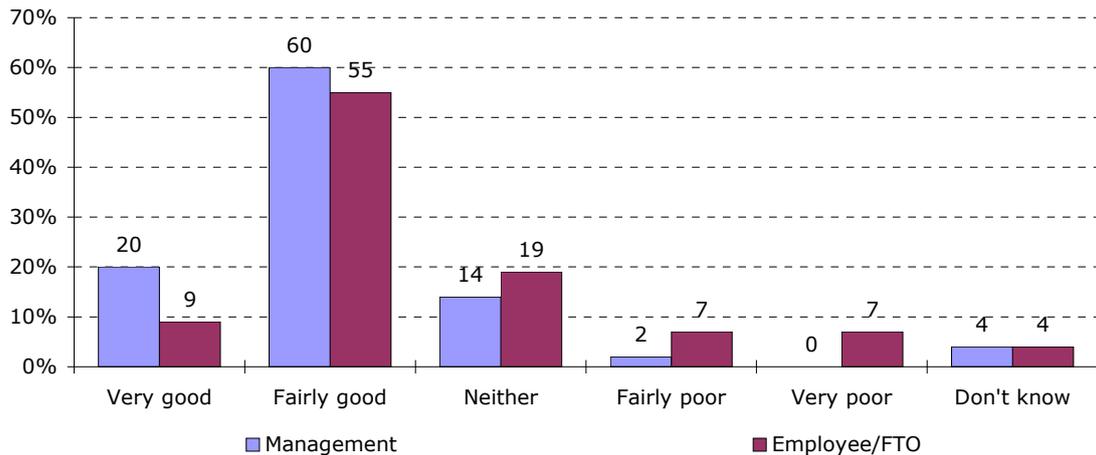
were asked about the post-project state of management-employee relationships in general and how if at all these had changed following the Workplace Project. The survey also explored specific aspects of that relationship, the state of day-to-day working relationships between management and employees; fair treatment and employee morale. As with relations between management and employee representatives the picture is that where there was an impact it tended to be positive. However, respondents – particularly on the management side – were more likely to see these areas as not relevant to the Acas intervention.

General relations between management and employees

Where projects had had an impact on the general relations between management and the workforce as a whole, this was usually seen to have been positive. However, in most cases there had been no change.

Although both parties to the employment relationship were fairly positive about the state of current management-employee relationships at the time of interview, management representatives were slightly more positive. One-fifth of management representatives described the current relationship as very good, with a further three-fifths describing this relationship as fairly good. This compares with only nine per cent of employee representatives who described the relationship as very good and just over half who describe it as fairly good. Employee representatives were more likely to describe the relationship in negative terms, with 14 per cent indicating the current relationship was 'fairly' or 'very poor' compared to only two per cent of management representatives. It is perhaps unsurprising that management representatives are less likely to describe the relationship with employees negatively, but it may reflect a lack of awareness of outstanding issues that were not addressed through the Acas project. A possible explanation for this is that negative employee representative perceptions of the employment relationship may reflect circumstances where issues have been resolved that were of concern to managers rather than employees, or where changes have been perceived to have adversely affected previous practices that were advantageous to employees.

Figure 4.18: Current relationship between management and employees, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



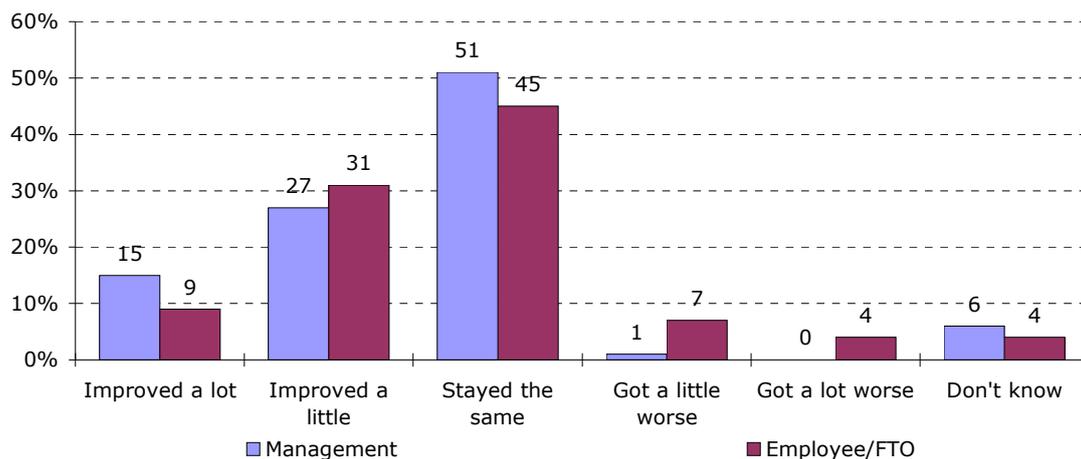
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

Around two-fifths of management and employee representatives claimed that there had been improvements in the employment relationship following the Acas Workplace Project. A minority of employee representatives thought the relationship had deteriorated since the Acas project, with a majority or around half in both groups believing the relationship was unchanged (Figure 4.19).

Of those who stated that there had been some improvement in the relationship between management and employees since the time before the Acas project started (a total of 45 management representatives and 30 employee representatives), ten per cent of employee representatives fully attributed this to the Acas project. A further 37 per cent stated the project was to a large extent responsible for the improvement in the relationship, while over half (54 per cent) stated that it was to some extent responsible. Management representatives were slightly less positive - four per cent fully attributed the improvement to the Acas project, 20 per cent attributing it to a large extent to the project, and a further 69 per cent (attributed the improvement to Acas to some extent, while seven per cent did not see the project as being relevant to the improvement).

Figure 4.19: Whether there was felt to have been a change in the employment relationship since the time before the Acas project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



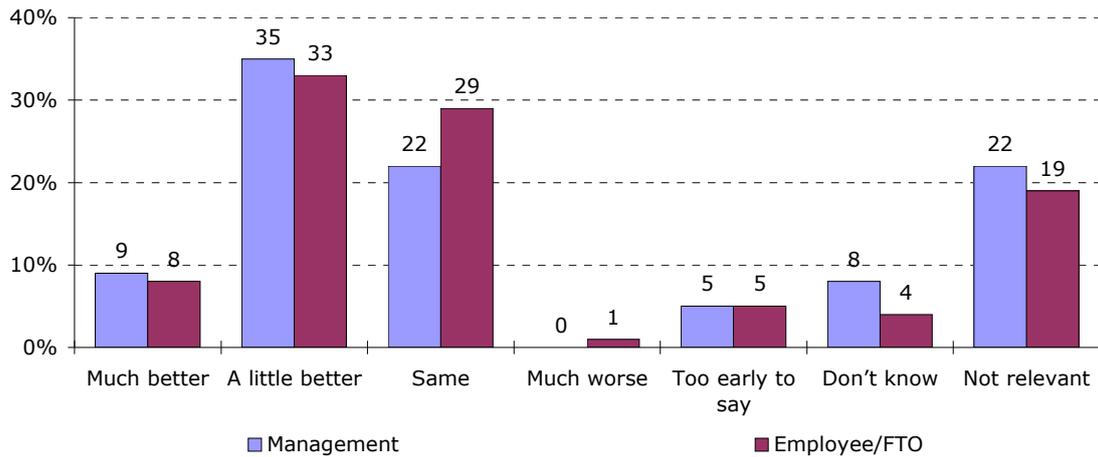
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Day to day working relations

From the telephone survey data, there was a degree of consistency between the responses of management and employee representatives in the extent to which they believed there had been improvements in *their day-to-day working relationships*. Around one-third in both groups thought that the quality of the relationship between management and employees had got a little better, with nearly ten per cent of each group stating this aspect of employee relations was much better. Five per cent in each group thought it was too early to say whether this had been an outcome of the Acas project, with just over two-fifths of management representatives and almost three-fifths of employee representatives indicating there had been no change.

Figure 4.20: Were day-to-day working relationships between management and employees felt to have improved, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



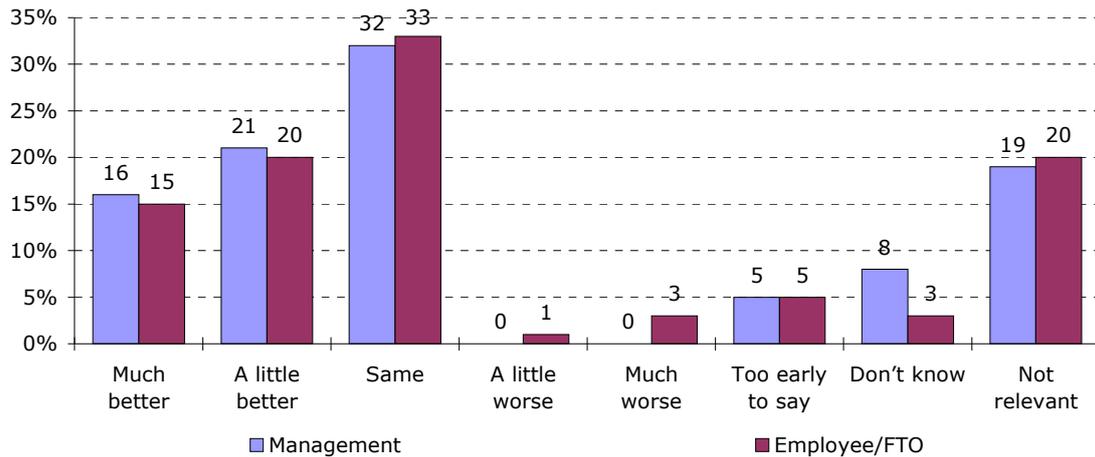
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Fairness at work

A very similar pattern of responses was found between management and employee representatives in the telephone survey when asked about changes in the fairness in treatment of employees. In total, over one-third of management and employee representatives thought that fairness in treatment had improved to some extent following the Workplace Project. Around one-third in both groups reported no change, with five per cent stating it was too early to give an indication of whether this was a relevant outcome. Around one-fifth in both groups did not consider fairness in employee treatment as a relevant outcome of the Acas project.

Figure 4.21: Whether the project made any change to fairness in the treatment of employees, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



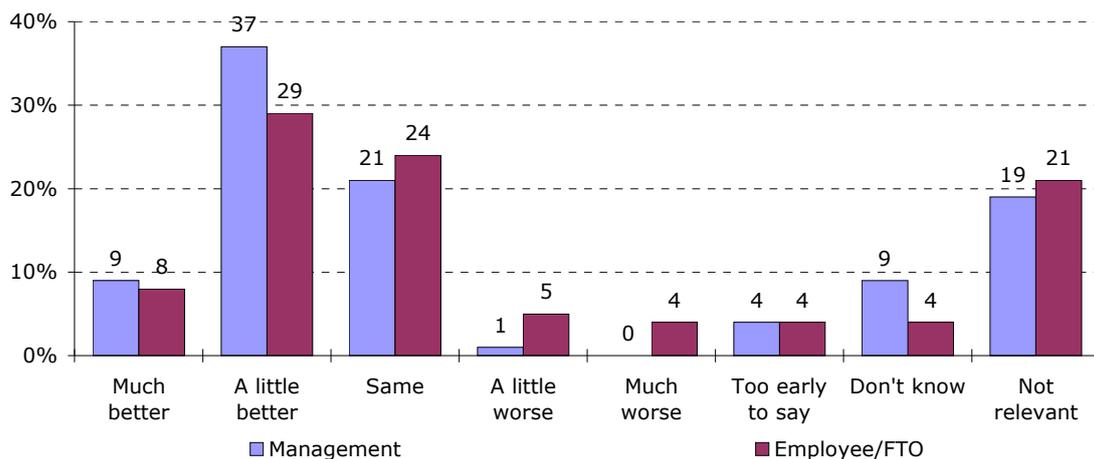
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Raising employee morale

Management and employee representatives from the telephone survey had fairly similar perceptions of the degree to which the Acas project had raised employee morale, with management representatives perhaps unsurprisingly being slightly more positive about the degree to which this occurred (Figure 4.22). In total, almost half of management representatives, compared with just over one-third of employee representatives, thought that employee morale had improved to some extent. Over two-fifths from both groups thought it was unchanged and around one-fifth did not consider this a relevant outcome of the Acas Workplace Project. Less encouragingly, nearly ten per cent of employee representatives thought that employee morale had deteriorated to some extent following the Acas project. Such an outcome might be temporary as, in tackling employment relations issues, it is not uncommon to encounter some (initial) disappointment or grievances. However, the nature of the evaluation's methodology means it is not possible to assess this in this report. Nevertheless, some insights into employee expectations at the outset of projects and how they are on occasion not met can be gained from the case studies, set out below.

Figure 4.22: Whether the project was felt to have raised employee morale, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

From the case study data, it is difficult to say with any degree of accuracy whether employee morale increased overall, as there were often conflicting views from the employee focus groups carried out in the case study organisations. On the one hand, the projects had left employees with a sense that managers had listened to them, particularly in the case of the stress audit at the further education college and the employee view gathering project at the equipment manufacturing organisation.

“Up ‘till now an awful lot of this was brushed under the carpet and ignored, the causes of stress have been ignored. At least the Acas project has brought that out into the open - we do have stresses here, we do have causes of stress.”

Focus group participant, further education college

These projects had given employees a chance to air their views to an external party and this had increased morale overall. At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, there was a perception from both sides that morale among staff had improved, although it was thought that this might be linked to the fact that the organisation was recruiting, rather than being specifically due to the improvement in the relationship between HR and union representatives.

The exception was the NHS Foundation Trust that put into place a new shift system: here, the negotiations were carried out between management and trade union representatives behind closed doors and employees felt excluded. Trade union representatives were also unhappy with this arrangement. As the final outcome was a compromise that did not suit all staff, there was inevitably some decline in staff morale in this organisation.

“Morale is quite low, especially for the people who can’t work the system. They’ve had a huge cut in money[due to not being able to work the new working hours system] and they’re probably worried about what’s going to happen in the next few months.”

Staff focus group participant, NHS Foundation Trust

Another issue affecting the morale of the workforce was a perception that momentum had been lost since the end of Acas's involvement in the project. This was particularly stark in the case of the stress audit at the further education college. Employees felt that the project had stalled and that management was not tackling the more difficult issues uncovered by the audit.

However, given the long-term nature of stress management projects, it is maybe inevitable that high staff expectations in terms of quick action are difficult to meet.

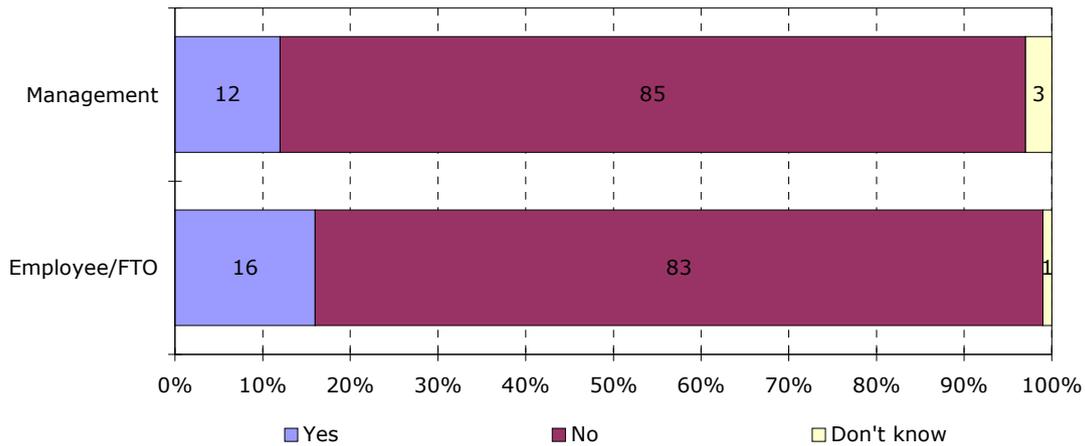
4.6.4 Perceived negative impacts and outcomes of Workplace Projects

The overwhelming view, from both the telephone survey and the case studies, was that the impacts and outcomes of the Workplace Projects were positive. Nevertheless, telephone survey and case study data show that on occasion some negative impacts were perceived. However, this was often associated with raised employee expectations at the project outset, or frustration that the implementation of a project was not moving as quickly as employees had hoped, due to its complex nature, or other difficulties relating to implementation.

Telephone survey

Although the overwhelming picture is of positive outcomes, some respondent did cite negative impacts which were associated with the Workplace Project. In total, 16 per cent of employee representatives and 12 per cent of management representatives reported that there had been some kind of negative impact, including factors such as an increase in workload as a result of dealing with a particular problem, frustration that projects had not provided a complete answer to the problem, failure to apply policies and non-implementation of agreed changes. These may reflect difficulties encountered in the experience of tackling a thorny employment relations problem, high expectations and difficulty in implementing change.

Figure 4.23: Negative impacts, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Case studies

The case study data highlighted the complicated nature of the projects in all four cases, not only in terms of the technical complexity of issues, but also the implications for organisational culture and employment relations. There were some perceived negative outcomes from the projects, largely connected with raised employee expectations and issues around maintaining momentum. The stress audit project at the further education college was a good example of this: stress management is a long-term and complex challenge, but here, staff expectations were raised by the project and there was some frustration among staff that the action plans were not being implemented as quickly as they would have liked. Some staff felt that, while the project itself had a great deal of momentum for its duration, that momentum had been lost once Acas involvement ended.

"I do think all the while [the Acas adviser] was here he was driving it forward and since he's left it's tended to wallow. Since he's left basically what's happened is the so called quick fixes which never get fixed anyway, anything else is just long-term. Plenty of things started but never finished."

Focus group participant, further education college

There were a range of negative views from staff after the putting into place of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust. The new system did not suit all staff and was the result of a compromise agreed from a starting point of very different views. As a consequence, some staff felt that morale had subsequently decreased, particularly for those employees who did not wish to work the shifts in the new system, and would therefore lose overtime payments. They also felt that they had been presented with no choice but to agree to the new system and that it was having a negative impact on their work/life balance.

"I am doing it and it does appear to be increased unsocial hours, especially at weekends. There are benefits, the night starts later and the night is

shorter and we do get days off in the week to compensate for the weekend work. There are pluses and minuses to it ... it means I'm not at home for a lot of weekends. This month, November, I worked four weekends out of five and I have a family. It does impact on my home life but I can't afford to come off it so I'm having to work it whichever way. Whichever shift they throw at me. It depends what your home life is like. Whether you can work the shift around it and what your partner does, whether they can pick up the childcare."

Staff focus group participant, NHS Foundation Trust

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, there were some frustrations about the workshops used in the project, with the participants feeling that the workshops had not been the best use of their time and that the third and final workshop in particular had run out of steam. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that in terms of achieving the objective of bringing HR and trade union representatives closer together, the project was characterised by both sides as successful.

4.7 Action taken after the project

This section examines the main actions that were taken after the Workplace Project had ended, focusing on changes to policies, procedures and practices. Plans developed with support from Acas play a significant role in helping organisations to get their policies and procedures right, as part of its role as ensuring good employment relations at the workplace and preventing conflicts from escalating. Many of Acas's Workplace Projects involve these themes.

Telephone survey

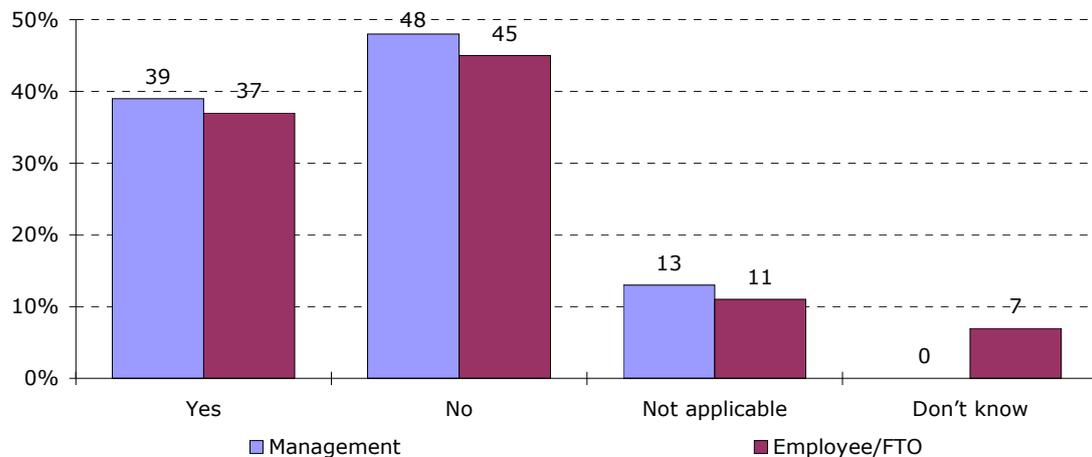
The telephone survey asked respondents whether policies, practices and procedures had been reviewed, revised or introduced as a result of the project. Overall, 81 per cent of managers and 73 per cent of employee representatives said that policies, procedures or practices had been revised, reviewed or introduced as a result of the workplace project. The following section examines this in more detail.

4.7.1 Introduction and review of policies and procedures

Introducing new policies and procedures

Around two-fifths of management and employee representatives involved in the Workplace Project said that their organisation had addressed the issue central to the project through the *introduction* of new policies and procedures. Just over ten per cent in each group stated this was not relevant to the issue.

Figure 4.24: Whether policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in the Acas project had been introduced, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



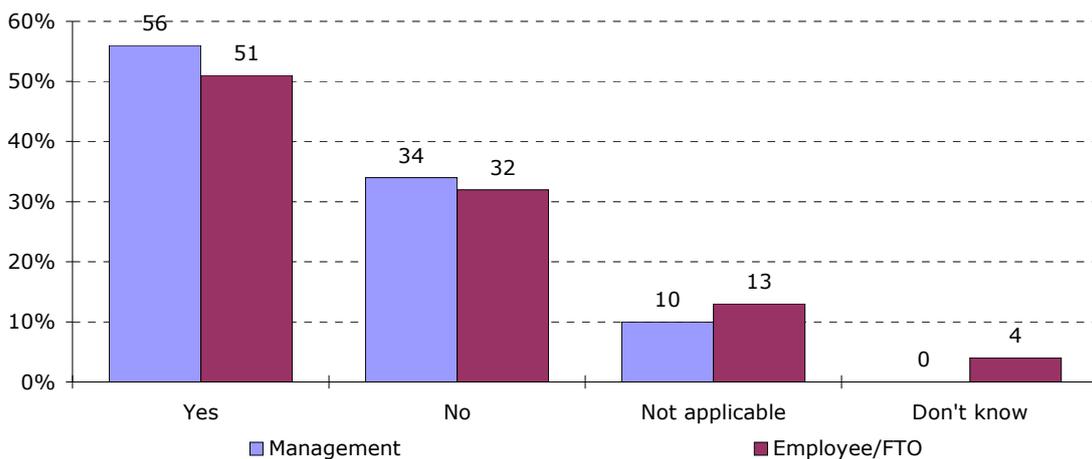
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Reviewing policies and procedures

Just over half of management and employee representatives stated that there had been a *review* of policies and procedures relating to issues addressed in the Acas project (as opposed to the introduction of new policies).

Figure 4.25: Whether there had been a review of policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in the Acas project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



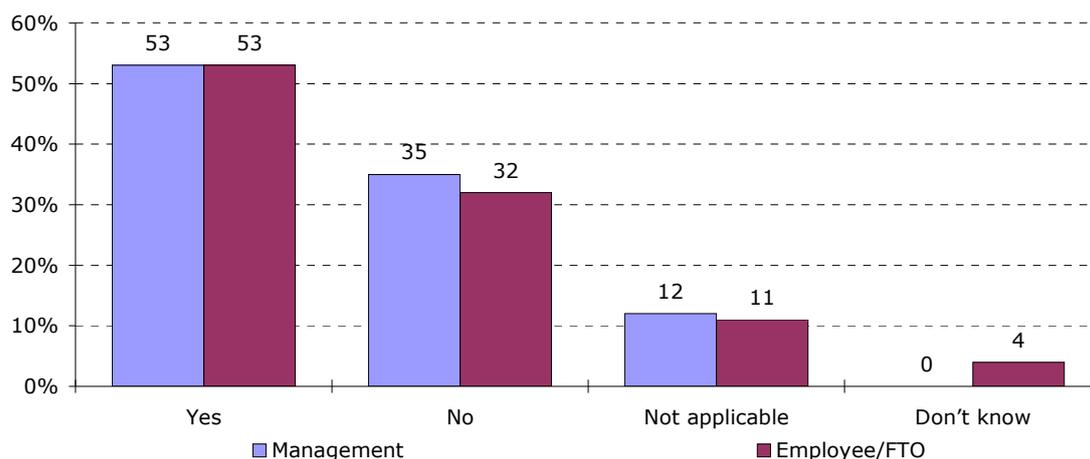
N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Revising policies and procedures

Around half of both management and employee representatives indicated that they had *revised policies and procedures* relating to the issue addressed in the Acas project, suggesting that when the process of reviewing had taken place, in the majority of cases this had led directly to the revision of policies.

Figure 4.26: Whether there had been any revision of policies and procedures relating to the issue addressed in the Acas project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

4.7.2 Reviewing and revising practice

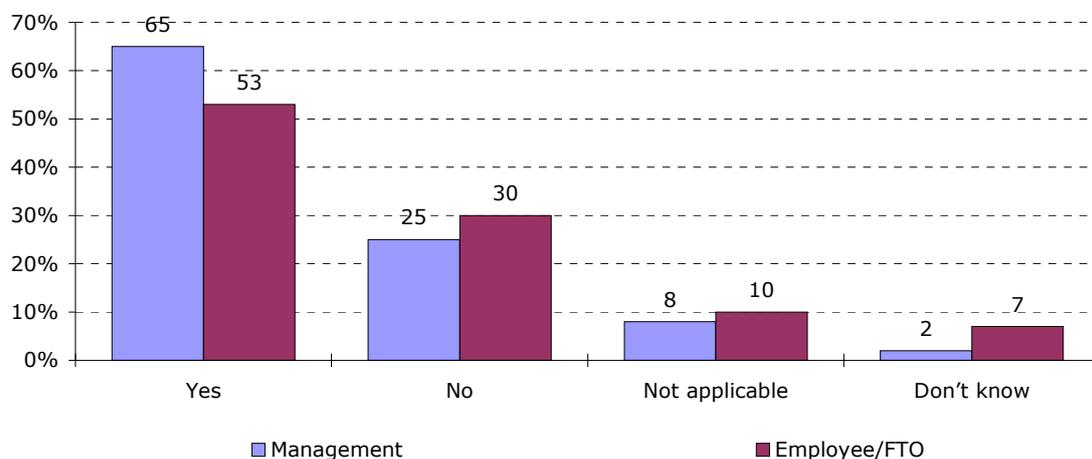
Reviewing practice

When asked whether any area of *practice* related to the issue addressed in the Workplace Project had been *reviewed*, almost two-thirds of management representatives and just under half of employee representatives indicated that it had. There are at least two explanations for the difference in views. It is possible that either employee representatives are unaware of changes in management practices, especially if these relate to decision-making processes in which employees are not involved. Equally, employee representatives may be more aware of inconsistency in management practice across the organisation.

The matched sample results mirrored the results of the overall sample, with around two-thirds (65 per cent) of management representatives stated that an area of practice relating to the issue identified within the Workplace Project had been reviewed, compared with around half (53 per cent) of employee representatives. A matched case analysis of the 60 projects for which this was possible revealed that in 37 per cent of those projects (or 22 of the 60 projects), there was some discrepancy of opinion between management and employee representatives about whether review of an area of practice relating to the issue addressed in the Acas project had taken place. In particular, the main focus of the projects in which this discrepancy occurred were consultation (five projects),

stress (five projects), pay/grading arrangements/job evaluations (four projects), and reviewing and/or improving relations between management and employees generally (three projects).

Figure 4.27: Review of an area of practice relating to issue addressed in Acas project, by type of contact. (Sub-sample: matched cases only.)



N=management 60, employee/FTO 60. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

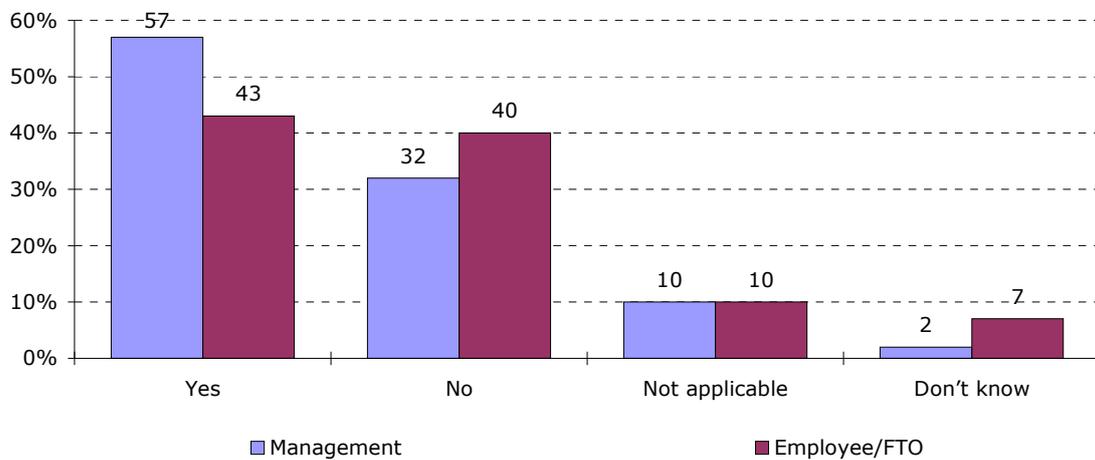
Revising practice relating to issues addressed in the project

Respondents were asked whether practices had been subsequently *revised* in the light of the Acas Workplace project. In the total sample, almost three-fifths of management representatives compared with two-fifths of employee representatives stated that an area of practice relating to the Acas project had been revised. A lower proportion of both groups stated that an area of practice had been reviewed, compared with the proportion stating that practice had been reviewed. This could be due to insufficient time elapsing since the project to implement changes fully or simply no need for any change in practice being identified. It is also possible that changes made by management may simply not yet have made an observable impact in the workplace that employee representatives could confirm.

In the matched sample, there was slightly less evidence that an area of practice related to the Acas project had subsequently been revised. There was again a discrepancy between management and employee representatives about whether an area of practice had been revised, with more employee representatives being unable to confirm it. A matched case analysis revealed that discrepancy of opinion between management and employee representatives was more pronounced in whether revision of an area of practice relating to the issue addressed in the Acas project had taken place, when compared with reviewing an area of practice. In 43 per cent of these (26 of the 60 matched cases) there was no consensus about whether this revision had taken place. The main focus of the project in which this discrepancy occurred appeared similar to where this discrepancy had previously been observed in reviewing practices. In particular, consultation (six projects), stress (five projects), pay/grading arrangements/job evaluations (five projects),

and reviewing and/or improving relations between management and employees generally (four projects) were cited as the main focus of the projects where this discrepancy occurred.

Figure 4.28: Revision of an area of practice relating to issue addressed in Acas project, by type of contact. (Sub-sample: matched cases only.)



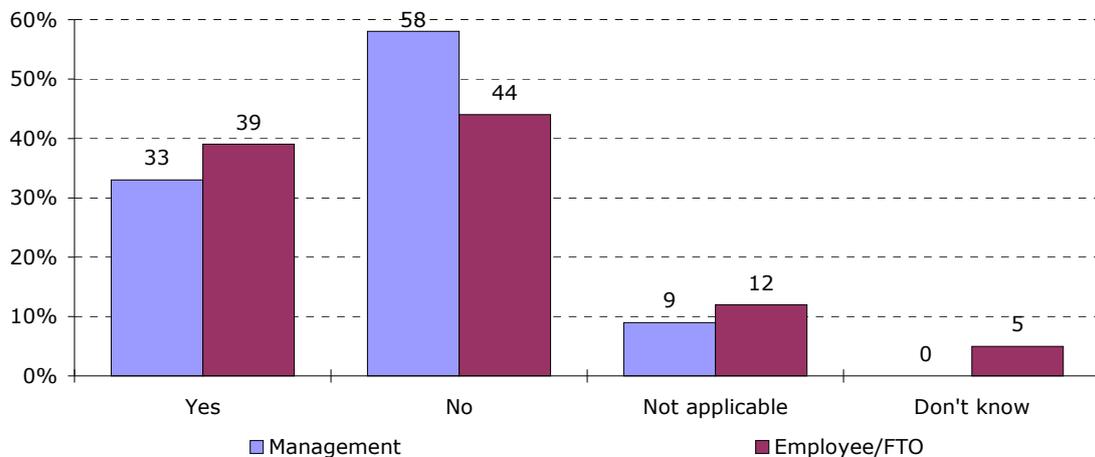
N=management 60, employee/FTO 60. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

4.7.3 Plans to revise or introduce new policies and procedures

Respondents were asked whether they *planned to introduce policies and procedures* that related to the issue addressed in the Acas Workplace Project. A similar proportion of management and employee representatives stated that they had such plans – around and just over one-third, respectively. This finding may support the earlier suggestion that it takes time for desired changes in workplace policies and procedures identified as a result of Workplace Projects to be implemented. This is perhaps unsurprising, as seeking Acas advice is likely to be an indication that the organisation saw the subject matter or problem as potentially either contentious and/or difficult to tackle alone and so perhaps too difficult to expect an immediate solution.

Figure 4.29: Whether there were plans in place to introduce policies and procedures relating to the issue addressed in Acas project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

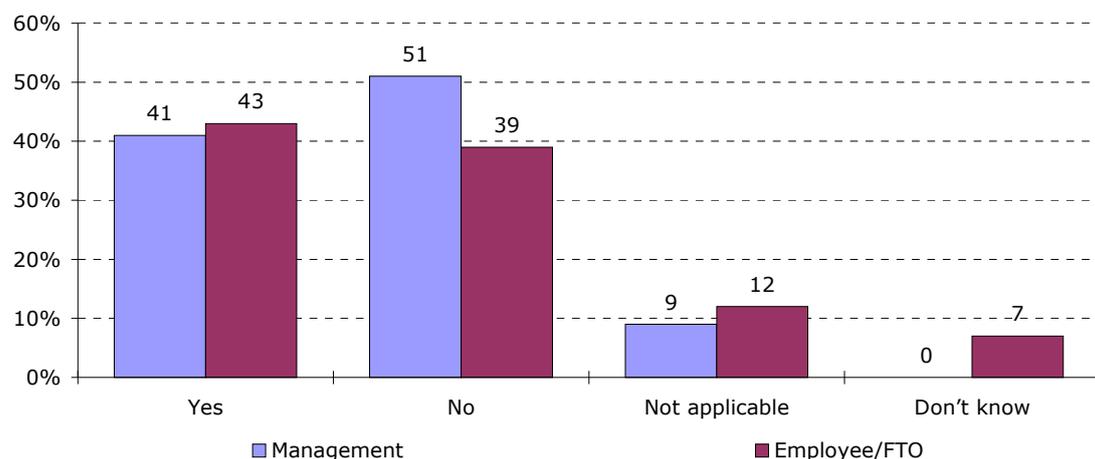


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

In addition, just over two-fifths of management and employee representatives stated that there were *plans* in place to *review or revise* policies and procedures addressed in the Acas project. Again, this suggests that there may be a time lapse between the end of the project and the implementation of change.

Figure 4.30: Were there plans in place to review or revise policies and procedures relating to the issue addressed in Acas project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

4.8 The journey travelled

If organisations are successful in resolving an employment relations problem, they must make a journey that travels through a range of stages. This echoes the issues for joint working as identified in Section 1.1 above. The main stages in the journey could be described as follows:

- Joint recognition that a specific problem exists, and that it cannot be resolved without help.
- A decision to seek external help, usually taken jointly.
- Joint agreement of objectives to resolve the issue.
- Involvement of all the parties in a joint problem-solving exercise. This includes allowing all parties to make their views known and listening to all parties in an objective setting.
- Achievement of a solution to the specific problem that is acceptable to all parties.
- Putting that solution into practice.
- Applying the learning from this exercise to other potential problems, to ensure that the underlying causes of the initial problem have been addressed. This stage, in which learning is embedded in the organisation, could include actions such as changes to policies, changes to practices, changes to procedures and the introduction of specific training.

Data from the case studies enables the journey of the organisations involved in particular Acas Projects to be charted, from the triggers for the particular project, through to the final outcomes. All four organisations felt that they had progressed significantly from start to finish, both in terms of the solutions they had found to their particular issues, and in terms of broader lessons learned and new ways of doing things, which enabled them to embed the learning from the project.

4.8.1 Joint recognition of the problem and the decision to seek external help

All of the case study organisations came to a joint recognition that a specific issue or problem existed and a decision was made to seek external help and advice. The organisations that had arguably come the furthest over the course of the project were the engineering and manufacturing organisation, which had transformed its partnership working, and the NHS Foundation Trust, which had put a new shift system into place. In both cases, there had been recognition of the problem, which in the case of the engineering and manufacturing organisation, meant that the relationship between the parties had ground to a halt, and which in the case of the NHS Foundation Trust was rooted in the relationships between the parties, and their opposing views on specific issues. External help was subsequently sought from Acas in both cases.

In the case of the equipment manufacturing organisation, the management team was new and so the impetus came from the HR function. Although the focus of the project was not a specific problem, managers recognised that a good relationship needed to be built with the workforce. The HR Director decided to seek external help as a result. The view-gathering exercise that was undertaken

was seen as a significant help to identifying issues that mattered to the workforce.

4.8.2 Agreement of joint objectives

Joint objectives were agreed in all the case studies, usually on a formal, written basis and with the input of the Acas adviser. The objectives usually did not change over the course of the project, although where the focus shifted, as in the case of the stress management project at the further education college, all parties were aware of the shift.

4.8.3 Joint problem-solving

In the case of the stress audit project at the further education college, the organisation had moved as far as recognising the problem, organising external help and involving all actors in trying to find a solution, here through the means of focus groups with staff and managers. Managers and employee representatives believed that the project itself was of great value as a knowledge-gathering exercise about the main work-related stressors encountered by staff, although there was acknowledgement that not all of the issues had been resolved. Nevertheless, they hoped that this would set out a firm basis for future action to tackle the issues uncovered.

In the case of the putting into place of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, a problem-solving process had taken place, involving employee representatives and management, although there was acknowledgement from all parties that staff had not been fully informed about the problem-solving process while it was taking place.

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, although the project was very much led by the HR function, which had triggered Acas involvement, planning meetings were held with Acas and trade union representatives as well as Acas and HR representatives, to ensure that both sides could voice their views about what they wanted from the project.

4.8.4 Achievement and implementation of a solution

The extent to which definitive solutions to issues and problems were found depended on the nature of the problem. In the case of the new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust, which was a very sensitive topic, a workable solution to the problem was found and had been implemented. Subsequently, management and employee representatives felt that they had travelled a long way in terms of developing mutual trust and positive working relationships between unions and management, although the relationship between the staff and the union appeared to remain difficult on occasion. Managers felt that the working groups, facilitated by Acas, had been instrumental in forging trust and acting as a bonding exercise, which was a virtually unrecognisable situation from the start of the project.

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the joint workshops, while criticised by some participants, achieved the objective of bringing the two parties together. Here, both sides felt that they had travelled a long way in terms of how

they saw the other party and their understanding of the kinds of pressures they were subject to at work.

4.8.5 Applying the learning

In most cases, it was possibly still too early to make any comprehensive assessment of the wider impact of the learning from the project. Nevertheless, all case study organisations spoke of the wider benefits of having engaged with their particular project.

The longer-term impacts of projects were particularly difficult to assess in the case of projects that required longer-term engagement. This was, for example, the case in the stress management project at the further education college, where it was recognised that successful stress management was a long-term goal and that the college was still at the beginning of the journey.

"We've run training sessions for managers to raise awareness of bullying and harassment. Some of the work we were already doing - obviously we've been able to link that to the stress audit and I think there's more open communication now in terms of stress so with the stress awareness sessions [the HR department] now runs, and stress management sessions, so there's those sides of it and there's the little niggly things have been sorted out as well. So just waiting for the bigger projects to come to fruition as well."

Head of HR, further education college

There was also a feeling that there were also complex and delicate issues at play, such as issues surrounding bullying, which would probably take a significant amount of time to unpick. However, there was optimism amongst those participating in the project that the project would achieve its goals in the future.

Overall, in this project, interviewees believed that the college had benefited from identifying and understanding the causes of stress for staff. Therefore, the knowledge base on which the college can take decisions has increased. However, it was an incomplete project in that it required a significant amount of further work to meet its objectives fully. Managers and staff acknowledged that the organisation had not yet been able to fully embed the learning from this project into its day-to-day practice, although the view from management was that this would come with time.

At the NHS Foundation Trust, managers described the process of implementing the new shift system as complex and difficult, involving overcoming hostility on the part of staff (although there had been admission on the part of managers and employee representatives that there were still negative feelings about this issue), and felt that they had learnt a great deal that they could apply in the future and were therefore confident that they could embed the learning from this project. In particular, managers reported that they had learned how to communicate with staff and explain issues to them.

"We've learnt from what happened on the implementation. The one to ones were very useful because it helped us understand what people understood and what people didn't. In fact, like most things, it was because something hadn't been explained very well to them or they didn't quite understand or somebody else had told them something different, so we resolved that early on."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

Further evidence of embedding learning was that managers in this organisation also felt that they had learned more about how to manage discussions and negotiations. For example, one management representative said that it was always better to have things in writing, as speech can be misrepresented.

"What we've done is make staff aware of who the representatives are, if they've got any concerns or problems but what we've asked them to do is to put it in writing because the spoken word can be misinterpreted, people may not listen and so we can go back and say, actually this is what you said."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

The trade union representative interviewed in this organisation also felt that employee representatives had been on a journey, speaking about the difficulties that employee representatives had felt at the outset, related to being *"stuck in the middle"* of management and staff. However, the trade union representative pointed out that the problem was not fully resolved due to ongoing national pay negotiations. Nevertheless, the union representative conceded that progress had been made towards moving to a more logical system of working time and, for the moment at least, staff felt that they were being fairly remunerated.

At the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the project was not of a technical nature, but centred on the understanding and mutual trust between the HR and trade union representatives, which were key ingredients of a better relationship between the two parties. Improvements in the relationship had been achieved, and a number of concrete activities had been implemented, such as introducing weekly meetings between the two sides. Embedding of this new relationship requires continuous work to ensure that the relationship keeps on track, despite the daily niggles that will inevitably characterise the relationship between trade union and HR representatives. Both parties were confident that this was being achieved.

"We had a few doubters and I think it opened their eyes, 'hold on there is another stance we could take here other than "out brothers out" sort of attitude, let's talk through it'. I think it was helpful in that way that it's got more people talking to more people."

Staff convenor, engineering and manufacturing organisation

The HR view in this organisation was that this change was also filtering down to line managers in terms of the way that they approached staff problems.

"It's a big cultural change for the line managers. They've been used to HR being in their pocket and 'phoning up and us reacting, not thinking about the trade unions. Now it's 'hang on a minute'. At the outset now we always say 'think of the implications, have you engaged a TU rep in this?' It's a cultural shift for these middle managers ... there's a big cultural shift in how things are working."

Focus group participant (HR team member), engineering and manufacturing organisation

Finally, as a result of the project at the equipment manufacturing organisation, the HR Director felt that she had a much greater understanding of the issues that were relevant to the organisation's staff. In turn, this led to a review of policies and procedures with the union that had followed from a culture of improved communication and the joint working around the project.

4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has tracked the progress of the Workplace Projects, from the initial triggers through to the agreement of objectives, the outcomes and impacts, and the lasting influence of the projects on the organisation.

Triggers for the project included consultation in the organisation, a need to reduce stress, improving employee relations between employees and management representatives or reviewing/implementing pay and grading or job evaluation. The case study projects focused on specific issues: improving partnership working, carrying out a stress audit, gathering employee views, and helping to facilitate the implementation of a new shift system. Projects were often sensitive and/or complicated and organisations felt that they would benefit from the interventions of an external organisation such as Acas.

Objectives were usually formally agreed in writing between the parties, with clarity on what these objectives were. Within this, management and trade union or employee representatives had their own view about what their own overall objectives were, although these were usually broadly compatible. In the vast majority of cases, the objectives of the project did not change as the project progressed.

Objectives were reported to have been fully or partly achieved in the majority of cases. However, staff interviewed in the case studies believed that more work still needed to be done to fully achieve the objectives of the project.

There were a variety of reasons cited for failure to achieve project objectives. The most frequently cited reasons were: that it was too early to say; that there had been some kind of breakdown in employment relations, with either a lack of commitment from employment representatives/trade union or a lack of co-operation between management and employee representatives cited as reasons for failure; that the issues were too difficult/complex to be resolved in a way identified by the Acas project; that there was a lack of interest or lack of commitment from management in implementing the solutions outlined in the Acas project; and that there had been a change in the workplace or circumstances in the workplace.

Projects had a wide range of outcomes, from measurable impacts on service provision or output, to a variety of other impacts, largely linked to wider employment relations issues. These included helping the parties to understand each other and work together better, increasing trust, improving communication, consultation and negotiation, fostering better working relationships, increasing fairness at work and building employee morale. The majority of the impacts were seen as positive: where negative impacts were reported, these were linked to heightened employee expectations, a loss of momentum, or an increase in workload as a result of the project.

The legacy of the projects is clear in that, according to the telephone survey data, 81 per cent of management representatives and 73 per cent of employee representatives overall said that they had introduced, reviewed or revised policies, procedures or practices as a result of the project. A substantial number also said that they had plans to introduce, review, or revise policies, practices or procedures in the future.

The case study organisations all felt that they had travelled a significant distance over the course of the project, from identifying the problem, recognising that they needed external help to find a solution to a specific problem, and involving all the actors, to finding a solution and at least starting to implement it and, in some cases, moving towards embedding the learning from this project into policies, procedures and practices in the organisation. Management and employee representatives had gained a lot of knowledge and experience about how to work together, or a better understanding of how the organisation worked.

5 Satisfaction with Acas

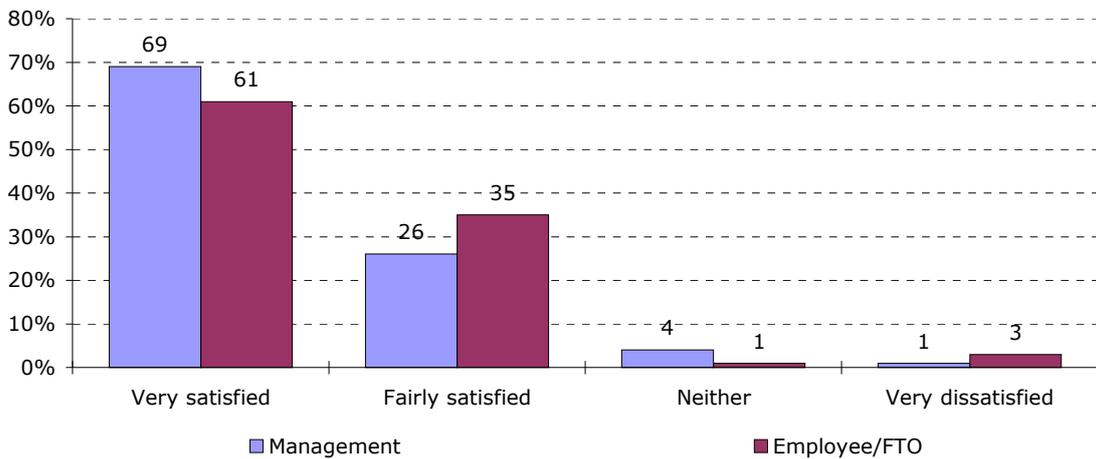
5.1 Overall satisfaction levels with the project

5.1.1 Telephone survey findings

From the telephone survey data, overall levels of satisfaction with the Workplace Project were very high. The vast majority of management representatives (95 per cent) and employee representatives (96 per cent) said that they were either fairly or very satisfied with their Workplace Project.

In the management representatives group in particular, nearly 7 in 10 indicated they were very satisfied, suggesting an overwhelmingly positive response. A slightly lower proportion of employee representatives also expressed this sentiment.

Figure 5.1: Satisfaction with the Acas Workplace Project exercise, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

5.2 Value for money

Acas was paid to carry out the work in 73 per cent of cases recorded in the telephone survey, with eight per cent of organisations stating that it was not known whether Acas were paid in their case.¹

¹ A respondent from each organisation (all managers – from both the matched and unmatched samples – and the unmatched employee representatives) are included in the results of the following question in order to avoid double counting cases.

Table 5.1: Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases. Acas paid to carry out this project work.

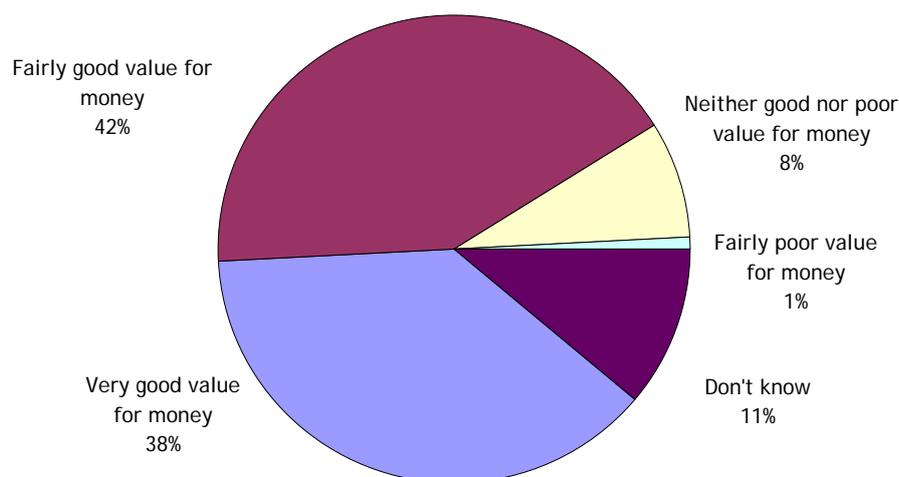
	Per cent	
Yes	73	
No	19	
Don't know	8	
N =	121	100

Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Satisfaction levels were high in general. In those cases in which Acas was paid, almost two-fifths of cases thought that their experience represented very good value for money, while a further two-fifths thought that the project represented fairly good value for money.

Figure 5.2: Perceived value for money if Acas was paid to carry out the work. (Overall sample of paying organisations - matched and non-matched cases.)



N=88. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

5.3 Overall satisfaction with Acas

5.3.1 Case studies

The majority of case study participants also registered very high levels of satisfaction with the service that Acas had provided, which echoes the satisfaction levels indicated by the telephone survey.

The case study interviews allowed participants to explain in more depth what they especially appreciated about Acas. In particular, the organisations appreciated the

impartiality, general expertise and experience that the Acas advisers brought with them, and the ability of the service to tailor its offering to particular organisational needs. For example, in the case of the stress audit project at the further education college, participants felt that Acas had made a significant contribution and the organisation was considering using Acas for conciliation on another, unrelated, matter. Interviewees believed that the project was suitably tailored for the organisation, the adviser was well prepared and had made an effort to understand the college.

"I thought they were excellent and they pitched it exactly right. I've never been disappointed with Acas because I think that [they] understand, because you are a conciliatory service anyway, you understand dealing with disputes and you come in at a certain level because you want to get it fixed. This was slightly different because it was pre-emptive which I'm not used to, but I felt from what I saw it was all very good."

Health and safety manager, further education college

5.4 Contribution of Acas advisers

5.4.1 Effectiveness of Acas and skills of Acas advisers

In order to be effective as an external problem-solver in an organisation, Acas advisers need to possess a number of skills. These include being able to gain an overview and understanding of the particular issues facing the organisation that they are working with, good 'people skills', which include developing a relationship with people, being able to listen and being able to interact in a non-judgemental way, being able to weigh up a situation and give impartial advice, and being able to encourage dialogue and discussion between the parties.

Below, we examine the views of telephone survey and case study respondents when asked about the effectiveness of Acas and the skills of its advisers.

Telephone survey

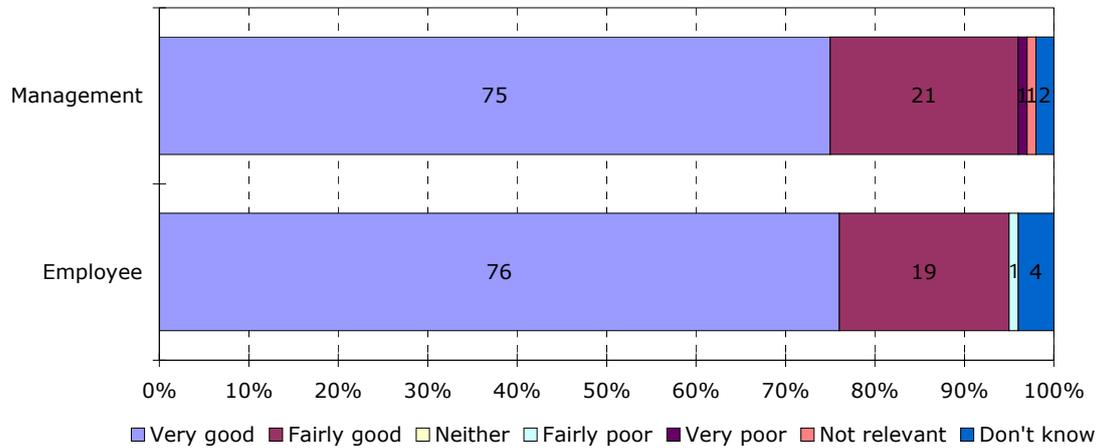
Respondents were asked how they would rate Acas in a range of areas, using a scale ranging from 'very good' to 'very poor'. Overall, Acas advisers received good ratings from both management and employee representatives on their skills levels in the areas covered by the survey:

- Understanding the issues being faced at the workplace.
- Developing a good relationship with the participants involved in the project.
- Maintaining an impartial stance.
- Skill in encouraging discussions between participants.

Within the total sample, both management and employee representatives rated the Acas adviser very highly on their *understanding of the issues being faced* in the workplace at the time of the project. Three-quarters rated the adviser as 'very good' in both groups, with around two-fifths in both groups rating the

adviser as 'fairly good', with just one per cent of management and employee representatives rating the advisor as poor.

Figure 5.3: How Acas was rated at understanding the issues facing your workplace, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

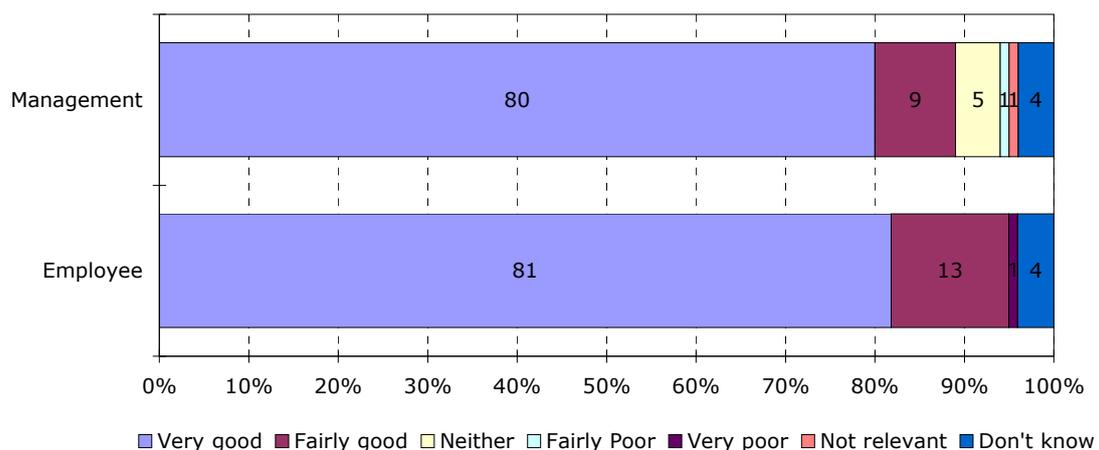


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Over four-fifths of both management and employee representatives rated the Acas adviser as 'very good' at *developing the relationship with participants* involved in the project. A further nine per cent of management and 13 per cent of employee representatives rated the adviser as 'fairly good'.

Figure 5.4: How was Acas rated at developing a good relationship with participants involved in the project, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

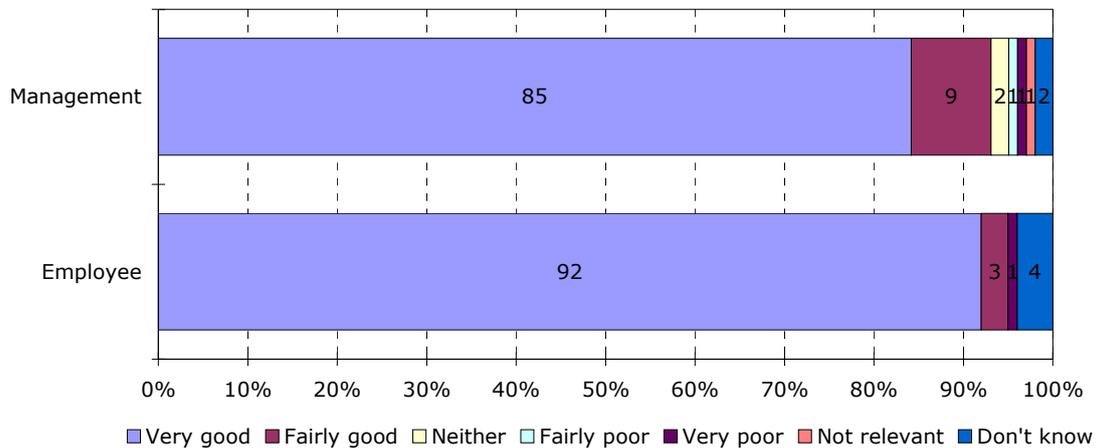


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

Although there were slightly more employee than management representatives who rated the Acas adviser as 'very good' at *maintaining an impartial stance*, in both groups the vast majority rated the adviser as at least 'fairly good' in this respect.

Figure 5.5: How was Acas rated at maintaining an impartial stance, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)

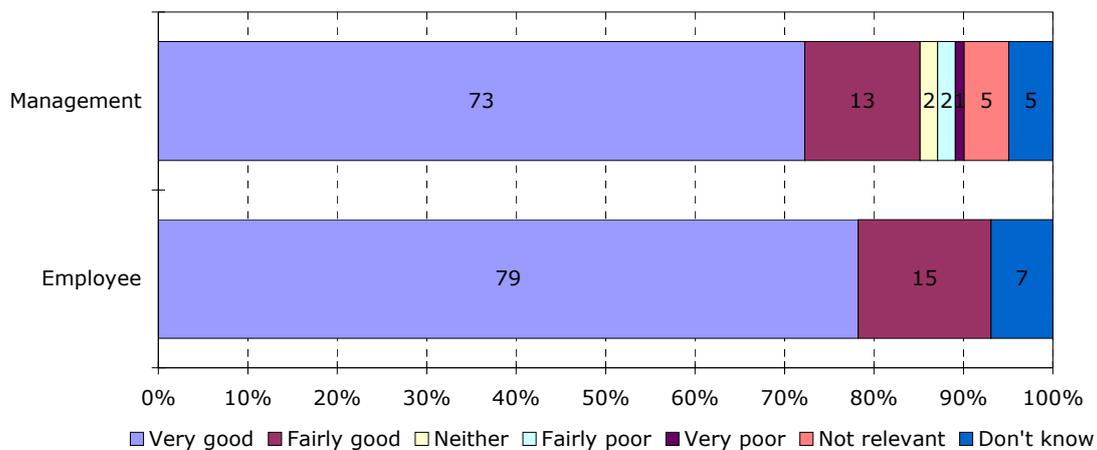


N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

Similarly, the vast majority of management and employee representatives rated the Acas adviser as 'very good' or 'fairly good' in terms of their skill in *encouraging discussions* between participants. No employee representative rated this element negatively and only a very small minority of the management representatives rated the adviser as either fairly, or very poor in this respect.

Figure 5.6: How Acas rated at skill in encouraging discussions between participants, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded. The matched sample data also supported these findings.

Source: IES, 2009

Case studies

The skills of Acas advisers cited above were also evident in the case studies. In all four cases, the Acas adviser had worked closely with the organisation, guiding it and helping it to find a solution to the problem it faced.

Impartiality

The status of the adviser as an impartial outsider was deemed to be critical to the success of the project in all four of the case studies, and particularly in the case of the stress audit project at the further education college. Here, the adviser was successful in drawing information out of people in the focus groups, which they may not have volunteered to an internal facilitator.

“It did sort of create a forum in which it could be discussed without threat or prejudice, that sort of thing, so it becomes a more objective and less, you know, having a go at somebody kind of an exercise, so that was good.”

Trade union representative, further education college

Praise for the impartiality of the Acas adviser was also given in the NHS Foundation Trust case study, where the adviser had to deal with a complex project and potentially conflicting points of view on the part of the participants.

"They were experienced, impartial, they knew what they were doing. They came in with set objectives and achieved those objectives within the time frames they did all they could do. There was nothing more they could have done."

Trade union representative, NHS Foundation Trust

Technical skills

The technical skills and experience of the Acas adviser were praised by project participants in the skills audit project, both in terms of running focus groups and in dealing with stress-related issues. They also commended the adviser's ability in being able to pitch discussions at the right level and compared this favourably with management consultants.

"They went through the (HSE) management standards and ... gave examples of identified issues which was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. They went through each one and then could actually articulate what most of the groups were trying to say and they were very erudite, but they did it in a very understandable breakdownable way and I liked that and reading [the report] they didn't pull any punches, they were very honest ... they didn't wrap it up in flowery, 'come back and use us, we love you' management consultant speak, they put it in straightforward and an appreciation of the situation and it was good, it was excellent."

Health and safety manager, further education college

Out of the four case studies, possibly the most complex and sensitive project was the implementation of a new shift system at the NHS Foundation Trust. Here, management praised the range of techniques used by the Acas advisers, noting that they had really helped participants to begin to work together in partnership and to communicate more effectively. One technique used here by the Acas advisers was to make managers and employee representatives describe each other's views through role play in order to understand the other side's point of view. Managers found this a really useful exercise.

"We had to say what was important and both sides had to do that and then you had to be in the other camp if you like and do it from the other side and that was really quite useful."

Management representative, NHS Foundation Trust

Knowledge and experience of a traditional industrial relations environment and of the issues likely to arise in the context of a workplace with a recognised trade union were deemed to be essential skills in the case of the partnership working at the engineering and manufacturing organisation.

People skills

Project participants also valued the Acas adviser's 'people skills' and felt they were good at drawing out individuals' views during the focus groups, having had a great deal of experience in doing this.

"They were immensely knowledgeable. That's what was so reassuring about them, they seemed to have this understanding. The staff said they were very easy for people to talk to. They were non-judgemental and they were very gentle and they listened to it all, the whole spectrum, and that was important. They were incredibly respectful to everyone's point of view."

Health and safety manager, further education college

"[The Acas adviser] is a level headed person ... they have been doing it for years. They can advise, guide and will answer questions whenever required. They were a good person to have on board in facilitating and drawing out things from staff that they wouldn't have said otherwise. Controlling them in some situations as well."

Human resources officer, further education college

"I had worked with [this adviser] in the past and on similar projects; they have a way about them that I think immediately puts people at ease. They are extremely knowledgeable and they have just got a good understanding and a good instinct about them so when they are sitting down talking to people in groups they know what to draw out of them."

HR Director, equipment manufacturing organisation

"You could tell that [the Acas advisers] were comfortable around people and they tried to drag something out of some of them because some people sit there and like to sit in the background they don't want to wave their arms about and become the leading light, so I thought that they were good in the way that they attempted to get people involved and motivated a little bit."

Staff convenor, engineering and manufacturing organisation

Areas for improvement

Few of the case study interviewees mentioned any areas where they thought Acas could improve how advisers handled the project. At the NHS Foundation Trust, however, one of the management representatives felt that the complex nature of the NHS structures were difficult for outsiders to grasp and that this may have caused some glitches, although there was an admission that it would probably be impossible for any external party to get up to speed quickly with all the issues. It should be noted that the new national NHS pay system Agenda for Change was being implemented at the time of the project, so it may be challenging for advisers to maintain up to date knowledge of emerging terms and conditions in the public sector.

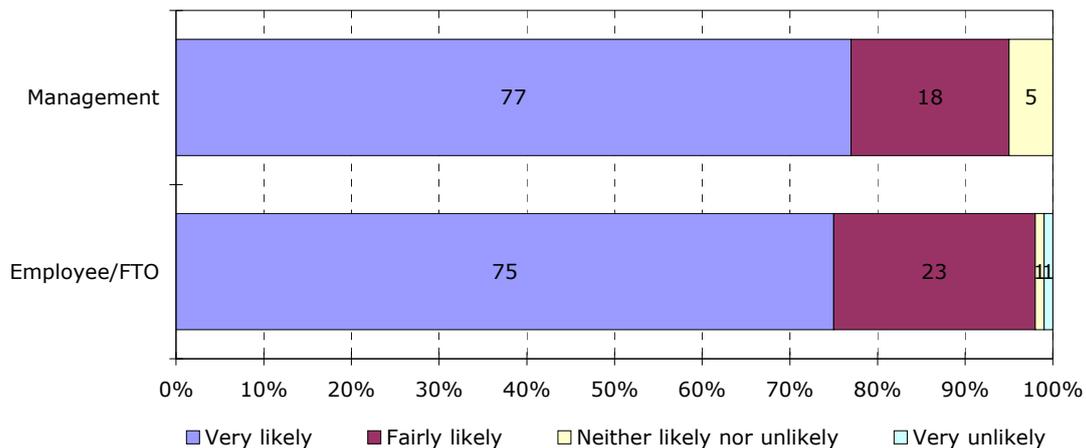
The engineering and manufacturing organisation made some useful suggestions as to how Acas could have further improved what was a successful project. Although the project was deemed to have achieved its objective of improving the partnership between trade union and HR representatives, participants on both sides felt that the workshops could have been organised and delivered slightly differently with more interaction between the participants. Many of the HR team members and some of the union representatives did not see the relevance of a

talk on the history of the trade union movement, given during the first workshop, and would have liked that to have been replaced by something more interactive. Participants also felt that the workshops size, with around 60 participants in total, made progress in the workshops more difficult. The Acas adviser interviewed for this research acknowledged this, but considered that the need to include all relevant parties was paramount.

Likelihood of recommending the Workplace Project service

When asked about the likelihood of recommending Acas Workplace Projects to a colleague or other professional contact, responses from the telephone survey were very positive from both management and employee representatives. In total, almost all management and employee representatives said that they would be either very or fairly likely to recommend the service to colleagues or other professional contacts.

Figure 5.7: Likelihood of recommending Acas, by respondent type. (Overall sample: matched and non-matched cases.)



N=management 106, employee/FTO 75. Percentages have been rounded.

Source: IES, 2009

5.4.2 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored organisations' satisfaction levels with Acas once they had worked with Acas advisers on a workplace project. From the telephone survey, it is clear that overall satisfaction levels with the service that Acas provided were high. Respondents were positive about the understanding of the Acas adviser of the issues that the organisation was facing; the way they had developed a good relationship with the participants in the project; their impartiality; and their skill in encouraging discussions. Further, where organisations paid for the service, the view from the majority of respondents was that it provided good value for money.

The case study data provided more detail on organisations' views of how the Workplace Project had run. The impartiality of the Acas advisers was identified as a strong positive point, as were their technical skills and understanding of the

subject matter, experienced of traditional industrial relations environments and practices, and their 'people skills' which allowed them to engage project participants and draw out views and opinions. Almost all the respondents from the telephone survey said that they would be very or fairly likely to recommend this service to a colleague or other professional contact.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Choosing Acas

Organisations chose to work with Acas for a range of reasons, largely connected to the impartiality of Acas, its independence and the skills and expertise of its advisers. This finding shows that the way the service is provided is consistent with and embodies Acas central mission, values and objectives as discussed in Kessler and Purcell (1996). Previous good experience of Acas also played a role in organisations' decision to use the service. This shows that the reputation of Acas is extremely positive and an asset when organisations are selecting external advisers for employment relations issues, particularly those which are considered to be too sensitive to be resolved in-house. Here, the input of an external expert service such as Acas was considered to be vital. The current climate of recession is likely to place increasing pressure and stresses on employment relationships and is likely to lead to increased demand for this kind of service from Acas.

6.2 Triggers for the project

The usual trigger for a Workplace Project was a need to find an external and impartial expert to help with a particular employment relations issue that was considered either too complex or too sensitive for the organisation to manage alone. Issues addressed included consultation in the organisation, stress reduction, improving employee relations between employees and management representatives or reviewing/implementing pay and grading or job evaluation. Employment relations in organisations were generally considered not to be particularly problematic at the outset of the project: the aim was not to overcome adversarial relationships, but to resolve a particular issue in a focused way. This reflects a distinction between the issues and situations faced by organisations who access different types of services from Acas.

The case study data points to a degree of organisational readiness to engage in joint problem-solving which is slightly different from the role suggested for it by previous research (Beaumont et al., 2005), where the emphasis is on building trust in fragile relationships from a fairly low base level. Collective conciliation could therefore be inferred as playing a role in getting organisations to a point from which Workplace Projects can take place, and indeed, a number of Workplace Projects develop from organisational use of this service. The two are therefore complementary and integral elements of Acas service provision.

6.3 Project objectives

Objectives for the project were usually formally and clearly agreed in writing between the parties. As stated in the introduction to this research, gaining a shared view of an employment relations problem, agreeing objectives and defining the most appropriate methods to achieve a solution are among the first stages to resolving the problem. The telephone survey respondents and the case study participants appeared to have little problem in setting joint project objectives. Although management and trade union or employee representatives had their own views about their own overall objectives, these were usually broadly compatible. For example, employee representatives might focus more on improving fairness at work, whereas management representatives tended to

concentrate more on the particular task in hand. In the vast majority of cases, the objectives of the project did not change as the project progressed: where they did, the new objectives were formally agreed. This instrumental perspective from managers suggests a greater clarity of purpose in undertaking the projects than we might anticipate in some of the wider literature, which hinted at the role of joint projects in surfacing unrecognised problems.

The majority of respondents from the telephone survey stated that the project objectives had been fully or partially achieved. Where this was not the case, a range of reasons for this were given, including: some kind of breakdown in employment relations; the issues being either too difficult or complex to be resolved; a lack of interest or commitment from management in implementing the solutions; and a change in the workplace or circumstances in the workplace. In addition, almost one in three employee representatives said that they felt it was still too early to judge project outcomes in these terms. It is arguable that these are respectable results, given the nature of the problems being tackled with the support of Acas. It appears that the projects are relatively successful in meeting objectives, even where there is some divergence between specific management and broader employee objectives. This is evidence of Acas success in being able to deliver project outcomes which fulfil the 'mutual gains' objectives in 'partnership' approaches to employment relationships (Reilly, 2002).

Although the case study participants reported that project objectives had been achieved to some extent, staff from all four organisations believed that there was still further work to do before the issue was resolved to the satisfaction of staff, or, in the case of the partnership working at the engineering and manufacturing organisation, keeping the momentum of the new, improved relationship going entailed an ongoing commitment.

One key challenge for the Acas Workplace Projects service is how attention to the significance of good employment relations can be fostered in an adverse economic climate and the extent to which managers can be persuaded to address ongoing employment relations issues. These can sometimes be regarded as a lower priority during tough business conditions. However, recent policy work such as the McLeod Review on employee engagement (2008) makes it clear that tackling some of these issues is critical to organisational sustainability and success.

6.4 Main project outcomes and impacts

A significant range of outcomes from projects were reported by both the telephone survey respondents and the case study organisations. Communication is an issue that is often at the root of employment relations problems but Acas Workplace Projects appear to have yielded benefits here. Survey respondents indicated that there had been improvements to overall communication between management and employee representatives, and specifically in consultation and negotiations procedures. Other outcomes included overall improvements in day-to-day working relationships between management and employee representatives, the building of trust between the parties, improvements in general fairness at work and an increase in employee morale.

Survey respondents found it more difficult to identify concrete impacts and outcomes of projects, such as reduced absence levels, reduced staff turnover,

reduced costs, efficiency of output, staff satisfaction and reduced grievance procedures. Only a minority cited improvements in any of these areas, although measurement here would depend on the collection of specific data before and after the Workplace Project, which some of the organisations had not attempted. Other impacts in a minority of organisations included improvements to the quality of an organisation's service or overall output or in its productivity and efficiency.

From the case study data, the main impact of the project was the full or partial achievement of the particular objective at hand. Nevertheless, many of the impacts cited above were also relevant to the outcomes of the case study project, in particular the improvement of working relationships and the building of trust. In the case of the engineering and manufacturing organisation, the main objective of the project was to improve relationships between HR and union representatives, an integral part of which was building trust and improving communications.

Some telephone survey respondents identified perceived negative impacts of a Workplace Project, although these appear to be linked to raised expectations and short-term pressures as a result of the process of undertaking the project. Negative impacts included an increase in workload as a result of dealing with a particular problem, frustration that projects had not provided a complete answer to the problem, and a failure to apply new or revised policies and agreed changes. From the case studies, there were some perceived negative outcomes from the projects, largely connected with raised employee expectations and issues around maintaining momentum. This reflects the potential for derailment and sustainability problems that partnership working projects can face (Beaumont et al., 2005).

6.5 Action taken after the project

Maintaining the momentum from a project with external facilitation, once the facilitator is no longer present, can be difficult. However, it seems that the majority of the organisations involved in the Workplace Projects in this research had implemented changes following the end of the project. Overall, 81 per cent of managers and 73 per cent of employee representatives responding to the telephone survey said that policies, procedures or practices had been revised, reviewed or introduced as a result of the workplace project. Around half of respondents said that they had *reviewed* and ultimately *revised* their policies and procedures and around two-fifths had *introduced* new policies and procedures. At least half the respondents stated that practices were *reviewed*, with slightly smaller proportions indicating that practices were subsequently *revised*. In addition, around one-third of management and employee representatives *planned* to *introduce* new policies and procedures as a result of the project and just over two-thirds of management and employee representatives *planned* to *review or revise* policies and procedures.

Thus, it can be argued that the Workplace Projects have had a significant and potentially ongoing impact in terms of leading to changes or proposed changes to policies, procedures and practices of organisations.

6.6 The journey travelled

It is interesting to track the journey travelled by the case study organisations, from the start of the project to its end and beyond. All four of the case studies progressed significantly, both in terms of finding solutions to particular issues, and broader lessons learned. The organisations all completed initial stages of the journey, such as jointly identifying the problem, seeking external assistance, jointly drawing up objectives, and seeking common solutions to the problem. The organisations had also begun to implement the solutions. There was less evidence of organisations having been successful in embedding the learning from the project, although this was usually a long-term issue. Overall, however, in terms of relationship-building, the parties developed more trust as a result of working closely with each other, sometimes for the first time in this way. Both management and employee representatives in the case study organisations felt that they had gained a significant amount of knowledge and experience about how to work together. This suggests that organisations which use Acas Workplace Projects may gain a double benefit, through (partial) resolution of an immediate problem, and also a better position from which to address any future issues. Assessing these longer-term benefits is very difficult to quantify but is likely to add an important element of added value to the service Acas provides, and should not be underestimated. This is reflected in existing work on the benefits that Acas provides as a service (Meadows, 2007).

6.7 Satisfaction with Acas

It is clear that the Acas Workplace Projects service users surveyed and those in the case study organisations mostly had very positive opinions on the service and their experience of it. The vast majority of management (95 per cent) and employee representatives (96 per cent) interviewed in the telephone survey said that they were either fairly or very satisfied with their Workplace Project.

Project objectives were clearly defined, formally agreed and rarely changed during the course of the project's life, which suggests that Acas was effective in providing appropriate support and guidance during the inception of the projects. The most common goals were addressing consultation in the organisation, helping with stress reduction, improving employment relations and looking at some specific issues such as pay, grading and job evaluation. A number of these issues are thorny and complicated, demonstrating that Acas services are sought, and valued, in circumstances where management-employee relationships may be fragile, sensitive or hostile.

The skills of the specific Acas advisers on the Workplace Projects were rated very highly by the vast majority of both management and employee representatives from both the survey and the case studies. Particular praise was reserved for the advisers' experience, their technical skills, their knowledge of the subject, and their 'people skills' that they used to bring people together to solve problems. One very specific measure of satisfaction is the fact that over three-quarters of both management and employee representatives surveyed said that they would be very likely to recommend Acas Workplace Projects to a colleague or other professional contact. One key skill, highlighted by Beaumont et al. (2005), is the sensitivity to manage concerns about trust and the suspicions of the parties to the employment relationship, in order to overcome barriers to progress in joint working between managers and employees, particularly where there is a history

of antagonism. The Acas advisers on these projects showed themselves to be particularly skilled in this area and this was particularly evident from the case studies.

Contrary to some of the complexities concerning previous intra-party employee relations highlighted as potential challenges for the Acas Workplace Projects service in the early part of this report, the experiences reported in the case studies and the survey data are relatively straightforward. This suggests that Workplace Projects do not necessarily have to be complicated or daunting processes. What is clear is that the topics tackled sometimes demand long-term interventions. Outcomes may therefore take time to develop and management commitment to sustaining progress is required, especially for trickier issues. Acas may wish to consider how best to support organisations that will require longer-term help to implement project recommendations.

Overall, the major benefit of Workplace Projects appears to be the development of trust between the management and employee representatives involved in the project, which lays the foundations for more constructive future relationships. This can often take place within the context of partnership working (and this was the specific focus of one of the case studies in this research) which, if the parties can successfully build trust, can foster long-term improvements in employment relations.

Annex 1: Case Study Summaries

Case Study 1: Further Education College

This further education college employs around 1,400 staff, comprising teaching and administrative and support staff. It is situated across a number of sites, with a the main campus. The college recognises two trade unions: the University and College Union (UCU), for teaching staff, and Unison, for support staff. Overall, it is estimated that 20 per cent of the teaching staff belong to UCU.

This study summarises the involvement of an Acas adviser in the stress audit carried out at the college in 2008. It shows the journey of the organisation from a starting point where staff, managers and employee representatives were aware that the college was experiencing problems with stress but lacked the information and knowledge to address this, to a point where the college had put a framework for recognising stress into place.

The challenge

The college received an inspection by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in summer 2008, at which it was told that its policies and practices on dealing with stress needed to be overhauled. In particular, the college was instructed to undertake a stress audit. This confirmed management perceptions that the college needed to tackle increased levels of sickness absence due to stress, and it was concerned that the HSE might take action against the college unless this was conducted. Stress had been highlighted as an issue for the college by a staff survey in 2008 and although the college had been dealing with individual cases, it had not put into place an organisation-wide approach. Until the HSE visit, the college had tried to support staff who took sickness absence due to stress by offering Human Resource (HR) function staff as a resource if individuals needed to talk through their problems, but no overall stress management strategy was in place. The challenge was therefore to undertake a stress audit across the whole organisation.

How Acas helped

Managers made initial contact with Acas through identifying regional officials from the Acas website. The project was led by an Acas adviser, and was carried out in October 2008. The Acas adviser met with the college's senior management team face-to-face in addition to email and telephone contact to define the scope of the project.

The project objectives were jointly set out in writing by the steering group that was set up to oversee the stress audit, of which the Acas adviser was a member, although the impetus for the objectives was given by the HSE. The Acas adviser was actively involved in the discussions around objective setting. The overall objectives of the project were to carry out a stress risk assessment, using the HSE Management Standards approach as a general framework, which involved running focus groups to identify problem areas and hotspots, and then to formulate action plans to address these issues.

In practical terms, the project consisted of the following elements:

- Setting up a steering group to oversee the work related to stress management. This consisted of trade union and senior management representatives, health and safety representatives and other staff representatives. The Acas adviser was also a member of the steering group and attended the steering group's meetings in an advisory capacity.
- Drawing up an agreed document containing terms of reference for the project. The members of the steering group did this jointly.
- Conducting ten focus groups with a range of staff across the college. These were facilitated by the Acas adviser, who issued a report on the findings. This report was disseminated throughout the college directly to employees.
- Drawing up an action plan based on the learning from the focus groups. This action plan was drawn up by the steering group.

The Acas adviser was involved in all of these stages and conducted all of the ten focus groups. The skills and expertise of the Acas adviser were praised in particular by the organisation:

"[The adviser's contribution was] huge. They gave it the kudos that it needed, they were good and as I said the report was so measured and so nicely broken down that they made a huge impact and they were very approachable and staff liked them greatly. Yes, they were good, very good."

The outcomes and benefits

The participants in this project believed that it was successful in that it achieved the practical goals established at its start, resulting in the development of an action plan to tackle stress. There were a number of concrete outcomes from the project: for example, stress training for staff was 'revitalised' and the college ran a new programme on how to avoid perceptions of bullying for managerial staff. The college has also implemented some 'quick win' changes, such as providing protective clothing (jackets and boots) for employees working on the college's farm.

In terms of softer impacts, staff felt that the college was more aware of stress and recognised it more than was the case before the project took place. Managers and employee representatives believed that that the project itself was of great value as a knowledge-gathering exercise about the main work-related stressors encountered by staff.

"We've run training sessions for managers to raise awareness of bullying and harassment. I think there's more open communication now in terms of stress so with the stress awareness sessions [the HR department] now runs, and stress management sessions, there's those sides of it and there's the little niggly things that have been sorted out as well."

They hoped that this would set out a firm basis for future action to tackle the issues uncovered, but recognised that this was a long-term goal and in some senses, the college was still at the beginning of the journey.

Case Study 2: NHS Foundation Trust

The project took place in the Blood Sciences services departments of an NHS Foundation Trust. The Trust employs around 6,500 staff and is mainly on two sites. The Blood Science services department employs around 60 full-time equivalent staff, the majority of whom are medical scientists. There are also around 14 full-time equivalent support staff. The two active unions in this department were Unite and Unison and the density rate was estimated as close to 100 per cent.

This case study charts the involvement of an Acas adviser with the Trust, helping them to put into place the new shift system and to tackle a range of problems connected with the past history of this issue. It charts the journey from a situation where there was little common ground between staff and their representatives and management, to a situation where levels of trust and joint working had been built up between management and employee representatives, and a workable compromise on shift working had been found.

The challenge

This was a relatively complicated project, centring on the Trust's wish to put into place a shift system to enable the Blood Science department to provide a guaranteed 24-hour service.

A round-the-clock service was already being provided by giving staff in the department one of two contracts. The first contract was a contract for a standard 37.5-hour working week, from Monday to Friday, 9am to 5.30pm, with a requirement to provide cover on one in five Saturday mornings, paid as time in lieu at time and a half. The second contract was a voluntary contract for the provision of on-call services covering all remaining hours in the year, providing a defined service 52 weeks a year, from which staff could withdraw at three months' notice.

Managers at the Trust wanted to change the arrangements to make them more secure and less at risk of staff withdrawing from on-call working at three months' notice.

In addition, the Trust wanted to implement a shift system under which more out of hours working would be expected, thus guaranteeing the 24-hour service. This had been attempted before by the Trust, around three to four years ago. However, at that time, it had tried to devise a new working time system without involving the union representatives until late in the process and it had therefore failed because the staff had blocked it. This time, the Trust was keen to do things differently and involve the unions from the start of the process. The Unite trade union representative suggested involving Acas.

Money was a significant challenge, however: trade union representatives believed that managers wanted to move staff onto national terms and conditions, which would have resulted in a drop in overtime payments from £10,000 per employee per year to a possible £3,000. The trade unions wanted to retain the current pay arrangements, and felt that the union and the management position were too far apart and inflexible for any compromise to be made.

How Acas helped

Acas was contacted after recognition from all parties involved in this issue at the Trust that an impasse had been reached that could not be resolved internally.

"We came to a standstill. Management wanted one thing, we wanted another and there was no shifting on it. They kept coming with different proposals which were not very different from the first one and there was no movement and it had been like that for over a year ... The only way forward was to bring the external company in to try and discuss."

Staff focus group participant

The Acas adviser convened a series of face-to-face meetings between managers and employee representatives, held between October and December 2007, to try to agree on a new shift system. The early meetings were characterised by a lack of trust on the part of staff, due to the previous failed attempt to introduce a shift system. The issue was complicated by the fact that there were national-level negotiations taking place on the issue of working time and out-of-hours working. Staff were nervous about changing their locally-agreed arrangements on out-of-hours working, fearing that this might mean that they would have to conform to national arrangements, which would be less advantageous for them.

Nevertheless, Acas carried on working with managers and employee representatives to try to find common ground. After some time, they decided that it was not possible to negotiate over the issue of pay and that therefore the current pay system would be retained for the time being. This meant that, having removed the contentious issue of pay, the parties could focus on the issue of the shift system.

The outcomes and benefits

The main outcome of the project was agreement on the putting into place an agreed shift system that allowed the department to offer a round-the-clock service. Staff continued to work a 37.5-hour week, but on a rota basis. However, they had the choice to opt out of shift working and only be contracted as shift workers after completing two rotas. Managers characterised the project as successful because it delivered this new shift system.

The management representatives acknowledged that the new system was not perfect, in that staff were not happy with the high level of weekend commitment, but had at least been agreed between both parties, implemented, and enabled the department to function on a 24-hour basis. Managers were particularly pleased that it had finally been implemented, given that previous attempts had failed.

Trade union representatives believed that staff were better off as a result of the new system, as, if they opted to work the new system, they were working fewer hours than previously, but their weekly pay had not decreased.

Nevertheless, some lingering negative aspects were reported by staff and employee representatives. For example, some staff felt that morale had decreased after the new system had been put into place, particularly for those

employees who did not feel that they would work the shifts in the new system, and would therefore not be able to work the new hours and lose the overtime payments. In addition, some staff felt that the new system, which requires more weekend working, would have a negative impact on employees' work-life balance, particularly for those with young children.

As well as the main outcome of succeeding in putting a new shift system into place, other benefits have resulted from this project. For example, managers and union representatives reported that their relationship had been strengthened.

"Working in partnership has dramatically improved with the staff side. I know there are ongoing issues but that relationship is a lot stronger now."

Management representative

Further, management and employee representatives felt that they had travelled a long way in terms of developing mutual trust and positive working relationships between unions and management, although the relationship between the staff and the union appeared to remain difficult on occasion. Managers felt that the working groups, facilitated by Acas, had been instrumental in forging trust and acting as a bonding exercise, which was a virtually unrecognisable situation from where the parties had been at the outset of the project.

Overall, all the parties to this project felt that they had come a long way since the outset. Managers described the process as complex and difficult, involving overcoming hostility on the part of staff, and felt that they had learnt a great deal that they could apply in the future, in areas such as communicating with staff, managing negotiations, and working together in partnership.

Case Study 3: Equipment manufacturing 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 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

Case Study 4: Engineering and Manufacturing organisation

The UK arm of this organisation is a division of the global group. Its main office is situated in the north of England.

This case study is focused on the organisation's north of England facility, which employs around 5,000 people and recognises around four trade unions, of which Unite and the GMB are the main ones. Union density is estimated to be high: around 70 per cent in the staff group and around 90 per cent in the manual group. The organisation has other facilities around the UK, which are not unionised, and together employ around 250 project team staff, engaged in support and design.

Acas ran three joint workshops for trade union and HR representatives in order to help build partnership working between them.

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

The challenge

There had been a history of difficulty in the relationship between the HR function and the trade unions at this facility. A partnership working agreement between management and unions had been put into place in 2003. This had worked well at first but with hindsight, both HR and union interviewees admitted that the success at this time was mostly due to the relationship built up between senior union representatives and the HR function at senior level. This relationship subsequently broke down when the Head of HR left, and the trade union representatives felt that there was a lack of understanding of the business on the part of the HR function, within which staff turnover was relatively high. Trade union representatives therefore felt that it was difficult to build relationships with the HR function. This relative lack of experience of the HR function was acknowledged by the head of HR, who realised that the HR team needed help in their dealings with the trade union representatives.

The relatively polarised positions of the two sides was described as follows by the main Acas adviser who worked with the organisation on this project:

"The basic union line was that the existing agreements, some dating back 20 years, were sacrosanct. However, the HR department was peopled by young graduates, with no background in engineering, who didn't like the old agreements – they were sometimes written before they were born and in a language that they did not understand. There were therefore very different cultures in HR and within the unions."

Acas adviser

The trade unions were also suspicious of the new Head of HR, with whom they had not worked before. The actual trigger for contacting Acas was the fact that the trade union representatives gave a letter to the HR Director, voicing their dissatisfaction with the deterioration of the relationship between the HR function and the trade union representatives. It was at this point that HR felt that the organisation needed external help to build up the relationship.

How Acas helped

Acas advisers came and talked with the HR function about what they wanted to achieve from the workplace project. Similar preparatory meetings were held between Acas advisers and trade union representatives so that they could put their view across.

Acas then ran a total of three joint workshops involving around 60 participants in each one, drawn from the HR function and from manual and staff trade union representatives.

The first workshop involved a session in which both sides could raise issues and then talk about how to resolve them. In the afternoon session of that workshop, talks were given by Acas advisers on issues such as the history of the trade union movement.

The second workshop followed much the same format as the first workshop, with the emphasis of bringing the two sides together into a shared environment in which they could work together.

The third workshop attempted to bring together the learning from the first two workshops. Each side gave details of what their job consisted of, which both HR and trade union representatives felt had been helpful.

The outcomes and benefits

Overall, the view from most of those interviewed was that there were benefits from the workshops, although some possible improvements to the workshops were also mentioned.

Although some of the participants had some doubt as to the relevance of some of the workshops, both the trade union representatives and the HR representatives felt that they had come closer together as a result, and now understood the other party better. The view from the HR function was that the very fact that the two parties had spent a considerable length of time in the same room together had contributed to improving their relationship.

One particularly striking point was made by the Head of HR, who noted that during the Acas project, this was, for some people, the first time that they had sat down with a person from the opposite side in a non-conflictual situation. By allowing people to interact socially, they could begin to see the other side as 'more human'.

"The Acas workshops got people sat around tables actually talking to each other and building networks, just that social interaction at coffee breaks, you know, people chatting. Some of the trade union reps I don't think had ever been in anything other than a conflict situation with an HR person, because I sat back to a certain extent and watched at the final session and you heard people sort of saying 'oh she's alright her really isn't she', and it's just that human contact ... certainly relationships have massively changed."

Head of HR

Overall, there was broad agreement between all those interviewed for this case study that the organisation had travelled a considerable way in terms of the basic relationship between the HR function and the trade union representatives. At the outset, the relationship was seen to be relatively poor, characterised by low levels of trust and preconceptions about the 'other side'. Trade union representatives felt that the HR function did not understand how they worked, or the industrial context in which they worked, due a lack of knowledge and experience. They were also frustrated at what they perceived to be delays in how the HR function was dealing with a range of requests from the trade unions. From the HR function point of view, there was a feeling that the trade unions did not understand them, the pressures they were under, and their role in general.

After attending the three workshops organised by Acas, both sides felt that the relationship had improved considerably, in terms of understanding and the attitude of both sides towards each other. The HR function members found that the trade union representatives could be a good source of knowledge and information and were now more willing to go and consult them about a range of issues, sometimes in order to 'test the temperature' of the workforce. Conversely, HR managers reported that trade unions would now come to them to warn them that a particular situation might be developing. There was also a general feeling from the HR team that HR and unions were working together on specific issues rather than representing opposite sides.

Appendix 1: Telephone Questionnaire

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL **Impact Survey – Workplace
Projects**

Start Time:	
Company Name:	
Respondent:	
Job Title:	
Interviewer:	

A. INTRODUCTION

QX Contact information from Sample

Have management and employee contact	1
Have management only	2
Have employee only	3

- 1) Good morning / good afternoon, my name is _____ from Employment Research Ltd, an independent research company. Please could I speak to [LEAD MANAGEMENT REP / LEAD EMPLOYEE REP]

ADD IF NECESSARY: We are carrying out a research project for Acas as a follow up to a project on [INSERT DATA FROM DATABASE: 'MainTopic'] carried out by an Acas Adviser, [INSERT "LeadAdviser"] conducted for your organisation about 6 months ago, to find out how useful it has been.

Continue	1	GO TO Q4
Respondent no longer works there	2	GO TO Q2 if management rep or Q3 if employee rep
Respondent not based at site (e.g. full time trade union rep)	3	ASK FOR HR DEPT TO CHECK CONTACT DETAILS of full-time officer or rep
Named contact still there but not lead management / employee contact for this project	4	GO TO Q2 if management rep or Q3 if employee rep

Make appointment	5	MAKE APPOINTMENT
Project still ongoing	6	THANK AND CLOSE
Refusal – company policy	7	
Refusal – already been interviewed for Acas survey	8	
Refusal – no time	9	
Refusal – other (please record reason for refusal, to report to Acas)	10	
Not available in fieldwork period	11	MAKE APPOINTMENT FOR NEXT FW PERIOD
Show reassurances	12	

REASSURANCES:

- If you would like to confirm that Employment Research is a bona fide Market Research company, you can call the Market Research society, free of charge, on 0500 39 69 99.
- If you have any queries about the research, you can contact Geoff Pike at Employment Research on 01273 299719 or Fiona Neathey at Acas on 020 7210 3960
- The survey will take about 20 minutes

IF MANAGEMENT REP NO LONGER WORKS THERE (Q1=2)

- 2) Please could I speak to the person who has replaced [MANAGEMENT REP]?

IF MANAGEMENT REP NO LONGER WORKS THERE (Q1=2) OR IF NAMED MANAGEMENT CONTACT NOT LEAD CONTACT FOR THIS PROJECT (Q1=4):

I would like to speak to someone who was involved in an Acas workplace project about [INSERT 'MainTopic'] which took place about 6 months ago, or has been involved in work following on from this. It is likely to be a member of senior management or a senior member of the HR department.

Continue	1	GO TO Q4
Respondent not based at site	2	ASK FOR HR DEPT TO CHECK CONTACT DETAILS of management rep
Make appointment	3	MAKE APPOINTMENT

Project still ongoing	4	THANK AND CLOSE
Refusal – company policy	5	
Refusal – already been interviewed for Acas survey	6	
Refusal – no time	7	
Refusal – other (please record reason for refusal, to report to Acas)	8	
Not available in fieldwork period	9	MAKE APPOINTMENT FOR NEXT FW PERIOD
Show reassurances	10	

- 3) **IF EMPLOYEE REP NO LONGER WORKS THERE (Q1=2)**
Please could I speak to the person who has replaced [EMPLOYEE REP] as the main representative of employees at this site?

**IF EMPLOYEE REP NO LONGER WORKS THERE (Q1=2) OR
IF NAMED EMPLOYEE CONTACT NOT LEAD CONTACT FOR THIS PROJECT
(Q1=4)**

I would like to speak to someone who was involved in an Acas workplace project about [INSERT 'MainTopic'] which took place about 6 months ago, or has been involved in work following on from this. It is likely to be a representative of either a Trade Union, or of some other employee committee or group at the site

INTERVIEWER : IF UNSURE WHO THIS IS, ASK TO SPEAK TO THE HR MANAGER, OR LEAD MANAGEMENT REP [INSERT FIELD FROM SAMPLE], TO ASK WHO WOULD BE THE MOST APPROPRIATE INTERVIEWEE

Continue	1	GO TO Q4
Respondent not based at site (e.g. full time trade union rep)	2	ASK FOR HR DEPT TO CHECK CONTACT DETAILS of full-time officer or rep, or get contact details from Acas adviser in advance
Make appointment	3	MAKE APPOINTMENT
Project still ongoing	4	THANK AND CLOSE
Refusal – company policy	5	

Refusal – already been interviewed for Acas survey	6	
Refusal – no time	7	
Refusal – other (please record reason for refusal, to report to Acas)	8	
Not available in fieldwork period	9	MAKE APPOINTMENT FOR NEXT FW PERIOD
Show reassurances	10	

- 4) Good morning / good afternoon, my name is _____ from Employment Research Ltd, an independent research company. We are carrying out research for Acas as a follow up to a project on [INSERT DATA FROM DATABASE: 'MainTopic'] carried out by an Acas Adviser, [INSERT "LeadAdviser"] conducted for [INSERT 'your organisation' OR / IF FTO ['OrganisationName']] about 6 months ago about to find out how useful it has been.

FOR NAMED RESPONDENTS OR THOSE WHERE DETAILS PROVIDED BY ACAS INCORRECT (Q1=1 OR Q1=4)

I understand you were the main management / employee contact

FOR REPLACEMENT RESPONDENTS (Q1=2)

I understand that [INSERT FROM SAMPLE 'EMPLOYER NAME' / 'WORKFORCE NAME'] was the main [INSERT TEXT: management / employee] representative for the project, but as they no longer work for the organisation, you have been suggested as someone who could answer some questions on the project instead.

The survey focuses on the longer term effect of Acas' involvement [INSERT TEXT: 'in your organisation'] OR IF FTO [INSERT 'OrganisationName'] through this project. Were you involved at the beginning or close to the beginning of this project and do you feel you are in a position to answer questions around the research objectives?

OK to continue	1	GO TO Q5 IF EMPLOYEE REP. MANAGEMENT REPS GO TO Q6
(REPLACEMENTS ONLY): Another person would be better able to answer	2	SHOW TEXT IF CODE 2: 'ASK FOR DETAILS OF WHO WOULD BE BETTER ABLE TO ANSWER, THEN TRANSFER AND REINTRODUCE'. interviewer: SEND INTERVIEWER BACK TO START OF Q4
Named contact still there but not main management / employee contact for this project	3	GO BACK TO Q2 IF MANAGEMENT REP OR Q3 IF EMPLOYEE REP (ROUTE AS FOR Q1=4)

Make appointment	4	MAKE APPOINTMENT
Project still ongoing	5	THANK AND CLOSE
Refusal – company policy	6	
Refusal – already been interviewed for Acas survey	7	
Refusal – no time	8	
Refusal – have not been involved in project from the beginning	9	
Refusal – other (please record reason for refusal, to report to Acas)	10	
Show reassurances	11	

B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

IF EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATIVE

5) Just to clarify, are you...

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

A trade union representative (eg shop steward or convenor)	1
A non-union employee representative	2
A full-time officer of a trade union (ie paid by the union to carry out duties on a full-time basis)	3
Other (Please specify)	4

6) Are you based at the same workplace as that in which this project took place?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Don't know	X	

ASK ALL

- 7) According to Acas' records, the workplace project they conducted for [INSERT TEXT: your workplace] / IF **FTO** (Q5=3) [INSERT 'OrganisationName'] finished on [INSERT 'ActualEndDate']. Is this roughly correct?

Yes	1	GO TO Q12
No	2	GO TO Q8
Don't know	X	GO TO Q12

IF NOT CORRECT (Q7=2)

- 8) In which month and year did the project finish?

January	1	
February	2	
March	3	
April	4	
May	5	
June	6	
July	7	
August	8	
September	9	
October	10	
November	11	
December	12	

- 9) Year:

2006	1	
2007	2	
2008	3	
2009	4	

IF ENDED NOVEMBER 2008 OR LATER

- 10) We would like to speak to those involved in workplace projects at least 3 months after the project has finished. Would it be OK to contact you again in about a year?

Yes	1	THANK AND CLOSE
No	2	CONTINUE

11) Would you be willing to take part if we did the interview now?

Yes	1	CONTINUE
No	2	THANK AND CLOSE

IF MANAGEMENT & IF EMPLOYEE CONTACT BLANK FROM SAMPLE

12) Before we continue, can I ask who the main employee contact was for this project?

ADD IF NECESSARY: As part of the research we are interviewing employee representatives as well as management representatives. We can arrange a time that is convenient with the employee rep and does not interfere with their work duties.

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Allow D/K and REFUSED

Record name	
Record telephone number	
Record best time to contact	

C. OBJECTIVES & REASONS FOR USING ACAS

ASK ALL

13) I understand an Acas adviser came in to help **[INSERT TEXT: your organisation]** / IF FTO (Q5=3) **[INSERT 'OrganisationName']**. What was the main focus or area of the project?

DO NOT READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Communication	1
Consultation	2
Reviewing and/or improving relations between management and employee representatives	3

Reviewing and/or improving relations between management and employees generally	4
Payment systems	5
Trade union recognition	6
Discipline and grievance procedures	7
Pay grading arrangements/job evaluations	8
Managing change	9
Collective bargaining/negotiations	10
Employee turnover	11
Absenteeism/attendance management	12
Workforce reductions/redundancy	13
Changes to patterns of work (e.g. shift systems, working hours)	14
Equality or diversity issues	15
Stress	16
Other (please specify)	17
Don't know	X

- 14) Thinking about when you were first considering ways of dealing with [INSERT MAIN SUBJECT FROM Q13], why did you and others [INSERT TEXT: in your workplace] / IF FTO (Q5=3) ['at [INSERT 'OrganisationName']'] decide to use Acas?
DO NOT READ OUT – CODE ALL THAT APPLY

Acas advice is independent of management / Trade Union	1	
Acas is independent of government	2	
Acas is acceptable to managers	3	
Acas is acceptable to Trade Union(s) / employee representatives	4	
Acas is acceptable to both parties	5	
Acas has relevant expertise in dealing with the particular issue/problem	6	
Acas approached us	7	

Acas offered value for money	8	
Acas is free	9	
Acas has a good reputation	10	
Had heard of Acas through Acas publicity	11	
Good experience of Acas in past – if so which service (specify, Acas to re-code)	12	
Did not know who else to use	13	
Recommendation of a colleague	14	
Recommendation of a contact outside the organisation	15	
(If respondent is union FTO: Q5=4) Recommendation of a contact outside the trade union	16	
Recommendation of a full-time union officer	17	
Not involved in decision – was not involved in project at the time	18	
Not involved in decision – decision made at Head Office	19	
Not involved in decision – Other (specify)	20	
Other (specify)	21	
Don't Know	X	

15) Did the project involve Acas providing training to you or others in the organisation?

Yes	1	GO TO Q16
No	2	GO TO Q17
Don't know	X	GO TO Q17

IF YES (Q16=1)

16) Was that before, during or after this project?

Before	1	
--------	---	--

During	2	
After	3	
Don't know	X	

ASK ALL

- 17) At the start of the project, what were the agreed objectives?

CODE EACH DIFFERENT OBJECTIVE SEPARATELY

Objective one (specify)	1	
Objective two (specify)	2	
Objective three (specify)	3	
Objective four (specify)	4	
Objective five (specify)	5	

IF > 1 OBJECTIVE (Q17)

- 18) Of these, which was the main objective?

CODE ONE ONLY

Objective one	1	
Objective two	2	
Objective three	3	
Objective four	4	
Objective five	5	

ASK ALL

- 19) Were these objectives *formally* agreed with *both* management and employee representatives or not?

Yes, formally agreed by both management and employee representatives	1	
--	---	--

No, not formally agreed by both management and employee representatives	2	
Don't know	X	

20) Did the main objective change in any way as the project progressed?

Yes	1	GO TO Q21
No	2	GO TO Q23
(DO NOT READ OUT) Not relevant (e.g. 1 day workshop only)	3	GO TO Q23
Don't know	X	GO TO Q23

IF YES (Q21=1)

21) Please could you describe how this objective changed?

IF YES (Q21=1)

22) Were the revised objectives *formally* agreed with *both* management and employee representatives or not?

Yes, formally agreed by both management and employee representatives	1	
No, not formally agreed by both management and employee representatives	2	
Don't know	X	

23) Was improving the relationship between management and employees a main objective, a secondary objective, or not an objective?

CODE ONE ONLY

Main objective	1	
Secondary objective	2	
Not an objective	3	
Don't know	X	

D. EFFECTIVENESS OF ACAS & ACTION OF ORGANISATION**ASK ALL**

- 24) Thinking about the way the Acas project was conducted, how would you rate the Acas adviser in terms of the following?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY FOR EACH STATEMENT

	Very good	Fairly good	Neither	Fairly poor	Very poor	Not relevant	(Don't know)
Understanding the issues facing your workplace	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Developing a good relationship with participants involved in the project	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Maintaining an impartial stance	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Skill in encouraging discussions between participants	1	2	3	4	5	V	X

- 25) Which of the following actions, if any, have been taken as a result of the workplace project?

	Yes	No	Not applicable	Don't know
Development of a formal agreement for the operation of a consultative committee	1	2	V	X
Introduction of policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in the Acas	1	2	V	X

project				
Review of policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X
Revision of policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X
Review of an area of practice relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X
Revision of an area of practice relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X
Plans in place to introduce policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X
Plans in place to review or revise policies and procedures relating to issue addressed in Acas project	1	2	V	X

- 26) To what extent have you or others in the workplace been able to sustain any activities or initiatives resulting from the Acas project, in the period since Acas' involvement?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY. IF NOT RELEVANT CODE DK

Fully	1	
To a large extent	2	
To some extent	3	
Not at all	4	
Don't know	X	

E. IMPACT & ACHIEVEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

ASK ALL

- 27) You said that the main objective of the Acas project was [INSERT MAIN OBJECTIVE FROM Q17 (IF 1 OBJECTIVE) OR Q18 (IF > 1 OBJECTIVE)]

To what extent do you feel that has been achieved?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Fully	1	GO TO Q29
-------	---	-----------

To a large extent	2	
To some extent	3	GO TO Q28
Not at all	4	
Don't know	X	GO TO Q29

IF Q27=3 OR 4

28) Why has this objective [not been achieved / only partly been achieved]?

DO NOT READ OUT – CODE ALL MENTIONED

Advice was of a kind not calling for action	1	
The problem went away	2	
It is too early to say/ongoing process	3	
Intend to take action in the future	4	
Methods used during Acas project were not effective (specify)	5	
Acas did not spend enough time at our organisation	6	
Issues too difficult/complex to be resolved in way identified by the Acas project	7	
Acas didn't get to the heart of the problem	8	
External factors beyond our control prevented objectives being achieved	9	
Change in operation or circumstances of the workplace	10	
Change of key personnel	11	
Lack of commitment from management	12	
Lack of commitment from employee/trade union representatives	13	
Lack of co-operation between management and employee representatives	14	
Employees not interested in implementing solutions arising from Acas project	15	

Advice left me unsure what action to take	16	
Other (specify)	17	
Don't know	X	

ASK ALL

29) To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Acas workplace project...?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY FOR EACH STATEMENT

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not relevant	(Don't know)
Helped participants to better understand each others' point of view	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Provided participants with new ways of working together	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Helped to build trust between participants	1	2	3	4	5	V	X
Helped participants to develop solutions to problems	1	2	3	4	5	V	X

30) Do you feel the following aspects of relations between **managers and employee representatives** are now better, the same, or worse, as a result of the Acas project? Please say if these are not relevant to the Acas project.

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY FOR EACH STATEMENT

	Much better	A little better	Same	A little worse	Much worse	Too early to say	Not relevant	(Don't know)
Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6	V	X
Consultation	1	2	3	4	5	6	V	X
Negotiations	1	2	3	4	5	6	V	X

Trust between management and employee representatives	1	2	3	4	5	6	V	X
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

- 31) And do you feel the following aspects of relations between **managers and employees** are now better, the same, or worse, as a result of the Acas project? Please say if these are not relevant to the Acas project.

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY FOR EACH STATEMENT

	Much Better	A little better	No impact	A little worse	Much worse	Too early to say	Don't know	Not relevant
Day to day working relationships between management and employees	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V
Fairness in treatment of employees	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V
Employee morale	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V
Trust between management and employees	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V
Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V

- 32) How would you rate the current relationship between management and employees generally [INSERT TEXT: at this workplace] / **IF FTO** ['at [INSERT 'OrganisationName']']?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Very good	1	
Fairly good	2	
Neither good nor poor	3	
Fairly poor	4	

Very poor	5	
Don't know	X	

- 33) Has this relationship improved, stayed the same or worsened since the time before the Acas project?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Improved a lot	1	GO TO Q34
Improved a little	2	
Stayed the same	3	GO TO Q35
Got a little worse	4	
Got a lot worse	5	
Don't know	X	

IF IMPROVED A LOT OR A LITTLE (Q33= 1 or 2)

- 34) To what extent, if any, can this improvement be attributed to the Acas project?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Fully	1	
To a large extent	2	
To some extent	3	
Not at all	4	
Don't know	X	

ASK ALL

- 35) Did the project have any positive impact on measurable performance indicators (e.g. absence; staff turnover; costs; staff satisfaction as monitored in staff surveys)?

Yes	1	GO TO Q36
No	2	GO TO Q37
Don't know	X	GO TO Q37

IF YES (Q35=1)

36) What were these impacts?

Impact one (specify)	1	
Impact two (specify)	2	
Impact three (specify)	3	

37) Apart from those already discussed, did the project have any other positive impacts on the way [organisation] works?

Yes	1	GO TO Q38
No	2	GO TO Q39
Don't know	X	GO TO Q39

IF YES (Q36=1)

38) Briefly, what were these impacts?

Impact one (specify)	1	
Impact two (specify)	2	
Impact three (specify)	3	

ASK ALL

39) Did the project have any negative impacts on the organisation?

Yes	1	GO TO Q40
No	2	GO TO Q41
Don't know	X	GO TO Q41

IF YES (Q39=1)

40) Briefly, what were these impacts?

Impact one (specify)	1	
Impact two (specify)	2	
Impact three (specify)	3	

- 41) Do you feel the following are now better, the same or worse, as a result of the Acas project? Please say if these are not relevant to the Acas project.

READ OUT – CODE ONE FOR EACH STATEMENT

	Much better	A little better	No impact	A little worse	Much worse	Too early to say	(Not relevant)	(Don't know)
Quality of the service or output delivered by this workplace	1	2	3	4	5	6	V	X
Productivity or efficiency	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V
Meeting objectives or targets	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	V

F. SATISFACTION

- 42) Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the Acas workplace project exercise?

READ OUT – CODE ONE ONLY

Very satisfied	1	
Fairly satisfied	2	
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3	
Fairly dissatisfied	4	
Very dissatisfied	5	
Don't know	X	

- 43) Was Acas paid to carry out this project work?

Yes	1	GO TO Q44
No	2	GO TO Q45
Don't know	X	GO TO Q45

IF PROJECT CHARGED (Q43=1)

44) Thinking about value for money, would you say the Acas project represented

READ OUT - CODE ONE ONLY

Very good value for money	1	
Fairly good value for money	2	
Neither good nor poor value for money	3	
Fairly poor value for money	4	
Very poor value for money	5	
Too early to say	6	
Don't know	X	

ASK ALL

45) If a relevant situation arose how likely or unlikely would you be to recommend Acas workplace projects to a colleague or other professional contact?

READ OUT - CODE ONE ONLY

Very likely	1	
Fairly likely	2	
Neither likely nor unlikely	3	
Fairly unlikely	4	
Very unlikely	5	
Don't Know	X	

G. CLOSE

46) Is there anything else about the project that you would like to comment on?

INTERVIEWER NOTE: IF NONE, CODE NULL

--

- 47) And finally, would you be willing to assist in further research into the issues that we have been speaking about that ACAS may wish to conduct at a later date?

Yes	1	
No	2	

THANK AND CLOSE - Record respondent details for quality control

OPTIONAL READ OUT:

That concludes the interview, thank you very much for your time. Just to remind you, my name is XXX and I'm calling from Employment Research.
If you have any queries please call Geoff Pike at Employment Research on 01273 299719; or the Market Research Society free phone number 0500 396999.

- 48) INTERVIEWER: Did you interview someone other than the named contact?

Yes	1	GO TO Q49
No	2	

- 49) INTERVIEWER: Please record reason for interviewing someone other than named contact.

Named contact no longer worked for organisation	1	
Named contact said they were not the lead management / employee representative for this project	2	
Other reason (specify)	3	

Appendix 2: Discussion Guide for Senior Advisor

1 – Introduction

Thank for giving up your time to speak to us. [Introduce IES].

We are conducting this interview as part of the evaluation of the Workplace Projects service.

The focus of the evaluation is on how the objectives of an organisation may evolve within the duration of the workplace project and on how those objectives are achieved.

We have quite a few questions to get through, but many of them should be quick to answer. We'd estimate the interview to take 20 minutes. Is that okay?

2 – Adviser background

1. Can I just check that you were the main adviser for the _____ Workplace Project?
The focus of this interview will be on this case.
2. Could you briefly describe your role within Acas?
3. How long have you been in this role? And at Acas?
4. How do workplace projects specifically fit into your role?

3 – Background to workplace project

5. Could you summarise the aims of the project, the main elements of the project and what was achieved?
6. Had you worked with or had any previous contact with this organisation prior to conducting this project?
(What was this?)
7. How did this Workplace Project come about?
[prompts:]
Was it something the organisation proposed or did it follow a suggestion from you / someone else in Acas?
Did it follow on from other work, such as collective conciliation?
8. Were you allocated the project or did the organisation come directly to you, or ask for you personally?
9. Who was your initial contact at the organisation regarding this project?
Who else were you in contact with?
management? trade union? other staff representatives?
10. When the project began what was the general climate or state of employment relations at [org]?
11. How long did the Workplace Project take?

[prompt:] How many visits did that involve?

[prompt:] How many working days did you spend in total?

Is that typical for a Workplace Project?

4 – Stakeholders & players

12. Who were the key stakeholders of the project?

How engaged was the employer / senior management with the workplace project?

Was there a union presence? Who?

What proportion of the workforce did they represent?

What was their role in the project?

Were there any inter-union issues?

13. Who had responsibility for the leading and coordinating the Workplace Project within the organisation?

Who else was involved in directing or planning the project?
(What roles did they play?)

Was there a lead employee representative?

Who? Local, area or national? or local with area/national back-up?

And were these people involved in the project for any particular reason?

[prompts:]

Was it their usual remit?

Had they been specifically selected? If so why and by whom?

14. What was your role in the project?

How typical is that for a Workplace Project?

15. Was there any resistance to the workplace project at the outset?

(Why? From whom?)

5 – Diagnosing problems & setting objectives

16. What were the key issues at stake?

Who identified that as something that needed to be tackled?
(You? Another Advisor? Senior management? Trade union?)

And on first impressions, how confident were you that it would be resolved?

17. How were the project objectives established?

[prompt:] Who set the initial objectives? How were they agreed?

Did management and employee representatives share the same set of formal objectives?

Was there any tension over what the project should achieve? What?

Besides the agreed objectives, did you sense there were any other motivations or agendas of the people involved in the project (or those who they represented)?

18. Did you play a part in diagnosing the problem and shaping the objectives?
(How did that work? How much influence did you have?)

19. How clear were the agreed objectives?

Were they formally agreed? In writing?

6 – Evolution of Objectives

20. Did the objectives change during the course of the workplace project? How?

[prompt:] Did other objectives emerge through the process of the workplace project from those initially identified? What were these?

[If they did evolve / change, ask the following:]

21. What led to the change?

22. How did the final objectives compare with the ones initially proposed?

Did you feel these final objectives were more appropriate? (In what way?)

23. Were the amendments formally agreed? In writing?

7 - Process & techniques

24. What meetings did you have with the people involved in the project?

What sort of things were discussed?

25. What techniques were used for the project?

[prompts – for each, ask what the subject/topic was & how it was implemented:]

- working groups?
- a staff survey?
- staff focus groups or on-line discussion groups?
- staff training?
- anything else?

26. Did the techniques used change at all during implementation?

[prompt:] Were there any problems/difficulties associated with the techniques chosen?

To what extent did the employee/management representatives approve of the techniques suggested?

8 - Outcomes

27. In what respects did the project meet, or not meet, its objectives?

Were there any other positive impacts of the project – for example, unintended benefits that hadn't been foreseen?

What would you say was the most effective part of the workplace project?

28. Was there any part of the project that didn't work so well?

What was the particular challenge there?

Was this overcome? How?

29. In your opinion did the project have any negative impact on the organisation?
What?

How could this have been avoided?

30. How successful did you personally feel the project was?
Why do you say that?

What was the key to success in this project?

Do you think it could have been more successful? How?

9 – Post-project

31. Do you think the effect of the workplace project will be enduring? Why/How?

Have you done any other related work with the organisation since the completion of the project? What is/was this?

32. In terms of the 'journey' it's taken so far, where would you say the organisation is 'at' in dealing with [the main issue]?
[Prompt:] What does it still need to do?

Close

33. Are there any sensitivities we should be particularly aware of in interviewing the people involved in the project?

Is there anything else you would like to add about what we've discussed?

Thank and close.

Appendix 3: Employee Representative Discussion Guide

Introduction

Introduce self & IES (independent of Acas)

Introduce the evaluation and its purpose:

Acas has commissioned us to evaluate its service for bespoke in-house projects; part of this involves making visits to organisations that have run projects with Acas, to explore their reasons for using the service, their experience of it and how they have found it useful. We are more interested in the *improvements* within the organisation and the '*journey*' you've taken, rather than focusing on historic or current problems.

Explain confidentiality & anonymity:

- **Interview data:** recordings will be treated confidentially & deleted once transcribed; transcriptions will be anonymised at the level of individuals (though organisations will be named) and will be property of Acas.
- **Reports:** prior to being published, the content of reports will be approved with the main participants. You will be able to check for any inaccuracies or information that may be too sensitive. Individuals will not be named in published materials (although organisations will). At the end, Acas will publish a two-page summary of each case study to promote the service and a fuller report that will analyse the cases in more depth.

Any questions before we start?

1. Individual background

I'd like to start by getting a bit of background.

1. What is your role within [organisation]? (Check job title)
How long have you worked in that role & with the organisation?

What is your involvement with the trade union?
Which union?
Full-time officer? Seconded? Part-time employee rep?

Full-time: Who pays your salary?

Part-time:
Do you get paid time-off for this from your employer?
How much time do you spend on union/staff representation duties?
2. What kinds of roles do you play as a rep?

[check for:]
 - representation of individual staff?
 - consultation or negotiation on collective issues?
 - other rep roles – eg health & safety rep; union learning rep?

3. How long have you had this role as employee rep?

Had you had other roles as a representative prior to this?
Where? (What organisation?)

4. Do you know what proportion of staff is represented by your trade union?

Are there any other trade unions recognised by the company?
What staff do they cover? (Demarcations - eg by grade or trade?).
How would you describe inter-union relations? (Good? adverse?)

Does the organisation have any non-union staff reps?
[If yes:] What issues / staff groups do they represent?

2. Employment relations background

5. *In general*, how would you have described employment relations at organisation prior to this project? Good? Poor?
Why do you say that?

6. How well do you think senior management and employee representatives communicated with each other?

7. To what extent is there mutual trust between management and employee representatives?

8. To what extent are employee representatives involved in decision making in the organisation? (eg consulted on decisions, kept abreast of changes)

In what ways are they involved?

What kind of decisions would they be involved in?

9. And are employees directly involved in decision making? (ie without the use of representatives - eg through surveys or focus groups)

How? On what issues?

10. Have there been any major disputes between employee representatives and management?

[if yes:]

Can you briefly describe what this issue involved? (Is it ongoing?)

What has the organisation done to try to resolve this issue?
Has the union / Have the unions been involved?

What do you think still needs to be done?

3. Lead up to the project

11. How did this project come about? Was it suggested by Acas, employee representatives or the company's management?

Did a manager or an employee representative telephone the Acas Employment Advice Helpline, or anyone else at Acas (Who? Phone or face-to-face)?
Was [organisation] in discussion with Acas about another matter?
[if so, probe on what the query / discussion was]

12. Was it a contentious proposal or was there general agreement that something should be done? (If contentious: Why? With whom?)
13. What were the actual issues or problems that led to this project? / What was the motivation for this project?
 Why was that a problem? / What were the reasons behind that?
 How long had that been an issue in your organisation?
14. Had you or management done anything to try to resolve this issue before the contact with Acas?
 What? / Why not?
 Had you discussed it with senior management?
 (What was the result of that?)
15. Why was a decision made to get external help?
 (Who made that decision?)
16. What drew you / [organisation] to use Acas in particular? Expertise? Skills? Anything else?
 Were any other service providers considered? (eg mgt consultants)
17. Had [organisation] or the union been in contact with Acas about this issue before the project? (Which – union or management?)
 [If no:] Had you or [organisation] previously used Acas for any other services?
 (What? Do you think this influenced the decision to use Acas for this project?)
18. Thinking back to when you decided, as an employee rep, to get involved in an Acas facilitated project, what were your objectives in doing so? What did you want to achieve?

4. Contact with Acas & senior mgt

19. Thinking back to the start, what was your personal first contact with Acas about this issue?
20. Over the course of the whole project including leading up to it, what contact did you have with the Acas Advisor?
 Were these face-to-face meetings?
 How many times did you meet?
 How long did you tend to meet for?
 Did you have any contact besides this? (eg email, telephone)
21. Was this about the right amount of contact with the advisor?
 [prompt:] Would you have benefited from more contact? Did you have more contact than you needed?
 Was all this contact with Acas and management?
 If yes: Would you have liked time to discuss issues & concerns with the Acas advisor alone?
22. And what other contact did you have with senior management over this issue?
 Was that about the right amount of contact?

5. Development of project

[note: some of this may have already been covered in discussion of the lead-up to the project: if so, skip it here!].

Objectives

We are keen to understand how your objectives were initially decided and also whether – and if so, how – they changed during the course of the project.

23. Thinking back to when the project started – can you remember what the agreed project objectives as they initially stood?

24. Did these objectives change or evolve over the course of the project, or did you stick to the objectives you originally agreed?

[Prompts:]

Which objectives changed?

Why?

What were they changed to?

Process for diagnosis & developing objectives

25. Did the Acas advisor play a role in diagnosing the problem or getting a better understanding of the issues; or was [organisation] already clear on what the issues were before Acas came in?

[if the former:] What did the adviser do in that respect?

Were you / the trade union(s) involved in diagnosing the problem?
(How / what did you do?)

Was there general agreement on what the key issues to be addressed were?
(What was contentious?)

26. How were the project objectives decided? How did you decide what the project should actually achieve?

Was it a joint decision / shared process?

How easy was it to agree on the objectives?
Why was this? What were the different views?

27. Were project objectives decided before or after Acas became involved?

[If before:] Was there any change to the objectives following Acas involvement?

[If after:] Was the Acas Advisor actively involved in setting the project objectives? (What role did he/she play?)

28. Were the project objectives *formally* agreed? (In writing?)

How clear would you say the objectives of the project were?

[if relevant:] Were revisions to the objectives formally agreed?

29. [if relevant:] Was the Acas Advisor involved in revising the objectives?

30. [Give show cards & chart; leave on table for reference]

These cards show various possible project aims...

Of these things, what would you say the project was designed to actually achieve? ... Was there anything else (not on the cards)?

How did that compare with what you personally wanted to achieve?

Thinking of the various parties working on the project, did different people want to achieve different things?

Elements & stages of the project

31. What were the main elements of the project?
(What did you agree you would do?)

Did the project include... [note which ones included]:

- working groups?
(What on? Who did it include? What was its remit?)
- a staff survey?
(On what subjects? Which staff – all?)
- staff focus groups or on-line discussion groups?
(On what subjects? Which staff – all? What was the format/how did it work?)
- staff training?
(What on? For which staff?)
- anything else? [make a note]

32. How did those elements fit together?
What were the main stages of the project?

33. Is that how the project was originally planned, or did it evolve or change as it went on?
(Were any of the main elements of the project agreed upon later?)

34. Was there union involvement in all these aspects?

Was there any disagreement over the actions proposed?
(Over what? Who was the disagreement between?)

Planning meetings

35. What meetings took place to plan the project and review its progress?

36. Who took part in those meetings/discussions?
Were you / the trade union there?
Was the Acas Adviser there?

37. What was discussed at these meetings / the meetings you attended?

Did you discuss the nature of the problem or issue?
(Did you come to a shared understanding of that? What agreed?)

Did the advisor give you any information or advice in planning meetings?
(What? Was this information/advice useful? Why/Why not?)

Did you talk about employment relations issues or the involvement of the trade union?

(What was the issue? What did you agree?)

Did you discuss staff well-being?

(What, specifically? What did you agree?)

Did you discuss organisational performance?

(What, specifically? What did you agree?)

38. How useful were these meetings?

Is there any way they could have been more productive / useful?

6. Project success & outcomes

Effectiveness of process

[refer to key elements of the project (eg working groups, survey etc):]

39. How successful was [this element of the project]?

What worked well & what didn't work so well?

Why was that?

Could it have been made more effective?

(How? What do you think should have been done?)

40. Do you think the various roles that management, employee representatives and the Acas Advisor had in the project were appropriate?

Is there any way these roles could have worked better? (How?)

41. Was your own role much of a change from what you were used to doing as an employee representative?

Did that pose any challenges for you?

Project-specific outcomes

42. What were the outcomes or results of the project?

[prompts:]

What changes have you noticed in the organisation?

What was that achievement/change due to?

43. Were the project outcomes assessed against the agreed objectives?

44. **[Refer back to show cards].**

In terms of these cards, what do you think the project managed to achieve?

[for each item, probe for:]

- in what way achieved / why not achieved

- illustrations or evidence

45. Have there been any particular areas of concern or problem areas that have not yet been dealt with?

What? What do you think needs to be done to address this?

46. Has the project caused any problems, either for the union or for employees at [organisation]?

What? What could have been done to avoid that?

Broader ER outcomes

For the following questions, also ask:

[if positive impact:]

Has that been measured in any way? (if no: How do you know this?)

How does that compare with before?

What is needed to make these changes sustainable?

[if negative impact:]

Has that been measured in any way? (if no: How do you know this?)

Why did that happen?

What could have been done to avoid that?

[all:]

Do you anticipate any (other) impacts from the project?

47. Has there been any broader impact from the project in employment relations?
(eg increased trust, or better communication & consultation)

48. Have there been any other impact from the project to [organisation], eg in
productivity or performance?

[If yes:] What? What is needed to make these changes sustainable?

[If no:] Do you anticipate any other benefits to follow?

49. Have there been any (other) impacts from the project on staff well-being?

[If yes:] What? What is needed to make these changes sustainable?

[If no:] Do you anticipate any?

Further action

50. Following your Acas project, did you use any other services to help you
manage [the issue]?

[if yes:] What? An Acas service? What was the effect of that?

[If no:] Do you intend to in the future?

51. Is there anything else you need to do to make sure the improvements you've
made are sustainable?

7. Contribution of advisor & Acas' approach

Advisor

52. What contributions would you say the Acas Advisor made to this project?
How did he/she do this? / Why was that important?

What else? / How else did he/she contribute? [repeat until nothing else]

[If not covered, ask about:]

- Intellectual contribution: helping you understand your situation;
- Practical advice;
- Making sure the project delivered (eg supporting effective project working)
- Facilitating joint working between mgt & employee reps.

53. Was there any other benefit from having Acas provide this service? (What?)
54. How would you rate the advisor's knowledge and understanding of the issues [organisation] faced and the context it operates in?

Can you give any examples of that?

Acas approach to project

55. How well was the service you received from Acas tailored to your requirements – thinking about the nature of your organisation, the issues the union faced at [organisation], the restraints you had?

Can you give any examples of that?

56. Was there any aspect of the Acas service, or the advisor's work that you found unhelpful or counterproductive? (What?)

57. How could Acas improve the service they offer for bespoke in-house projects?

8. Close

Is there anything else you'd like to add or comment on?

Thank and close.

Explain that once we have written up a case study report, we will send it to the to correct any factual inaccuracies.

Appendix 4: Management Representative Discussion Guide

Introduction

Introduce self & IES (independent of Acas)

Introduce the evaluation and its purpose:

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Explain confidentiality & anonymity:

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Any questions before we start?

1. Individual background

I'd like to start by getting a bit of background.

1. What is your role within your organisation? (Check job title)
2. How long have you worked in this role & for this organisation?
3. Could you briefly describe your organisation and workforce?
[Probe on: number of employees, main area of business, number of UK locations]
4. Do you have any recognised trade unions? (Who? How many?)

Do you know what proportion of staff is represented by trade unions?

Do you have any non-union staff reps?
[If yes:] What responsibilities do they have? Who do they represent?

2. Employment relations background

5. *In general*, how would you have described employment relations at organisation prior to the project? Good? Poor?
Why do you say that?
6. How well do you think senior management and employee representatives communicated with each other?
7. To what extent is there mutual trust between management and employee representatives?
8. To what extent are employee representatives involved in decision making in the organisation? (eg consulted on decisions, kept abreast of changes)

In what ways are they involved?

What kind of decisions would they be involved in?
9. And are employees directly involved in decision making? (ie without the use of representatives - eg through surveys or focus groups)

How? On what issues?
10. Have there been any major disputes between employee representatives and management?

[if yes:]

Can you briefly describe what this issue involved? (Is it ongoing?)

What has the organisation done to try to resolve this issue?

Has the union / Have the unions been involved?

What do you think still needs to be done?

3. Lead up to the project

11. How did this project come about? Was it suggested by Acas, employee representatives or the company's management?

Did a manager or an employee representative telephone the Acas Employment Advice Helpline, or anyone else at Acas (Who? Phone or face-to-face)?
Was [organisation] in discussion with Acas about another matter?
[if so, probe on what the query / discussion was]
12. Was it a contentious proposal or was there general agreement that something should be done? (If contentious: Why? With whom?)
13. What were the issues or problems that led to this project? / What was the motivation for this project?

Why was that a problem? / What were the reasons behind that?

How long had that been an issue in your organisation?
14. Had you / [organisation] done anything to try to resolve this issue before contacting Acas?
(What? / Why not?)

- Had you discussed it with employee reps?
(What was the result of that?)
15. Who made the decision to run a project with Acas?
Were employee reps involved in this decision?
16. Why was a decision made to get external help?
(Who made that decision?)
17. What drew you / [organisation] to use Acas in particular? Expertise? Skills?
Anything else?
Were any other service providers considered? (eg mgt consultants)
18. Had [organisation] or the union been in contact with Acas about this issue
before the project? (Which – union or management?)
[If no:] Had [organisation] previously used Acas for any other services?
(What? Do you think this influenced the decision to use Acas for this project?)
19. Thinking back to when you decided as a manager to get involved in an Acas
facilitated project, what were your objectives in doing so? What did you want
to achieve?

4. Contact with Acas

20. Thinking back to the start, what was your personal first contact with Acas
about this issue?
21. Over the course of the whole project including leading up to it, what contact
did you have with your Acas Advisor?
Were these all face-to-face meetings?
How many times did you meet?
How long did you tend to meet for?
Did you have any contact besides this? (eg email, telephone)
Were they management-only meetings or were employee reps / trade unions
involved?
22. Was this about the right amount of contact with the advisor?
[prompt:] Would you have benefited from more contact? Did you have more
contact than you needed?
23. And what other contact did you have with employee representatives over this
issue?
Was that about the right amount of contact?

5. Development of project

**[note: some of this may have already been covered in discussion of the
lead-up to the project: if so, skip it here!].**

Objectives

We are keen to understand how your objectives were initially decided and also whether – and if so, how – they changed during the course of the project.

24. Thinking back to when the project started – can you remember what the agreed project objectives as they initially stood?
25. Did these objectives change or evolve over the course of the project, or did you stick to the objectives you originally agreed?

[Prompts:]

Which objectives changed?

Why?

What were they changed to?

Process for diagnosis & developing objectives

26. Did the Acas advisor play a role in diagnosing the problem or getting a better understanding of the issues; or was [organisation] already clear on what the issues were before Acas came in?

[if the former:] What did the adviser do in that respect?

Were you / the trade union(s) involved in diagnosing the problem?
(How / what did you do?)

Was there general agreement on what the key issues to be addressed were?
(What was contentious?)

27. How were the project objectives decided? How did you decide what the project should actually achieve?
Was it a joint decision / shared process?

How easy was it to agree on the objectives?
Why was this? What were the different views?

28. Were project objectives decided before or after Acas became involved?

[If before:] Was there any change to the objectives following Acas involvement?

[If after:] Was the Acas Advisor actively involved in setting the project objectives? (What role did he/she play?)

29. Were the project objectives *formally* agreed? (In writing?)

How clear would you say the objectives of the project were?

[if relevant:] Were revisions to the objectives formally agreed?

30. [if relevant:] Was the Acas Advisor involved in revising the objectives?

31. [Give show cards & chart; leave on table for reference]

These cards show various possible projects aims...

Of these things, what would you say the project was designed to actually achieve? ... Was there anything else (not on the cards)?

How did that compare with what you personally wanted to achieve?

Thinking of the various parties working on the project, did different people want to achieve different things?

Elements & stages of the project

32. What were the main elements of the project?
(What did you agree you would do?)

Did the project include... [note which ones included]:

- working groups?
(What on? Who did it include? What was its remit?)
- a staff survey?
(On what subjects? Which staff – all?)
- staff focus groups or on-line discussion groups?
(On what subjects? Which staff – all? What was the format/how did it work?)
- staff training?
(What on? For which staff?)
- anything else? [make a note]

33. How did those elements fit together?
What were the main stages of the project?

34. Is that how the project was originally planned, or did it evolve or change as it went on?
(Were any of the main elements of the project agreed upon later?)

35. Was there union involvement in all these aspects?

Was there any disagreement over the actions proposed?
(Over what? Who was the disagreement between?)

Planning meetings

36. What meetings took place to plan the project and review its progress?

37. Who took part in those meetings/discussions?
Were employee reps / the trade union there?
Was the Acas Adviser there?

38. What was discussed at these meetings / the meetings you attended?

Did you discuss the nature of the problem or issue?
(Did you come to a clear understanding of that? What was agreed?)

Did the advisor give you any information or advice at this point?
(What? Was this information/advice useful? Why/Why not?)

Did you talk about employment relations issues or the involvement of the trade union?
(What was the issue? What did you agree?)

Did you discuss staff well-being?
(What, specifically? What did you agree?)

Did you discuss organisational performance?
(What, specifically? What did you agree?)

39. How useful were these meetings?

Is there any way they could have been more productive?

6. Project success & outcomes

Effectiveness of process

[refer to key elements of the project (eg working groups, survey etc):]

40. How successful was [this element of the project]?
What worked well & what didn't work so well?
Why was that?

Could it have been made more effective?
(How? What do you think should have been done?)

41. Do you think the various roles that management, employee representatives and the Acas Advisor had in the project were appropriate?

Is there any way these roles could have worked better? (How?)

42. Was your own role much of a change from what you were used to doing as a management representative?

Did that pose any challenges for you?

Project-specific outcomes

43. What were the outcomes or results of the project?

[prompts:]
What changes have you noticed in the organisation?
What was that achievement/change due to?

44. Were the project outcomes assessed against the agreed objectives?

45. **[Refer back to show cards].**
In terms of these cards, what do you think the project managed to achieve?
[for each item, probe for:]
- in what way achieved / why not achieved
- illustrations or evidence

46. Have there been any particular areas of concern or problem areas that have not yet been dealt with?

What? What do you think needs to be done to address this?

47. Has the project caused any problems, either for management or for employees at [organisation]?

What? What could have been done to avoid that?

Broader ER outcomes

For the following questions, also ask:

[if positive impact:]

Has that been measured in any way? (if no: How do you know this?)
How does that compare with before?
What is needed to make these changes sustainable?

[if negative impact:]

Has that been measured in any way? (if no: How do you know this?)
Why did that happen?
What could have been done to avoid that?

[all:]

Do you anticipate any (other) impacts from the project?

48. Has there been any broader benefit from the project on employment relations (eg in trust between management and employee representatives, or the approach to employment relations)?

49. Has there been any (other) benefit from the project in productivity or performance?

[If yes:] What? What is needed to make these changes sustainable?
[If no:] Do you anticipate any?

50. Have there been any (other) impacts from the project on staff well-being?

[If yes:] What? What is needed to make these changes sustainable?
[If no:] Do you anticipate any?

Further action

51. Following your Acas project, did you use any other services to help you manage [the issue]?

[if yes:] What? How has that worked / What was the effect of that?
[If no:] Do you intend to in the future?

52. Is there anything else you need to do to make sure the improvements you've made are sustainable?

7. Contribution of advisor & Acas' approach

Advisor

53. What contributions would you say the Acas Advisor made to this project?
How did he/she do this? / Why was that important?

What else? / How else did he/she contribute? [repeat until nothing else]

[If not covered, ask about:]

- Intellectual contribution: helping you understand your situation;
- Practical advice;
- Making sure the project delivered (eg supporting effective project working, or facilitating collaboration between mgt & employee reps).

54. Was there any other benefit from having Acas provide this service? (What?)

55. How would you rate the advisor's knowledge and understanding of the issues you faced and the context in which you work?

Can you give any examples of that?

Acas approach to project

56. How well was the service you received from Acas tailored to your requirements – thinking about the nature of your organisation, the issues you faced, the restraints you had?

Can you give any examples of that?

57. Was there any aspect of the Acas service, or the advisor's work that you found unhelpful or counterproductive? (What?)

58. How could Acas improve the service they offer for bespoke in-house projects?

8. Close

Is there anything else you'd like to add or comment on?

Thank and close.

Explain that once we have written up a case study report, we will send it to them to correct any factual inaccuracies and approve using the organisation name.

Appendix 5: General Staff Discussion Guide

1. Introductions

Introduce self (independent, not part of ACAS)

Introduce the evaluation and its purpose:

ACAS has asked us to evaluate its service for bespoke in-house projects; part of this involves making visits to organisations that have run a project with Acas, how useful they have found it and what benefits they perceive to have gained through the project. We are more interested in the changes made and the process used (the 'journey' they've taken), rather than focusing on historic / actual problems.

Anonymity & confidentiality: there will be nothing in reports to identify individuals, but organisations will be named case studies. Transcripts of interview recordings will be kept confidentially and analysed by the research team, and will then remain property of Acas; recordings will be deleted. People should feel free to tell us exactly how they feel because we don't pass on the views with any names attached, just report back generally. Case study reports will be published only with permission from each case study organisation.

2. Background

1. What is your job title and role within your organisation?
2. How long have you worked in this role and for this organisation?

3. The Acas Project

3. Are you aware that your organisation has run a project with Acas on [topic]?

If yes:

What do you know about this?

Were you involved in it at all? How? What were your role and responsibility in the project?

What did you think of the service that Acas provided?

Do you know what the main objectives of the project were?

[If yes:] Do you think these objectives were appropriate? Why?/Why not?

If no:

Are you familiar with Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service)?

Do you know what it does?

One thing Acas does is offer a service whereby it helps organisations to address problems in the workplace through collaborative working between management and employee representatives.

4. What has your experience of [topic] been at organisation?
(How has the issue of [topic] affected you in your job?)
5. Why do you think your organisation decided to run an externally facilitated project on [topic]?

Do you think that this was an area that the organisation needed to address?

[Prompts:]

What do you think the problem or challenge was seen to be in this area of [topic]?

What in your opinion is the reason behind the problem?

How long has this been an issue in your organisation?

What has [organisation] done to try to resolve this in the past?

What do you think needs to be done?

Do you think a project involving Acas, management and employee representatives, would be a sensible way to improve this? Why?

4. Employment Relations

6. In general, how would you describe employment relations at organisation?

Good? Poor?

Why do you say that?

7. How well do you think senior management and employee representatives communicate with each other?

8. To what extent is there mutual trust between management and employee representatives?

9. To what extent are employee representatives involved in decision making in the organisation? (eg consulted on decisions, kept abreast of changes)

In what ways are they involved?

What kind of decisions would they be involved in?

10. And are employees directly involved in decision making? (ie without the use of representatives - eg through surveys or focus groups)

How? On what issues?

11. Are there any particular disputes between employee representatives and management, or any particular difficulties in people management?

[if yes:]

Can you briefly describe what this issue involves / has involved?

What has the organisation you done to try to resolve this issue?

What do you think needs to be done?

5. Perceptions of Changes

12. Do you think the project on [topic] has impacted on or changed your work in any way?

Why do you say that?

13. Have you noticed any (other) changes in workplace relations recently / [since the project took place]?

What has changed?

Have there been any changes in....

[probe on]:

- the way senior management works with employee representatives?
- the way consultation or communication with staff takes place?
- the level of trust between employees and senior management?
- policies and procedures surrounding [topic]?
- how productively or effectively people work?

[if yes:] What change has there been?

What would you put that down to?

Close

Thank them for their time.

Is there anything you've discussed that you would prefer us to remove from our analysis, or anything you've said that you would prefer us not to quote? To remind you, the organisation will be a named case study, but individuals will not be named. Some verbatim quotes will be used to illustrate points.

Appendix 6: 'Show Cards' for Workplace Projects Evaluation

improve employment relations	develop policies & procedures	improve employee well-being
resolve an employment dispute	support organisational change	create a fairer workplace
increase productivity	facilitate staff consultation	support business strategy
improve HR related outcomes	improve communication with staff	reduce the likelihood of future disputes

To be printed on card, cut up & presented to interviewees along with show cards chart. Blanks for interviewees to write other objectives/achievements.

