

Case study



Acas workplace projects: partnership and better consultation at the UK Passport Service

Acas assisted the UK Passport Service to improve relationships between management and the union, who then developed a partnership agreement. Further work with Acas has helped the parties deal with public sector change processes and improve information and consultation processes.

The issue

The UK Passport Service employs 2,700 staff at eight sites across the United Kingdom. Managers and union representatives from the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union contacted Acas for help in 1999. After some past problems, they realised that they needed to build trust and improve information sharing to build a platform for successfully tackling future change.

How did Acas help?

Acas engaged in extensive work with the Passport Service to improve management/union relations. During 2000 and 2001, Acas advisers facilitated nine one-day workshops at the Service's sites around the country. These were attended by senior and middle managers and union representatives, who together developed strategies for improving relationships. The workshops led to a fundamental review of the relationship and culminated in a new partnership agreement. A second round of ten workshops – funded by the DTI's Partnership Fund – was held over 2002 and 2003. Again, senior managers and union representatives attended and developed action plans for putting partnership into practice at the local level. Acas further assisted the Service in 2004 by training in-house mediators, and a third series of Acas-facilitated partnership "refresh and review" workshops are planned for 2004.

The results: improved consultation and change management processes

With the shift to partnership working, new consultation and communication mechanisms have been established to encourage two-way dialogue. Monthly team briefings with question and answer sessions, CEO site visits to outline future plans, and informal meetings between staff and board members have all resulted in a welcome increase in employee participation.

Union representatives now attend key management meetings, enabling them to play a greater role in decision making. The outcome is speedier and more effective joint decision-making. Recent pay negotiations have taken less time, with both sides developing a common understanding of the issues and reaching a pay deal after just a few meetings. The 2003 pay deal received widespread employee approval, with one of the largest ballot turnouts and majorities in favour ever experienced.



Additionally, new focus days involving union participation in 'blue sky thinking' on strategic changes were considered especially valuable in cementing the relationship, and allowing for creative dialogue.

Overall, shared buy-in and high quality decisions were regarded by both sides as contributing to improved organisational performance. An example was the recent speedy implementation of swipe cards for employees to enable secure movement around the workplace. The risk of opposition from the workforce was removed as the union was involved from day one in policy formation. The result was that the project ran smoothly to completion.

Improving trust between the parties was a key feature of the work, as in most Acas workplace projects. Improved relationships mean that management feel free to fully engage the union in early discussions on often sensitive issues. A union representative described how dialogue had changed 'from arguing, to discussing'. Managers and union representatives also felt that the workplace climate had improved considerably and a mid 2003 staff survey showed improvement in staff satisfaction.

An HR manager recommended the involvement of Acas in organisations planning to improve their relationships. Management and union representatives valued the independence, accessibility and credibility of Acas, as well as its expertise in the subject, describing Acas as the 'standard bearer' of good employment relations.

For further details please contact Research@acas.org.uk

