

**UNION MODERNISATION FUND –
ROUND 2**

BECTU: Modernising Two-Way
Communications – Case Study

SEPTEMBER 2010

BECTU: Modernising Two-Way Communications

Background

BECTU is a small trade union with approximately 25,000 members working in the film, TV, theatre and interactive media sectors. Around 40% of members work as freelancers and large numbers work for small theatres, arts centres and independent film and TV production companies. This pattern of atypical employment relations and small, hard to organise employers is compounded by constant technological innovation and global competition. Union organisation in this context is a constant challenge.

The needs of BECTU members are determined by accelerating technological change, freelance working, shifting patterns of ownership and regulation, and numerous skills shortages. The union wanted to resolve the problem of how a trade union could enable members with very mobile working lives, extensive freelancing, fixed-term contracts, remote work locations and often only limited contact with colleagues to participate in and benefit from trade union membership. Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) support would help them do that.

Why this project?

The use of the web is vital for a union like BECTU, whose members work in large part in the media and broadcasting sectors where excellent and powerful web-

services are taken for granted. The UMF project would mean that members could become more influential in the life of the union and enable them to communicate more on their own terms.

Aims and objectives

The union set out to modernise relations with members, non-members, employers and other partners. They planned to *'use web-based tools to transform communications, provision of services and support for networks and communities amongst our members and beyond'*. With a new website interface creating a single access point to all services and resources, they set out to:

- increase members' and representatives' participation in union affairs
- provide the information and guidance members need to develop their careers
- allow branches to extend their networks to share knowledge and maximise employment opportunities
- encourage and support under-represented groups in becoming part of the industry and of the BECTU community
- promote a better understanding of BECTU's role in the industry
- better influence employers and national agencies on behalf of members through improved communications with members

- enable members to manage some personal information online
- provide all branches with their own dedicated pages to give members easier access to the information they need
- provide new online tools to branch reps to help with local organisation
- promote and extend the use of modern communications techniques by and between officials, support staff and members
- extend access to BECTU services, information, training and events.

Methodology and outcomes

Over the previous ten years, BECTU's website had been externally operated. The challenge of the redevelopment project was to bring the site in house and to place it at the centre of the union's communications and organisation strategy with the benefit of web 2.0 technologies. A project team was established and the project was managed by Sharon Elliott, as the newly appointed Communications Officer. The first year of the project focused on recruiting a web development company, coupled with the design and build of a multi-faceted site in association with the union's database management team. Year two saw the delivery of the site, further development and extensive internal communications, and training involving BECTU representatives, union staff and the wider union membership.

The union contracted with NetXtra to develop the comprehensive website, agreeing a detailed project plan which included modules for

news, training, events, branches/divisions and branch web pages, and Crewbus, the union's online freelance directory. Miller Technology Ltd delivered the member-only components and enabled them to interact with the union's central database.

Additional security work was commissioned in the second year of the project to boost the security of the login process. Steps were taken to organise penetration tests to protect members' data and the architecture of the site.

Weekly conference calls '*were essential to building a shared understanding about the work and to keeping the project on track, if not necessarily on time*'. User testing ahead of the launch of the site was a crucial stage, minimising the number of technical issues post-launch.

Once the site was officially launched, login information was issued to BECTU members and the Student Register (a contact scheme aimed at college and university students planning a career in the cultural sectors) was re-launched. Briefings took place regularly, new pages and content were created and knowledge and experience were shared and developed. The union reinforced its efforts to increase the number of member email addresses it held in order to promote the site efficiently.

The new site uses the best available web-enabled tools to provide improved access to BECTU's services. The member-only enhancements and the associated web tools were designed so that full-time and lay

reps could work to engage all members in discussions about the union's priorities and not solely have to rely on engagement with those able or willing to attend meetings. The ability of all union branches to run their own branch web pages was a key part of the development.

Training

Brian Kelly, Training Officer, developed the site's training pages and designed new reps' courses to promote the new web functions, which ran monthly in year two of the project. Training was designed for three distinct groups of learners:

- a one-day training programme, run mainly at head office but also in the nations and regions, for branch secretaries and branch web-page editors
- a one to two hour introductory workshop for reps' meetings (and other training courses to give an overview and taster of the new facilities)
- a 'micro workshop' lasting just 20 minutes, for delivery at public events and on occasions where lengthier engagement with learners was not possible.

The training programme (which was ambitious and trained 800 members, reps and officials in 2009 alone) was designed to work with the existing infrastructure of union meetings, courses and public events. Says Sharon Elliott, the Project Manager, *'These courses were essential to helping branch secretaries access and use the branch data available online. New web page editors have been*

briefed and supported in the use of their new online tools.'

Communications

Communications were crucial to reach as many stakeholders as possible and to keep the project high on everyone's radar. Throughout the first year, efforts were made to keep the union's membership up to speed with plans for the new site. In particular, members of the reps' focus group and the Communications Committee were regularly consulted and articles appeared in the union's journal. The union's 2009 annual conference provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the project with reps and to involve them in setting objectives to encourage members and reps generally to visit and use the site. More than 40 reps took part in a special workshop led by an expert in social media to assess the new site in the context of the range of online opportunities. Reps suggested a number of refinements to the site, especially with regard to branch web pages and forums, which were taken forward later in the project.

The project team has encouraged take up of the new facilities through publicity on the site, branch circulars, bulk emails, journal articles and briefings to officials and reps.

Evaluation

The project met the majority of its objectives during the formal project period, in terms of the number of:

- members logging on to the site, members able to

amend their own record and branch reps able to communicate with their members via the site

- branch reps able to communicate with each other
- online registration for course and events
- members able to contribute to policy and decision making
- members getting access to information.

Feedback from members suggests that the new site is well appreciated. Central to the project was the desire to encourage culture change within BECTU by providing new ways for branch reps to 'speak' to their reps using their branch pages and new ways for members to speak to one another, both within and across branches, via the site. One measure of the extent of members' engagement with these aims is the number of members who had used their login – 63% of branch secretaries and some 37% of members with an email address. Data for the new site shows that the number of monthly page views is up substantially (by 150% on average) when compared with figures for the previous site. These site statistics also show that visitors to the new site are spending more time there.

More than 50 branches had launched their own dedicated web pages by the end of the formal project period. The pages allow branch news to be posted, updates on negotiations to be provided and documents to be uploaded for the benefit of members. Branch secretaries have welcomed the ready and easier access to branch

data which the site now provides. Some branch reps also made use of the forums and their feedback led to modifications to make this facility more attractive to more representatives and to members generally. BECTU staff have also embraced the new website:

'As far as BECTU staff are concerned, there is a greater appreciation of the value of the website. Officials are making room for the site in their communication plans and there is scope clearly to make more use of the site. Officials are encouraging branch reps to make use of their branch pages and of the available branch data.'

Lessons learned

Don't take on too much – the original plan envisaged the re-launch of a new site with substantial member-only areas, new 'join online' functionality and the redesign and re-launch of the union's existing freelance directory, Crewbus. It is clear that BECTU underestimated the time needed to develop and deliver all these elements; for this reason the new Join Online functionality and the Crewbus relaunch were deferred until 2010.

Insist on the right customer focus – it is important when working with external partners to ensure that they have the right customer focus. Sharon explains, *'Our understanding of the demands which the union can rightly make as a client has been developed during the project period; in addition there is better intelligence about our responsibilities as a client, not least in terms of articulating what we need.'*

Get colleagues on board – whilst BECTU had significant internal and external support throughout the project, the union’s preparation would have benefited from a more formal discussion at the outset with all colleagues expected to contribute to the project, either in the development phase or on delivery. *‘Early buy-in by everyone directly affected would have helped to smooth pathways when problems occurred which, not surprisingly with a project of this scale, they did.’*

Expect the unexpected – issues will arise which have not been anticipated. *‘Breathe deeply and keep calm!’*

Examine the full costs – double, if not triple check, that all elements essential for project delivery have been factored in. It may be necessary to take external advice to make sure that nothing essential is missed. *‘Unwelcome additional costs are one factor but the timing of late negotiations to deliver on a missing aspect may not secure the best price/conditions.’*

Project management – *‘the preparatory work done by colleagues, and supported by BIS, to set a formal project management framework was invaluable to the delivery of all aspects of the project. This overarching project plan also worked well with NetXtra’s use of established project management tools. Whilst timelines and milestones altered in response to day-to-day experience of the project, project management principles were essential to steering the project towards delivery.’* Colleagues working on

the union’s UMF3 projects will also be using project management disciplines to guide their work.

Pace of cultural change – *‘Our experience tells us that it is important to be realistic about the pace of cultural change. Whilst we have enthusiastic reps, members and officials it is clear that we need to continue to ‘sell the site’ to representatives and members to build further on the positive results of the first nine months. We will continue to invest resources and to identify new ways to encourage our audience to use the site as an essential and frequent place of reference.’*

Looking ahead

The job of bringing the operation of the website in house, followed swiftly by the redevelopment of the site, has been, says Sharon Elliott, *‘a huge and important undertaking, which is already helping to shape the union going forward. Officials and staff generally see the site as a central part of the union’s operations and are more actively using the website to communicate their work to members. The union is being modernised by this project and is engaged in a more extensive exchange of information with members using the site. This process of modernisation will continue.’*

BECTU has detailed the following aims for the project in 2010:

- The union will continue promotion of the site, both internally and externally.
- Internally, BECTU will continue to work with reps on using the site to strengthen local

- organisation, not least through the branch web pages and the use of the site's forum capability.
- A virtual learning environment will be introduced in 2010 and the existing online instructional videos (currently on YouTube) will be available as part of a more structured online learning offer. Reps' training will continue with at least four one-day workshops for branch secretaries and branch web-page editors in 2010; the 'introductory' and 'micro' workshops will continue to be available on demand.
 - From an external point of view, BECTU will continue to work on building recognition of the site by its range of users (who include members, employers and those working in the industry).
 - The union will continue to measure members' responses.
 - The website will be a key resource in further developing recognition of BECTU via the increasingly influential social networking sites.
 - Special interest groups – such as on health and safety and equality – will be encouraged to use the site's tools to reinforce their networks.
 - More will be done to increase the number of email addresses held centrally, so that more time-sensitive information can be provided to members.
- The site will be consolidated with more content, more interactivity, the introduction of targeted newsletters and work on search engine optimisation (priorities for driving traffic to the site).
 - Head office activities will be reviewed to ensure that the site is being used to best effect to strengthen communications and deliver efficiencies where possible.
 - The site will be central to the development and delivery of additional content aimed at new entrants as part of BECTU's UMF3 project running from 2010 to 2012.
 - New services will be offered via the site, the first of which – BECTU Plus, a package of member benefits - was launched in January 2010.

Conclusions

Sharon Elliott sums up:

'From a union-wide perspective, the new website has delivered clear benefits thanks to its integration into the union's day-to-day operations. There is more coverage of the range of union issues and more scope to add more content. Speedier communications, relevant to all sections of the union, and available to members at or away from base, or on location, make a real difference to the way the union is perceived. We have made big strides in using the site to deliver benefits throughout the organisation but there are more opportunities still to be taken. Our vision of the future is one where the transformative potential of the internet can be harnessed to

support the traditional functions of our trade union. Our supportive networks can be strengthened, our reps can be more creative and independent in their communications with their members and our members can have readier access to the information they need and can reach out to their fellow members. Equally important to us is the increased scope we now have to encourage our sectors to be more inclusive by sharing our knowledge, promoting the union's values and working with other agencies which share our goals. The transformation we envisage will be deep-seated and radical because it will change the way we all do business with each other on a day-to-day basis and will not be readily reversible. The investment will change how we communicate with and relate to our members for the long term, whilst at the same time we remain focused on strong union organisation.'

General Secretary Gerry Morrissey agrees:

'The benefit to BECTU of this UMF project has been immense. It has allowed our staff and freelance members, who work all over the UK and beyond, to keep in better contact with the issues which affect them. The site assists not just these individuals but the entire industry, and in particular those employers who rely on freelance talent. Thanks to the project we will be in a better position to encourage employers to use our relaunched freelance directory, Crewbus, as they "crew up" productions. Across the union, employed members can develop stronger links with their branch officials and keep in touch

with local developments via their branch website pages. From our point of view, although we intended to make these changes at some point, with the help of the UMF we've been able to bring our plans forward by some years. We're delighted with the results.'

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