
The Value of Trade Union Facility Time

Insight, Challenges and Solutions



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Executive summary

The study

This report presents the findings of research conducted by NatCen Social Research on trade union facility time between April and June 2012. The research was commissioned by UNISON to provide qualitative insight into the value, challenges and issues arising from facility time; solutions to the challenges and issues identified were also discussed.

The research comprised 129 written submissions in response to five research questions and three deliberative focus groups with branch reps and human resources professionals in the public sector. The sample was contacted through UNISON branch secretaries.

Benefits arising from the use of facility time

The use of facility time in workplaces where UNISON organises reflected Acas guidance on time off for union duties and activities. Four main benefits that arose from the use of facility time were identified:

- Provision of a **ready-made structure for meaningful consultation and negotiation** saving organisations money and providing reassurance to members that their views are valued in decision-making.
- Facilitation of partnership working with trade unions that **improved workplace relations** and the reputation of an employer as 'a good place to work'.
- **Earlier intervention** in relation to complaints, grievances and disciplinaries preventing escalation into more serious problems; thereby saving organisations and taxpayers money by reducing the impact on staff time and possible legal costs.
- **Better communication** to manage change during restructuring and redundancy processes; thereby improving understanding of decisions, minimising negative impacts and reducing the number of working days lost through industrial action.

The value of facility time in itself

In addition to benefits arising from the use of facility time, the time also had value in itself. The value of facility time in this respect came from better representation of members' views and improved availability of representatives to work with employers on areas of common interest.

Where reps were released or seconded from their substantive posts the quality of representation and availability of reps was further improved because reps were able to: (a) focus further on their duties; (b) prepare better for discussions with managers and (c) build up relationships of respect trust with managers over time.

Issues, challenges and possible solutions

There is a need for UNISON to continue to develop its strategy for supporting reps in their use of facility time. The union should:

- Continue to address misleading and one-sided information about facility time; and
- Ensure branch structures and practices are adequate to address the challenges created by outsourcing and 'localisation'.

There was a significant need for practical information on the most effective ways to manage facility time. Key ways to make facility time more effective included:

- Promoting a **flexible and tailored approach** to facility time to account for varying workloads within the organisation and that adequately reflected the size of branch membership and the substantive roles reps performed alongside their union duties;
- Putting in place **effective systems for allocating work within branches** so work could be fairly distributed between reps, ensuring that enough lay reps were trained to take on non-complex case work;
- Promoting the **benefits of released or seconded reps for employers and trade unions** (provided the terms and conditions and career development needs of such reps were also properly considered).

The ability of reps to access facility time was a significant challenge. Practical information and guidance that UNISON could provide to assist reps in doing so was:

- Information to improve manager and colleague awareness of facility time;
- Good practice in relation to providing cover or backfill for reps (e.g. pooled central budgets, a 'bank' of staff to cover reps, supporting arguments for released or seconded reps);
- Reduction of management and rep concerns about potential misuse of facility time through more transparent systems for allocation and monitoring of work.

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