

A meeting by any other name

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Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

If I said the words 'joint consultative committee', what associations or images would they bring to mind?

For many they would conjure up face-to-face meetings (remember them?), with agendas sent out well in advance, formal etiquette during the meeting itself, and detailed minutes with action points to follow. Heavy in process you might think.

To some the words might also feel a little dated. In their [guide on how best to consult staff](#), the CIPD suggest using terms like 'innovation forum'. But what strikes me about consultation is that whatever words you use to describe your arrangements, it's vital to recognise that building trusted consultation channels takes time, and it can be testing. Change in the coronavirus (COVID-19) world is ever more complicated, technical perhaps, and that means working hard to create the change that you believe is right.

Consultation: a voice lost in a crowd

A new [Acas policy paper](#), published today, suggests that no matter what we call the process of involving employees in decision-making – engagement has become popular – we should not forget the reason we do it. We do it, for example, because getting people back to work safely involves reassurance, planning, logistics, and ultimately, reaching consensus on what works best for everyone – for the business and for workers.

Consultation is more important than ever because:

Habits acquired in the good times serve you well in the difficult times

But if you haven't started involving your staff, it's time to start. And the changes to the Information and Consultation of Employee Regulations, that became law on 6th April this year, mean that it is easier for employees to trigger an information and consultation request from their employers (the threshold has been lowered from 10% of the workforce to just 2%). This is, of course, a legal requirement for many collective redundancies.

We have critical things to discuss that go beyond coronavirus

The 'Black Lives Matter' campaign, and the loss of trust in some institutions, has reminded us that racial equality has to be permanently on our workplace agenda; and there are other big cultural changes we want to see, for example around gender equality and eradicating sexual harassment. Consultative groups can keep these issues in the forefront of our minds every day, and help formulate solutions, especially if the membership is diverse.

We need solutions

As the Acas paper reminds us, "management don't have a monopoly on good ideas"; so why wouldn't you trawl far and wide for creative ideas? Also, it's worth noting that the health crisis has given everyone a chance to reflect on what matters most to them, with environmental and family concerns coming more to the fore, so if we are to understand our people, we need to understand their shifting priorities and interests.

Unions have reported an upturn in new members in recent months and, as champions of workers' involvement and participation, they have a hugely valuable role to play. But what we must change is the idea that consultation is just nice to have, because it's an essential ingredient of fair and productive workplaces. Consultation can too easily be regarded as a 'foul weather friend' that you turn to when times are tough. The conversation needs to keep going beyond the immediate crisis.

Acas advisers often say that the sign of a good, happy workplace is not the absence of any complaints or grievances, but the way complaints and grievances are handled. We shouldn't be afraid of having disagreements and acknowledging that we have different perspectives and interests. What we must share is a willingness to move towards mutually agreeable solutions.

Employers who are used to listening to and involving their staff will be quicker at responding to their needs and better able to maintain motivation and engagement in the very real problems that lie ahead. The next big challenge is to find better ways of using technology to involve staff remotely, more quickly. More on this soon.