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The role of union representatives in developing employability skills in partnership with employers: TUC Unionlearn

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Brief description

TUC Unionlearn: The unusually strong partnership between the trade union and the employer enables workers at McVitie's to gain transferable skills to help their employability and chances of promotion.

Overview – the provider's message

'McVitie's, like other large employers, requires its employees to have basic levels of literacy and numeracy for health and safety reasons. USDAW, the union recognised by McVitie's and which represents nearly all the workforce, is enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by the Union Learning Fund to its members. Many of its members are traditionally hard-to-reach learners, such as part-time women workers and shift workers. The workplace representatives at McVitie's were able to convince their employer of the benefits that Union Learning Representatives could bring to the workforce and the company. This has led to an unusually strong partnership, with a workplace Learning Centre providing a safe place where learners can be helped to achieve literacy and numeracy qualifications without being stigmatised. Everyone benefits – learners gain in skills and confidence, and the employer gains a more skilled articulate and motivated workforce.'



Judith Swift, TUC Unionlearn

The good practice in detail

It seems obvious that partnerships between an employer and a trade union can be a powerful force to support learning in the workplace. The TUC has recently produced a [research paper](#) in which individual learners say how this kind of learning has provided them with valuable opportunities they would not have had otherwise. But how can an employer be persuaded that literacy and numeracy training is a benefit and not a cost? And how can employees be motivated to make the effort to improve skills they failed to acquire at school, and have managed without ever since? The role of Unionlearn can be key in providing and supporting the Union Learning Representatives who are the lynchpins of workplace learning schemes.

How the partnership works

Unions and union learning projects can make learning affordable in the workplace by setting up Collective Learning Funds (CLFs). These are essentially pots of resource, money or time, with which employers, workers, learning providers and unions jointly invest in efforts to deliver courses and training for learners. At McVitie's in Manchester, which employs over 600 people with around 70% of the workforce engaged in learning, their CLF was originally developed with grants from Unionlearn in the North West and the employer. The Learning Centre at McVitie's offers a wide range of courses with the highest recruitment in literacy and numeracy. The workforce can engage in vocational training, language and IT courses. The centre has also created a reading culture with ties with Stockport library and the Six Book Challenge. Now the Union Learning Representatives at McVitie's are using UK Online grants of £35 as an alternative co-investor in the learning centre.

Benefits for the workforce

The most obvious benefit for new members of the McVitie's workforce is that passing the literacy and numeracy tests means they can be taken on as an employee, rather than remaining as an agency worker. However, there are all kinds of other benefits for more experienced workers, many of whom started working for the company before the test was introduced 14 years ago. Acquiring literacy and numeracy skills can increase workers' employability – although moving to a different company does not often happen. What has happened more often, according to Jonathan Waterhouse, the company's lead Union Learning Representative, is that workers feel inclined to stay because they are pleased that the company has chosen to invest in developing their skills. It also gives a chance for progression within the company, and new opportunities are being offered in the form of the creation of the Advanced Team Member role, to release engineers from some of their more routine functions.



Learners without sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to pass the company's test (at level 1 approximately), value the support they are offered through the Learning Centre. They are not generally able to attend during work time, but they can come before or after their shifts, and in any downtime that might occur. The take-up of the offer of support for basic skills has been so great that the provider Work Solutions has now moved from offering a few hours support to two full days at the site.

Benefits for the employer

McVitie's, like many food manufacturing companies, requires its workforce to have basic literacy and numeracy skills to become machine operatives or to be promoted to other roles. It is a requirement for health and safety reasons – employees need to be able to read and

respond to instructions on health and safety as a minimum. Increasingly, McVitie's like other employers, requires the workforce to be proactive, particularly in making suggestions about possible improvements to production processes, in the face of global competition. It also needs to manage the knowledge carried in the heads of its workforce – traditionally, employees have stayed with the company for an average of 15 to 20 years, and the company is understandably anxious to have access to the knowledge held by long-standing employees. A more articulate and confident workforce is more likely to be able to share and discuss knowledge about the best ways of carrying out different processes. As Lesley Flood, McVitie's training coordinator says, 'the increasingly sophisticated audit and customer requirements need an educated and proactive rather than passive workforce'. It is for these reasons that McVitie's has introduced its own tests which employees have to pass in order to be taken on by the company, and also to progress within it. The difference for the workforce is that they have Union Learning Representatives to support them to acquire the skills to pass the tests.

The role of the Union Learning Representative

Essentially, the Union Learning Representative is the catalyst who makes everything happen. In the case of McVitie's, Jonathan (who was the [TUC's Union Learning Rep of the Year in 2011](#)) coordinates a team of Representatives. Lesley says 'He's like a conductor, bringing in different sections of his orchestra to meet different people's needs. He's brilliant at matching different workers to the Representative with the right skills for them.' As an employer, McVitie's is spared the effort of identifying a provider and developing a programme that is right for the company and the individual – the Representative and Unionlearn take on that role. As Lesley says, 'Work like this didn't just happen overnight' – it takes time to bury historic differences between employers and their workforce in the interests of shared benefits. As the lead Representative, Jonathan has introduced systematic initial assessment and individualised training programmes for learners to follow to prepare them appropriately for the Skills for Life qualification and for the employer's test. Before this partnership started, employees would have had no preparation for the test, and it was a barrier to employment and progression for many.

The demand for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) support is not sufficient to justify its provision, but the Representative is able to provide information about provision offered locally by another union. This has been so successful that some learners take their family members as well. Jonathan and Lesley are very aware that their learners do not exist in isolation – they have other roles in the community than that of employees, and the partnership is keen to support further learning. Nationally, about a quarter of Unionlearn centres are open to families and communities of learners. McVitie's cannot offer open access, but they can (and do) direct learners to other provision. As Lesley and Jonathan say, 'We can always send them some biscuits...'

Provider background

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) established the Union Learning Representative role in 1998. During the same year, a government grant established the Union Learning Fund (ULF) to help unions to develop learning opportunities. In 2003, Union Learning Representatives acquired statutory rights similar to other union representatives. Union Learning Representatives now support a wide range of learning on employers' premises, in local college centres and in trade union premises. [Unionlearn](#) was set up in 2006 to manage this.

Its management team reports to the Board of the TUC's General Council. McVitie's is one of the employers working with Unionlearn to provide training to its employees in the workplace.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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