Working Together? An investigation into managers’ attitudes towards trade unions.

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# Executive Summary: key findings

**Managers’ attitudes to trade unions in the wider society**

*Managers’ views on trade unions have become much more positive since 1980.*

* In 2013 significantly fewer managers (31%) think that trade unions do *not* act in the county’s economic interest than in 1980 (86%).
* More managers in 2013 (26%) than in 2000 (17%) think that trade unions have too much power; but this is much lower than in 1980 (83%)

**Managers’ attitudes to the role of trade unions in the workplace**

*The majority of managers who expressed a preference appear to support the idea that organisations benefit from having a trade union.*

* 56% of managers see a clear role for trade unions in the modern workplace, with key roles of protecting members (28%) and giving members more influence (41%).
* 34% of managers think trade unions add value to an organisation.
* But, 30% of managers think that unions do not understand the commercial pressures they face and that they cause conflict within workplaces (37%).
* 73% of managers think that trade unions should work more effectively with management.
* 49% of managers think trade unions protect workers from bad management.

**Managers’ attitudes to the role of trade unions in employee engagement**

*The most positive responses from managers were in relation to employee engagement.*

* 58% of managers see a role for trade unions in securing and 59% see a role for trade unions in maintaining employee engagement. 39% of respondents also felt that union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement.
* However, few managers felt that a union presence encourages employees to ‘go the extra mile’ (17%), or encourages trust between the workforce and management (31%), or encourages employees to feel positive about their organisation (24%).
* Opinion was divided on whether employee engagement practices replace the need for trade unions.

**Managers’ attitudes to the role of trade unions in improving job quality**

*Unions were seen to make a positive contribution in giving employee voice and promoting equality.*

* 53% of the respondents felt that a trade union presence improves employee voice and 38% that unions are successful at achieving employee wage increases.
* 47% of managers thought trade unions promote equality in the workplace, but,
* 30% thought that work-life-balance and family-friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces, while 26% did not.
* 40% of managers thought unions do little to affect skill levels; 19% thought unions are key partners in improving skills; and 19% thought unions improve training and progression.
* 22% of managers thought that unions make a positive contribution to job satisfaction.

**Demographic differences between managers**

*Women managers, managers in the public sector and junior managers have the most positive attitudes towards trade unions.*

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## Background and context

Reputational damage caused by high profile disputes in the late 1970s and government economic and social policies of the 1980s and 1990s did much to change the view of trade unions – they were increasingly seen as impediments to organisational and market efficiency. The subsequent emergence of largely non-unionised new industries, increased diversity amongst the UK workforce and the emergence of human resource management, which advocates individualising the employment relationship, has seen wholesale changes in how employee relations are managed today. There is strong evidence that the range of employee relations matters that are subject to joint decision making between the workforce and management has significantly reduced over the past thirty years (van Wanrooy *et al*, 2011).

At the same time, there is increasing interest in employee engagement in contemporary workplaces (Purcell and Hall, 2012). The decline in trade union membership and the number of workplaces in which unions have a presence has resulted in a representation gap, leaving many employees without a route to influence decisions on workplace issues that matter to them and it is unlikely that this will have a positive effect on their level of engagement. The traditional role for trade unions as the vehicle for harnessing employee voice and as legitimate stakeholder within organisations appears largely to have been rejected, or at least forgotten, by many managers. This may be a missed opportunity to tap into the talent and creativity of others in attempting to solve business challenges.

There has though been some recent recognition of the benefits for both managers and unions of closer engagement (Stuart *et al* 2010). Other research has started to define the benefits of closer co-operation, such as UnionLearn’s examination of workplace learning which showed that managerial support for union learning programmes increases their effectiveness (Bacon and Hoque, 2009). However, it remains unclear what managers, in general, think about the role, efficacy and value of trade unions and their willingness to foster closer working relationships.

## 1.2 Rationale for this project

There is a general lack of information on how managers feel about the roles and activities of trade unions, although some significant studies should be noted. In particular, Poole *et al* (2001 and 2005) conducted research with CMI members in 1980, 1990 and 2000, which examined attitudes towards trade unions in general terms. Through asking a core set of questions in each of their three surveys Poole *et al* (*ibid*) reported that progressively fewer managers believed that trade unions had too much power and that union membership amongst managers themselves had been growing.

The question though could be asked: Does it matter what managers think of trade unions? There is longstanding evidence that managers’ response to trade unions affects organisational performance (Freeman and Meddoff, 1984). There is also evidence that where managers are hostile to unions, employees have a poorer perception of the employment relations climate in the organisation (Pyman *et al,* 2010). Management response to unions has also been identified as important to the success of cooperative relationships between management and trade unions (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004).

It is in this context that this project was developed, with specific objectives to:

* Improve understanding about managers’ perceptions of trade unions;
* To identify the areas in which managers believe trade unions are most effective and in which they could play a greater role in the future;
* Provide greater detail on the attitudes of managers in different contexts.

This report provides a detailed and current picture of managers’ attitudes towards trade unions as well as a more nuanced understanding by presenting findings broken down by gender, organisational sector and managerial level.

1.3 Structure of the report

The report is structured into six main sections, five sections cover key questions from the survey on: trade unions in the wider society, trade unions within organisation, managers and trade unions, trade unions and employee engagement and trade unions and job quality. Within each of these sections a general overview of findings is outlined. This is followed by a consideration of differences between managers, illustrated in each section with more detailed statistics on one element of difference (e.g. between managers in the public, private and third sectors, between male and female managers, between managers who work in organisations with or without a union or staff association presence, and between managers of different levels of seniority). The following section provides a discussion of conclusions drawn from these findings. There are then two appendices, one giving demographics details of respondent and the final one outlining the project methodology.

# 2.0 TRADE UNIONS IN WIDER SOCIETY

## 2.1 An overview of findings

This section considers managers’ views on the role of trade unions in general terms (see Table 2.1). It is clear from the findings that a substantial number of managers do not accept that the role of trade unions should be restricted to the workplace. Instead, managers believe trade unions have an important role to play in society as campaigning bodies. In particular, 55%[[1]](#footnote-1) of managers disagreed[[2]](#footnote-2) that unions should be solely concerned with pay and conditions and 38% agreed that unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues. The strongest expressed support for union action concerned protecting pensions with 53% of managers felt that unions should do more in this area. Overall, slightly more managers were against stricter laws controlling the activities of trade unions (31%) compared with those who were in favour (28%).

***Table 2.1: Responses to questions on the role of trade unions in society***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither disagree nor agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| Unions are not acting in the country’s economic interests | 8% | 21% | 40% | 21% | 10% |
| Trade unions do a good job for the country as a whole | 8% | 23% | 42% | 23% | 3% |
| Unions have too much power | 7% | 25% | 42% | 20% | 6% |
| There should be stricter laws controlling the activities of trade unions | 8% | 23% | 42% | 21% | 7% |
| Unions should solely be concerned with pay and conditions | 12% | 43% | 33% | 10% | 2% |
| Unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues | 4% | 15% | 42% | 35% | 4% |
| Trade unions should do more to protect pensions | 2% | 7% | 39% | 42% | 11% |

The survey contained questions that had been used in earlier studies by Poole *et al* (1980, 1990 and 2000), providing an opportunity to see how attitudes to trade unions have changed since 1980. Poole *et al*’s studies used the CMI membership list as the sample population in the same way as this 2013 project, although it should be noted that since 1980, the proportion of female respondents and respondents based in the public sector has increased year on year.

***Table 2.2: Responses to the statement ‘Trade Unions should solely be concerned with pay and conditions’ (1980-2013)[[3]](#footnote-3)***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | % agree/ agree strongly | % neutral | % disagree/ disagree strongly |
| 1980 | 45 | 10 | 45 |
| 1990 | 43 | 10 | 48 |
| 2000 | 28 | 14 | 57 |
| 2013 | 12 | 33 | 55 |

While there has been an increase in the proportion of mangers who thought that trade union activities should not be limited to pay and conditions, a notable feature is the increase in those who were neutral to this view (Table 2.2). Indeed across these questions the data suggests that managers generally hold neutral views on trade unions role in wider society. In five out of the eight questions more managers reported a neutral view than one of agreement or disagreement.

When the 2013 results are considered in isolation, it appears that managers hold negative views about the impact of trade unions on the economy and the country as a whole - 32% of managers felt that unions were not acting in the country’s economic interests (while 29% felt they were), 31% did not think that trade unions were doing good job for the country as a whole (while 27% thought they do). Table 2.3 shows that there has actually been a significant decline since 1980 in the proportion of managers who hold negative views on the general impact of unions. Managers in 2013 are more likely to be positive or neutral about the role of trade unions in the economy.

***Table 2.3: Response to the statement ‘Trade Unions are not acting in the country’s economic interest’ (1980-2013)[[4]](#footnote-4)***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | % agree/ agree strongly | % neutral | % disagree/ disagree strongly |
| 1980 | 86 | 7 | 6 |
| 1990 | 60 | 20 | 20 |
| 2000 | 36 | 30 | 33 |
| 2013 | 31 | 40 | 29 |

Between 1980 and 2000 there had been a sharp reduction in the numbers of managers who thought trade unions had too much power (Table 2.4), although this had risen again slightly between 2000 and 2013. Significantly, there was a large reduction in the proportion of managers who disagreed with this statement in 2013 with more now holding a neutral position.

***Table2.4: Response to the statement ‘Trade Unions have too much power’ (1980-2013)[[5]](#footnote-5)***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | % agree/ agree strongly | % neutral | % disagree/ disagree strongly |
| 1980 | 83 | 7 | 11 |
| 1990 | 32 | 28 | 40 |
| 2000 | 17 | 31 | 52 |
| 2013 | 26 | 42 | 32 |

## 2.2 Managers’ attitudes by sector

Managers in the private sector typically expressed less favourable views on trade unions’ role in wider society than those in the public sector (Table 2.5). These differences were statistically significant on all but one of the statements – ‘unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues’.

***Table 2.5: Responses to questions on the role of trade unions in society by organisational sector***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Managers by Sector | | | |
| Answer options | **Public** | **Private** | **Third** | **P value** |
| Unions are not acting in the country’s economic interests | 2.9[[6]](#footnote-6) | 3.3 | 3.0 | <0.001[[7]](#footnote-7) |
| Unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues | 3.2 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 0.381 |
| Unions have too much power | 2.7 | 3.2 | 2.8 | <0.001 |
| There should be stricter laws controlling the activities of trade unions | 2.8 | 3.2 | 2.7 | <0.001 |
| Trade unions do a good job for the country as a whole | 3.2 | 2.6 | 3.1 | <0.001 |
| Trade unions should do more to protect pensions | 3.8 | 3.4 | 3.4 | <0.001 |

The two statements where differences in attitudes were most stark are ‘Trade unions do a good job for the country as a whole’ and ‘Unions have too much power’. For the first of these statements private sector managers typically disagreed (42%) whereas those in the public sector agreed (37%) but were nearer to a neutral position and managers in the third sector (35% agreed) were similar to those in the public sector. For the second statement public sector managers disagreed (44%), private sector managers agreed (37%) and those in the third sector disagreed (31%), but were closer to neutral. There was also disagreement on whether there should be stricter laws controlling the activities of trade unions; managers in the public (40%) and third (34%) sectors tended to disagree, while managers in the private sector tended to agree (36%).

As previously reported there was overall disagreement with the statement ‘unions should be solely concerned with pay and conditions’ but this was strongest in the public sector (60%), followed by the third sector (56%) and finally the private sector (51%).

There was overall agreement that unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues and that unions should do more to protect pensions. In the case of the former there were similar views across the sectors: public 39%, private 38% and third 38%; in the case of the latter, managers in the public sector agreed most (64%), then managers in the third sector (56%), followed by managers in the private sector (44%).

2.3 Union/staff association presence or not

On all but one issue there were significant differences between managers with a union/staff association (SA) presence and those without. Both groups of managers disagreed that unions should be solely concerned with pay and conditions. Managers in organisation with a union/SA presence said that unions do a good job for the country as a whole and those without disagreed. Managers with a union/SA presence disagreed with the statement ‘unions are not acting in the country’s economic interests’, those without agreed with the statement. Managers in organisation without a trade union/SA presence thought that unions have too much power and that there should be stricter laws controlling unions, while those with a union/SA presence disagreed.

2.4 Managers attitudes by levels of seniority

When looking at the attitudes of different levels of managers, in general the more junior the managerial level the more favourable the response to trade unions’ role in wider society. All but one of the statements (unions should do more campaigning on wider societal issues) has statistically significant differences in attitudes. Most notably directors disagreed that ‘trade unions do a good job for the country as a whole’ whilst junior managers were neutral and on the statement ‘unions have too much power’ junior managers typically disagreed whilst directors expressed a neutral position.

2.5 Managers attitudes by gender

Regarding gender there are several significant differences between men and women managers in the responses to the questions on trade unions in society. Women thought trade unions should do more campaigning on societal issues and that they do a good job for the country, significantly more so than men. Men when compared to women thought that trade unions had too much power and that stricter laws to govern them were required.

# 3.0 TRADE UNIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

## 3.1 An overview of findings

Respondents were asked about their views on the role of trade unions in the workplace (see Table 3.1); the questions were asked of all respondents whether they worked in a unionised workplace or not.

Managers clearly still believe that unions have a place in organisations with 56% disagreeing with the statement that ‘there is no role for unions in the modern workplace’ and only 12% agreeing. Similarly, 34% of managers agreed that unions add value to the organisation, 40% that organisations benefit from having a trade union present and 48% that unions promote equality in the workplace. However, only 22% of managers agree that unions provide an important contribution to training in the workplace. Given a union focus on skill development, this finding is surprising and potentially disappointing for unions to find that managers do not appear to see a union contribution in this area.

***Table 3.1: Responses to questions on the role of trade unions within organisations***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither disagree nor agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| Unions add value to the organisation | 6% | 20% | 39% | 29% | 5% |
| Unions understand the commercial pressures faced by business | 12% | 24% | 34% | 26% | 4% |
| There is no role for unions in the modern workplace | 18% | 38% | 31% | 9% | 3% |
| Unions are out of touch with modern workplace practices | 6% | 23% | 41% | 23% | 7% |
| Unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work | 7% | 27% | 38% | 22% | 6% |
| Unions allow members a greater level of influence in the organisation | 4% | 19% | 36% | 37% | 4% |
| Unions promote equality in the workplace | 3% | 15% | 35% | 40% | 8% |
| Organisations benefit from having a trade union present | 5% | 19% | 37% | 33% | 7% |
| Unions provide an important contribution to training in the workplace | 7% | 27% | 44% | 20% | 2% |
| Unions cause conflict in the workplace | 5% | 19% | 39% | 30% | 7% |

Managers recognised the benefits that trade unions offer employees with 28% agreeing that unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work and 41% that unions allow members a greater level of influence in the organisation.

However, attitudes about unions’ role within the workplace were not wholly positive with 36% of managers disagreeing with the statement ‘unions understand the commercial pressures faced by business’ and 37% agreeing that unions cause conflict in the workplace.

It is evident that managers’ attitudes towards the role of trade unions within organisations are more polarised than those concerning unions’ roles within wider society. In only four out of ten statements did the neutral position represent the most commonly expressed view.

3.2 Managers attitudes by levels of seniority

There are significant differences in attitudes amongst differing levels of management on each of the statements from this section of the survey - the more senior the manager the less favourable their views towards unions (Table 3.2). In particular attitudes on whether trade unions understand the commercial pressures faced by businesses move from 14% of junior managers disagreeing to 61% of directors. The same is true when looking at views on the statement ‘unions add value to organisations’ – 48% of junior managers agreed with this, 38% of middle managers, 27% of senior managers and only 16% of directors agreed[[8]](#footnote-8).

It is notable that the attitudes of directors and senior managers tended to be more alike when compared to other levels of managers. 52% of junior managers, 44% of middle managers, 29% of senior manager and 21% of directors agreed with the view that organisations benefit from having a trade union present. Although as a whole managers disagreed with the statement ‘there is no role for trade unions in the modern workplace’, disagreement was stronger amongst junior managers (62% compared with 50% of directors).

Junior managers (16%) were less likely than directors (44%) to feel that unions are out of touch with modern workplace practices, or to think that unions cause conflict in the workplace (27% of junior managers, 46% of directors). Only 19% of junior managers disagreed with the statement that ‘unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work’, compared with 50% of directors. Again junior managers were more likely to agree (48%) than directors (30%) that unions allow members greater influence in the organisation.

***Table 3.2:*** ***Responses to questions on trade unions in organisations by managerial level***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Managers by level | | | | |
|  | **Director or partner** | **Senior manager or principal** | **Middle manager or consultant** | **Junior manager or advisor** | **P value** |
| Unions add value to the organisation | 2.6 | 2.8 | 3.2 | 3.4 | <0.001 |
| Unions understand the commercial pressures faced by businesses | 2.2 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 3.3 | <0.001 |
| There is no role for unions in the modern workplace | 2.5 | 2.6 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 0.003 |
| Unions are out of touch with modern workplace practices | 3.3 | 3.2 | 3.0 | 2.7 | <0.001 |
| Unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work | 2.6 | 2.6 | 3.0 | 3.2 | <0.001 |
| Unions allow members a greater level of influence in the organisation | 2.9 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.4 | <0.001 |
| Unions promote equality in the workplace | 3.1 | 3.1 | 3.4 | 3.5 | <0.001 |
| Organisations benefit from having a trade union present | 2.6 | 2.9 | 3.3 | 3.5 | <0.001 |
| Unions provide an important contribution to training in the workplace | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2.9 | 3.0 | <0.001 |
| Unions cause conflict in the workplace | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 2.9 | <0.001 |

When asked if they thought trade unions promote equality in the workplace, 60% of junior managers agreed, 50% of middle managers agreed, 38% of senior managers agreed and 36% of directors agreed. There was less difference on whether unions contribute to training in the workplace, 24% of junior managers agreed and 15% of directors agreed.

## 3.3 Managers’ attitudes by sector

It is clear that managers in the public and third sectors have more favourable views than do managers in the private sector about the role of trade unions in organisations. Managers in the private sector were significantly more likely than were managers in the public and third sector to disagree that trade unions benefit organisations, understand commercial pressures faced by business, allow members a greater level of influence in the organisation and add value to the organisation. Managers in the private sector were also significantly more likely than were managers in the public and third sector to agree that there is no place for unions in the modern workplace.

3.4 Union/staff association presence or not

Managers from organisations with a union/SA presence felt that unions add value to an organisation; that unions give members a greater level of influence; and that organisations benefit from having a union presence (Table 3.3). Managers in organisations without unions/SA association disagreed with this view. Managers from organisations with a union/SA presence were neutral about whether unions understand commercial pressures and whether unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work; again managers from organisation without a union/SA presence disagreed.

***Table 3.3:*** ***Responses to questions on trade unions in organisations by presence or not of a union/staff association***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Managers attitude by presence of union/staff association or not | | | | |
|  | **No Union or SA** |  | **Union and/or SA** |  | **P value** |
| *Unions add value to the organisation* | 2.7 |  | 3.3 |  | <0.001 |
| *Unions understand the commercial pressures faced by businesses* | 2.6 |  | 3.0 |  | <0.001 |
| *There is no role for unions in the modern workplace* | 2.8 |  | 2.1 |  | <0.001 |
| *Unions are out of touch with modern workplace practices* | 3.3 |  | 2.8 |  | <0.001 |
| *Unions are better than management at protecting individual members at work* | 2.8 |  | 3.0 |  | 0.003 |
| *Unions allow members a greater level of influence in the organisation* | 3.0 |  | 3.5 |  | <0.001 |
| *Unions promote equality in the workplace* | 3.1 |  | 3.4 |  | <0.001 |
| *Organisations benefit from having a trade union present* | 2.7 |  | 3.5 |  | <0.001 |
| *Unions provide an important contribution to training in the workplace* | 2.8 |  | 2.8 |  | 0.535 |
| *Unions cause conflict in the workplace* | 3.4 |  | 2.9 |  | <0.001 |

Managers from organisations without a union/SA presence agreed that unions are out of touch with modern workplace practices and that unions cause conflict; managers from organisations with a union/SA presence disagreed with both contentions. Both groups of managers agreed that unions promote equality in the workplace, although those with a union/SA presence agreed more. Both disagreed with the statement that ‘there is no role for unions in the modern workplace. There was no significant difference on union contribution to training in the workplace.

3.5 Managers attitudes by gender

There were significant differences in evidence between male and female attitudes. Female managers answered significantly more positively when considering if trade unions benefit organisations, understand commercial pressures faced by businesses and add value to the organisations. For the other questions there were no significant differences.

# 4.0 MANAGERS AND TRADE UNIONS

## 4.1 An overview of findings

This section considers respondents’ views on the relationship between managers and trade unions, again the questions were posed to all respondents (see Table 4.1).

***Table 4.1: Responses to questions on the relationship between trade unions and management***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither disagree nor agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| Unions should work more effectively with management | 1% | 2% | 25% | 54% | 19% |
| Management has too much power compared to trade unions | 8% | 31% | 43% | 14% | 4% |
| Unions protect workers from bad management | 4% | 18% | 30% | 39% | 10% |
| Unions do not understand the needs of management | 6% | 26% | 39% | 25% | 4% |

Managers clearly felt that ‘unions protect workers from bad management’ with 49% agreeing with this statement and only 22% disagreeing. It is perhaps not surprising that managers did not think that management has too much power compared to trade unions with 39% disagreeing with the statement. Interestingly though, 43% of managers neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement whilst 18% agreed. This suggests that to some extent managers do consider ‘management’ to have too much power compared to trade unions.

Perhaps less surprisingly, 73% of managers agreed that unions should work more effectively with management. This could be read to imply a criticism of the way in which unions currently work with management, although equally it could indicate a willingness amongst nearly three quarters of managers to work more closely with unions.

Opinions were divided on the final statement with 32% of managers disagreeing with the statement ‘unions do not understand the needs of management’, 39% expressing a neutral view and 29% agreeing.

4.2 Managers attitudes by gender

There were no significant differences between men and women for this section of the survey. Both men (76%) and women (67%) managers strongly agreed that unions should work more effectively with management. There was also no difference between them (both 49%) on whether trade unions protect workers from bad management. Men were slightly more likely (32%) than women (26%) to think that unions do not understand the needs of management; and men (44%) were slightly more likely to disagree than women (33%) that management has too much power in comparison to trade unions.

***Table 4.2:*** ***Responses to questions on the relationship between trade unions and management by gender***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Gender* | | |
|  | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***P value*** |
| Unions should work more effectively with management | 3.8 | 3.9 | 0.007 |
| Management has too much power compared to trade unions | 2.8 | 2.7 | 0.017 |
| Unions protect workers from bad management | 3.3 | 3.3 | 0.602 |
| Unions do not understand the needs of management | 2.9 | 3.00 | 0.078 |

## 4.3 Managers’ attitudes by sector

Considering the views of public sector, private sector and third sector managers, private sector managers were significantly more likely than were public sector managers to agree that unions do not understand the needs of management[[9]](#footnote-9). Public sector managers also significantly more likely to say that unions protect workers from bad management than private sector management[[10]](#footnote-10). There were no other significant differences by sector on views of management and trade unions and third sector managers were not significantly different from the other managers.

4.4 Union/staff association presence or not

Managers in organisations with a union/SA presence disagreed that unions do not understand the needs of management, whereas managers in organisations with a union/SA presence agreed with the statement. Both groups of managers agreed that unions protect workers from bad managers, although those in organisations with a union/SA presence agreed more strongly. There was no significant difference on the other issues.

4.4 Managers attitudes by levels of seniority

When looking at managers’ attitudes by managerial level it is apparent that more senior levels of management again expressed less favourable views of trade unions than junior. There was typically no significant difference in attitudes expressed by directors and senior managers; both groups had significantly higher levels of agreement with the statement that ‘unions do not understand the needs of management’ than those in middle and junior positions who disagreed with the statement. Similarly, directors and senior managers both disagreed significantly more with the statement ‘unions protect workers from bad management’ than junior managers

# 5.0 TRADE UNIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

## 5.1 An overview of findings

This section focuses on managers’ attitudes to the role of trade unions in relation to employee engagement and some of the most positive attitudes towards trade unions were expressed by managers in this question (Table 5.1). Unlike previous sections none of the statements elicited a neutral response from a majority of managers. Interestingly, questions in this section attracted the highest item response rates and this may well reflect the contemporary importance attached to employee engagement by managers and their organisations.

***Table 5.1: Responses to questions on trade unions and employee engagement***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Don't know |
| There is a role for unions in securing employee engagement | 4% | 11% | 24% | 47% | 11% | 4% |
| There is a role for unions in maintaining employee engagement | 3% | 11% | 24% | 48% | 11% | 3% |
| Practices used by management to enhance employee engagement replace the need for Trade Unions | 7% | 27% | 27% | 26% | 9% | 4% |
| Union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement | 5% | 19% | 34% | 31% | 8% | 4% |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management | 9% | 26% | 30% | 24% | 7% | 4% |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages an organisational climate in which employees 'go the extra mile' | 15% | 33% | 30% | 13% | 4% | 5% |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation | 10% | 30% | 32% | 17% | 7% | 5% |

Most managers believed that unions have something to contribute in this area with 58% agreeing with the statement ‘there is a role for unions in *securing* employee engagement’ and only 15% disagreeing. Likewise, 59% of managers agreed with the statement ‘there is a role for unions in *maintaining* employee engagement’ and only 14% disagreed. In addition, 39% of managers agreed that union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement.

Opinions on whether practices used by managers to enhance employee engagement replace the need for trade unions were divided with 35% agreeing and 34% disagreeing.

Managers were less positive in their assessment of the effect of a trade union presence on organisational climate, with 48% disagreeing that trade unions encourage an organisational climate in which employees ‘go the extra mile’. Again, 35% of managers disagreed that ‘the presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management’. 40% of managers disagreed with the view that ‘the presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation ‘, while 25% agreed.

## 5.2 Managers’ attitudes by sector

Seventy per cent of managers in the public sector thought that unions have a role in securing employee engagement compared with 50% in the private sector. Nearly three quarters of managers in the public sector (74%) agreed with the view that ‘there is a role for unions in maintaining employee engagement’, significantly more than those in the private sector (50%). No significant difference was found between managers in the public and third sector. Managers in the private sector (44%) agreed with the view that ‘practices used by management to enhance employee engagement replaces the need for trade unions’ significantly more than those in the public sector (28%). Public sector managers (54%) agreed that union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement significantly more so than those in the private sector (29%). 49% of managers in the public sector disagreed with the statement ‘the presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation’ significantly more than those in the private (36%). Public sector managers (43%) showed a significantly higher level of agreement with the statement ‘the presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management’ than did managers in the private sector (23%), while 35% of managers in the third sector agreed.

***Table 5.2: Responses to questions on trade unions and engagement by sector***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Managers by sector | | | |
|  | **Public** | **Private** | **Third** | **P value** |
| There is a role for unions in securing employee engagement | **3.7** | **3.3** | **3.5** | **<0.001** |
| There is a role for unions in maintaining employee engagement | **3.8** | **3.3** | **3.5** | **<0.001** |
| Practices used by management to enhance employee engagement replace the need for Trade Unions | **2.8** | **3.3** | **3.1** | **<0.001** |
| Union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement | **3.5** | **2.9** | **3.2** | **<0.001** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management | **3.2** | **2.7** | **3.0** | **<0.001** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages an organisational climate in which employees 'go the extra mile' | **2.7** | **2.4** | **2.8** | **<0.001** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation | **2.7** | **3.0** | **2.7** | **<0.001** |

5.3 Union/staff association presence or not

Managers from both groups agree that there is a role for unions in securing and maintaining employee engagement, although managers from organisations with a union/SA presence were more positive. Managers from organisations with a union/SA presence agreed that union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement and that the presence of a union in the workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management; managers from organisations without union/SA disagreed. Those from organisations without a union/SA presence agree that the presence of trade unions discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation; those from organisations with a union/SA presence disagreed. Both groups disagreed that unions in the workplace encourages an organisational climate in which employees ‘go the extra mile’, although those without a union/SA presence disagreed more.

***Table 5.3: Responses to questions on trade unions and engagement by presence of a trade union/staff association or not***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Managers attitude by presence of union/staff association or not | | | |
|  | **No union/SA** |  | **Union and/or SA** | **P value** |
| There is a role for unions in securing employee engagement | **3.2** |  | **3.7** | **<0.001** |
| There is a role for unions in maintaining employee engagement | **3.2** |  | **3.8** | **<0.001** |
| Practices used by management to enhance employee engagement replace the need for Trade Unions | **3.4** |  | **2.7** | **<0.001** |
| Union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement | **2.9** |  | **3.4** | **<0.001** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages greater trust between the workforce and management | **2.6** |  | **3.2** | **<0.001** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace encourages an organisational climate in which employees 'go the extra mile' | **2.9** |  | **3.0** | **0.280** |
| The presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation | **3.1** |  | **2.5** | **<0.001** |

5.4 Managers attitudes by gender

There was a slight difference between men and women managers here, with 39% of men agreeing that practices used by management to enhance employee engagement replaces the need for trade unions’ against 33% for women. When asked about whether union involvement in decision making improved employee engagement 46% of women agreed whereas only 37% of men did so. Women disagreed significantly more than males with the statement that ‘the presence of trade unions in a workplace discourages employees to feel positive about their organisation’.

# 6.0 TRADE UNIONS AND JOB QUALITY

## 6.1 An overview of findings

This section considered managers’ attitudes to the role of trade unions in enhancing job quality. Eight elements were taken as indicators of ‘good’ job quality, each addressed in one of the statements that formed this question (Table 6.1).

Managers felt that unions can make a positive contribution to improving job quality in a number of ways. Most notably 53% of managers agreed that ‘employee voice is enhanced through the presence of trade unions in the workplace’. In addition, 38% of managers agreed that trade unions are successful at securing wage increases and 35% said that trade unions make a significant contribution to enhancing job security.

***Table 6.1:*** ***Responses to questions on trade unions and job quality***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Don't know |
| Trade unions are successful at securing wage increases | 4% | 20% | 33% | 32% | 6% | 5% |
| Trade unions make a significant contribution to enhancing job security | 6% | 25% | 29% | 30% | 5% | 5% |
| Trade unions do little to affect skill levels amongst the workforce | 3% | 17% | 32% | 33% | 7% | 6% |
| Training and progression opportunities are improved when trade unions are present in the workplace | 8% | 30% | 36% | 16% | 3% | 8% |
| Trade unions are key partners in improving skills amongst the workforce | 8% | 29% | 37% | 16% | 3% | 7% |
| Employee voice is enhanced through the presence of trade unions in the workplace | 4% | 12% | 27% | 42% | 11% | 4% |
| Trade unions make a positive contribution towards enhancing levels of job satisfaction amongst staff | 9% | 28% | 36% | 17% | 5% | 6% |
| Work-life balance and family friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces | 7% | 19% | 33% | 23% | 8% | 11% |

Opinion was divided as to whether work-life balance and family friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces with 31% of managers believing they were, 26% disagreeing and 33% expressing a neutral view.

In contrast, managers expressed less positive attitudes towards trade unions’ involvement in and impact on training, skill development and job satisfaction. Forty percent of managers agreed that trade unions do little to affect skill levels amongst the workforce and 38% disagreed that training and progression opportunities are improved when trade unions are present in the workplace. Furthermore, 37% of managers disagreed that trade unions are key partners in improving skills amongst the workforce (19% agreed) and again 37% disagreed that trade unions make a positive contribution towards enhancing levels of job satisfaction amongst staff.

6.2 Managers attitudes by gender

There was less significant difference between managers on the questions on job quality, particularly on the size of the organisation, union presence or age. By and large women, junior and public sector managers were again more positive towards trade unions. For example, overall there was a positive response that trade unions make a significant contribution to job security, but within this, 39% of women agreed and 27% disagreed while men were equally balanced – 36% agreed and 36% disagreed.

***Table 6.2:*** ***Response to the question on trade unions and job quality by gender***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Gender* | | |
|  | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***P value*** |
| Trade unions are successful at securing wage increases | 3.1 | 3.2 | 0.090 |
| Trade unions make a significant contribution to enhancing job security | 3.0 | 3.1 | 0.041 |
| Trade unions do little to affect skill levels amongst the workforce | 3.3 | 3.2 | 0.182 |
| Training and progression opportunities are improved when trade unions are present in the workplace | 2.7 | 2.8 | 0.023 |
| Trade unions are key partners in improving skills amongst the workforce | 2.7 | 2.9 | 0.009 |
| Employee voice is enhanced through the presence of trade unions in the workplace | 3.4 | 3.5 | 0.457 |
| Trade unions make a positive contribution towards enhancing levels of job satisfaction amongst staff | 2.7 | 2.9 | 0.008 |
| Work-life balance and family friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces | 3.0 | 3.1 | 0.061 |

On the questions around the union contribution to improving skill levels and training and progression opportunities, while the overall response was negative, women managers and junior managers were less negative than male and senior managers. Men (45%) agreed slightly more than women (41%) with the statement that ‘trade unions do little to effect skill levels within the workforce. Equally only 26% of women and 18% of men agreed that trade unions are key partners in improving skills amongst the workforce. On work-life balance and family friendly policies, female managers were more likely to agree that they are better in unionised workplaces (40% of women compared to 32% of men).

6.3 Union/staff association presence or not

Managers from organisation with a union/SA presence agreed that these are better in unionised workplace, while managers from organisations without disagreed. Both groups of managers agreed that employee voice in enhanced through a presence of unions in the workplace, although those with a union/SA presence were more positive in their response. Both groups disagreed that unions make a positive contribution to levels of job satisfaction. In relation to job security and training and progression, there was no significant difference.

## 6.4 Managers’ attitudes by sector

There was greatest agreement overall with the statement that ‘trade unions make a contribution to employee voice’ and within this agreement was highest in the public sector, with little difference between men and women. There was overall disagreement with the statement that unions contribute to job satisfaction, this disagreement was strongest amongst private sector managers and male managers (42% of men disagreed compared with 35% of women). This question was also linked to seniority – more senior managers disagreeing more strongly, while junior managers gave a positive response that union do contribute to job satisfaction. Junior managers and managers in the public sector were more likely to agree that work-life balance and family friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces.

# 8.0 CONCLUSIONS

Overall managers’ attitudes towards trade unions have become more positive in recent years, although the trend appears to have slightly reversed between 2000 and 2013. Most managers saw a positive role for trade unions in organisations with key roles of protecting members, improving employee voice and giving members more influence. There were high levels of neutral responses from managers. It not possible to be sure how to interpret this; it could indicate lack of knowledge or experience of trade unions, a feeling that that unions are not relevant to them or it could this indicate a lack of strong views against trade unions - with greater opportunity for unions to increase their role in organisations. These findings are not dissimilar from those in the Workplace Employment Relations Surveys (WERS) which has surveyed managers and employee representatives six times since the first survey in 1980. The 2004 survey was conducted in 3,000 workplaces (Kersley *et al*, 2006) and initial findings have recently been produced for the 2011 survey (van Wanrooy *et al,* 2012). Between 1998 and 2004, managers were no more pro-union or anti-union, while specialists were more positive towards unions.

Nearly three quarters of the respondents in this survey thought trade unions should work more effectively with management, which implies a willingness to engage with trade unions.

However, the picture from the WERS is somewhat less positive - between 2004 and 2011, the percentage of managers who were not in favour of union membership stayed unchanged at 17%; the percentage of managers who would rather consult directly with employees rose from 76% to 80% (van Wanrooy *et al,* 2011).

Employee engagement - One of the areas where responses were most positive in relation to trade unions was around employee engagement activities; managers clearly saw a role for trade unions in securing and maintaining employee engagement and thought that union involvement in decision making improves employee engagement. However, there was a less positive response about the union role in achieving what are the expected outcomes of employee engagement – the expectation that staff, who feel engaged with their job and organisation, will work harder and better, and gain greater satisfaction from their work.

The equalities agenda -Respondents clearly felt that trade unions are active around the equalities agenda – almost half of managers thought trade unions promote equality in the workplace, but, there was divided opinion on the success of outcomes from such activities – fewer managers thought that work-life-balance and family-friendly policies are better in unionised workplaces.

Skills and training - One of the more surprising areas, given the wider union workplace learning agenda, was managers’ perceptions around skill development and training (see Wright, 2011; Rainbird and Stuart, 2011). Managers in the survey did not think that unions had a great role in workforce skill development, training and progression.

Differences amongst managers - There were significant differences between mangers’ responses across a wide range of questions in terms of gender, seniority and sector. Women managers, junior managers and managers in the public sector were significantly more positive towards trade unions and were also more likely to be union members themselves.

One of the most significant differences between managers is that between those who work in organisations with a union and/or staff association presence, who a consistently more positive in their attitude toward unions than those who work in organisation without a union/staff association presence. This suggests that negatives views on trade unions may come from lack of direct and/or current experience of working with them.

In any organisation the strategic approach to employment relations, and trade unions in particular, will inevitably depend on a range of contextual factors. Accepting this proviso, the survey indicates that many managers who currently work with trade unions and first level managers dealing directly with workforce issues believe unions bring a range of benefits to the workforce and to the organisation. This suggests a number of questions:

* Is there a need for senior management to to engage in greater discussion across managerial levels?
* Do managers without direct experience of working with unions need to reflect on the benefits of unions identified by mangers with experience?
* Are there lessons managers in the private sector take from the experience of managers in the public sector on positively utilising a trade union role?
* If an organisation is pursuing an employee engagement strategy, have managers considered the potential contribution of trade unions in harnessing collective employee voice?
* Could more managers capitalise on the areas of shared interests with unions around equal opportunities and workforce skill development.

Add Helpful Resources Section

CMI checklists

Acas guidance documents

Any TUC material?

# APPENDIX 1 – Demographical summary of respondents

Sector and gender: Of the total of 1,240 responses, there were 758 respondents who answered the demographic questions. Of these 62% were male, 38% female.

***Table 9.1: The distribution of respondents by sector and gender***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sector | Male | Female | Total |
| Public Sector | 46% | 43% | 44% |
| Private Sector | 39% | 51% | 47% |
| Third Sector (not for profit/voluntary) | 15% | 6% | 9% |

Union presence in own organisation: 62% of respondents worked in organisations with recognised trade unions and/or non-unionised staff associations. Recognition of trade unions and staff associations by sector is portrayed in Table 9.2.The majority of recognition is in the public sector.

***Table 9.2: Trade union and/or non-unionised staff association % recognition by sector***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Public Sector | Private Sector | Third Sector | Total |
| No recognition | 8.3% | 45.9% | 46.6% | 27.9% |
| Yes, trade union(s) only | 57.4% | 22.1% | 23.3% | 39.2% |
| Yes, non-unionised staff association(s) only | 2.9% | 3.8% | 2.9% | 3.3% |
| Yes, trade union(s) and non-unionised staff association(s) | 25.6% | 14.6% | 16.5% | 20.0% |
| Don't know | 5.7% | 13.6% | 10.7% | 9.6% |

Age: Nearly ten per cent (9.8%) of respondents were aged less than 30 and under, 20.7% were aged 31-40 and the modal age group was 41-50 (34.6%). The rest of the sample (34.9%) were older than 50.

Race: The sample were mainly composed of managers classified as ‘White British’ (85%) with ‘White Irish’ and ‘Other White’ backgrounds as the next most populous categories (6%). The next highest represented ethnic group were African(2%) and Indian (2%).

Experience: In terms of years of experience in the current workplace, the modal group (36%) had 10 or more years of experience, 21% had 5-10 years’ experience, 21% had 2-5 years’ experience and the rest (22%) had less than 2 years’ experience.

Level of seniority: 14% of the respondents were directors or partners, 22% were senior managers, 41% were middle managers or consultants and 23% were junior managers or advisors.

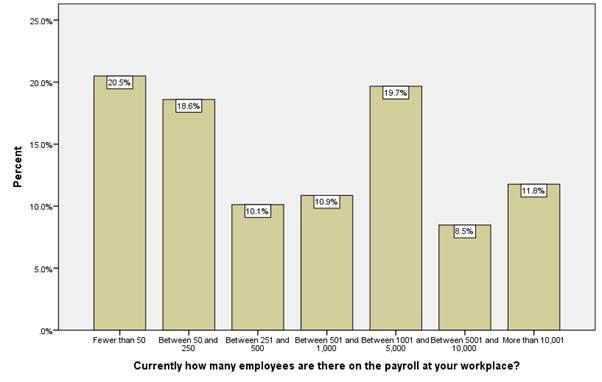
Union membership: In the survey mangers were asked about their own trade union or staff association membership; it was notable that 26% of respondents were union members and 5% staff association members. The proportion of managers who are members of a trade union or staff association has been increasing since its low point in 1990.

***Table 9.3: Managers’ membership of trade unions and non-unionised staff associations (1980-2013)[[11]](#footnote-11)***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | % member of a trade union | % member of a non-union staff association | Total % member of union or staff association |
| 1980 | 20 | 6 | 26 |
| 1990 | 14 | 6 | 20 |
| 2000 | 18 | 9 | 27 |
| 2013 | 26 | 5 | 31 |

A third of managers had been asked to join a trade union at some point (57% in the public sector, 14% in the private sector and 21% in the third sector). Overall most managers who were not already union members said that they would not consider joining a trade union in the future, although women and junior managers were more likely to consider joining.

31% of female managers were trade union members compared with 24% of men; 43% of managers who work in public sector were union members, compared with 10% in private sector and 22% of managers in the third sector. Older managers are more likely to be union members than younger managers and union membership declined with seniority - 37% of junior managers were union members, 29% of middle managers, 21% senior managers and 10% of directors.

***Figure 9.4: The percentage distribution of the respondents by workplace size.***

***Table 9.5: Business area represented by the respondents***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Business Area | N | % | Business Area | N | % |
| Agriculture, forestry & fishing | 8 | 0.6 | **Hospitality, catering, leisure & tourism** | 28 | *2.3* |
| Business services | 37 | 3.0 | **Housing and real estate** | 30 | 2.4 |
| Central government | 35 | 2.8 | **IT** | 23 | 1.9 |
| Construction | 36 | 2.9 | **Justice/security** | 14 | 1.1 |
| Consultancy | 57 | 4.6 | **Legal & accounting services** | 13 | 1.0 |
| Creative/media | 9 | 0.7 | **Local Government** | 104 | 8.4 |
| Defence | 75 | 6.0 | **Manufacturing & production** | 78 | 6.3 |
| Education | 233 | 18.8 | **Mining & extraction (incl. oil and gas)** | 8 | 0.6 |
| Electricity, gas and water | 36 | 2.9 | **Police** | 29 | 2.3 |
| Engineering | 60 | 4.8 | **Sales/marketing/advertising** | 11 | 0.9 |
| Finance, insurance | 53 | 4.3 | **Telecommunications & post** | 18 | 1.4 |
| Fire and rescue | 15 | 1.2 | **Transport & logistics** | 30 | 2.4 |
| Health & social care | 179 | 14.4 | **Wholesale & retail** | 23 | 1.9 |

# APPENDIX 2 - Methodological note

To investigate managers’ attitudes towards trade unions a bespoke survey was designed and issued to a random sample of 20,000 CMI members drawn from CMI’s membership, across all levels of management, sectors, sizes of organisation and geographical areas of the UK. Respondents were invited to complete the survey online, through a personalised email from CMI. The survey was informed by eight telephone interviews with CMI members in addition to discussions with project partners (Acas and TUC). The survey captured information on respondents and their organisations, how employee relations was practised within their organisation, perceptions of the employee relations climate and the efficacy of management and trade unions, as well as respondents’ attitudes towards trade union involvement in organisational life and wider society.

The survey attracted 1,240 responses equating to a response rate of 6% which is a low response rate but did yield sufficient data to use a full range of statistical tests. Data were exported in to SPSS[[12]](#footnote-12) and analysed using a range of statistical techniques including independent t-tests and one way ANOVA in order to highlight and make sense of patterns and relationships between data categories. This report presents both descriptive and inferential statistics along with appropriate commentary explaining the meaning and importance of findings. Much of the findings reported here are those where statistically significant relationships between data categories were found. Such an approach is standard practice when presenting quantitative data. For clarity, statistical significance is where a result or relationship is caused by something other than mere random chance.

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1. Statistics have been rounded to the nearest whole number. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the survey respondents were given five response options (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree). These are shown in the statistical tables; in the text strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree have been aggregated into agree and disagree. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Figures for 1980, 1990 and 2000 from Poole *et al* (2001). For 1980 *n*=1,058 , 1990 *n*=827 , 2000*n*=1,291 (Poole *et al*, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Figures for 1980, 1990 and 2000 from Poole et al (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Figures for 1980, 1990 and 2000 from Poole et al (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All mean scores in this report have been rounded to one decimal place [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. When a p value is less than 0.05 a significant difference exists [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Respondents self-identified their level of management from one of these four categories. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. P value = <0.001 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. P value = 0.006 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Figures from 1980, 1990 and 2000 are taken from Poole *et al* (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Statistical Package for Social Scientists – the most commonly used quantitative data analysis tool. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)