


INFORMATION AND CONSULTATION OF EMPLOYEES (ICE)

What, why and how

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

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Guide

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1 WorldSkills UK

Business sector: partnership organisation between businesses, education and governments that works to help accelerate young people's careers, through delivery of career advice, competitions and thought leadership into training and employability skills.

Size: small employer with around 50 employees.

Context

With around 50 employees, WorldSkills UK are close to the bottom end of the scale of companies covered by the ICE regulations, but they chose to establish robust information and consultation arrangements anyway as a matter of good practice. They set up their consultation body, which they call the Innovation Forum, in 2017, after the results of a staff survey suggested they could improve on their internal communications and that workforce trust in senior leadership was low. The organisation was going through a period of significant change at the time and it was felt that better workforce engagement was essential to help the organisation survive.

The purpose of the forum as originally designed was threefold:

- to improve downward communication and engagement with the workforce around the strategic change programmes the organisation was going through
- to provide a venue for the CEO to hear workforce issues *'that might not be getting to me as CEO'*
- to allow the workforce to put forward ideas that could then be taken up by management and lead to innovation.

Representatives and ways of working

The forum has between five and seven reps at any time, elected from different teams across the business and re-elected annually – each rep is representing about ten staff. Meetings occur bi-monthly but can be scheduled sooner if particular issues arise. The meetings tend to last from one to two hours. Reps all received training from an external provider when first elected.

The forum itself is co-chaired by the CEO and an elected employee chair; both liaise regularly and have joint input into agenda-setting. Each meeting will have a presentation of key issues from the CEO, time to discuss hot topics that the workforce is keen to raise, such as problems with the hot-desking system or mental health support, and then time to go through an assessment of all ideas put forward for innovation. The Innovation Forum then either approves ideas directly or submits them to the Operational Management Team for review. Currently, about three-quarters of the time is spent discussing staff ideas and one-quarter discussing management's priorities around strategic change.

After meetings, the CEO feeds back from the meetings to the rest of the Senior Leadership Team and the workforce reps do the same with the workforce. During the Monday morning all-staff briefings, the CEO will also address the whole workforce directly, but Innovation Forum reps also will often present updates at these meetings. There are also drop-in sessions held for people keen to talk about HR, well-being or other issues.

Reception

Views of the forum from both management and workforce perspectives have been extremely positive, saying *'people have got really engaged in it – it's been great'*. Trust levels in leaders are *'now at the highest people can remember'*, increasing from 30% in the 2017 staff survey to 86% in the 2019 survey and there is a lot more positivity around the integration of the Senior Leadership Team with the rest of the workforce – *'it felt like a them and us for some people; it doesn't feel like that anymore'*. Meanwhile, the proportion of staff with a highly positive view about senior management's communication of the organisation's ambition increased from 30% in 2017 to 83% in 2019 after the work of the Innovation Forum to improve communication with the workforce. There was a clear view that *'staff value having a voice where they may not have felt they had a voice before'* and a sense that the majority of staff ideas put forward were being actively taken up by management.

Lessons for employers

The forum's success has been attributed to several key factors:

- fair and contested elections
- clear terms of reference
- allowing people to meet and talk regularly and informally around and outside of the formal structures (this was regarded as key in building this level of trust)
- having the personal commitment from the CEO to the body.

The CEO was particularly keen to stress that he saw the forum as a valuable *'strategic tool for the organisation'* deserving of proper investment of time and energy and not just *'an HR or regulatory compliance tick-box issue where you're going through the motions'*.

2 Stonewater

Business sector: social housing provider, managing around 32,000 homes in England for over 65,000 customers, including general rent, shared ownership and specialist accommodation such as retirement and supported-living schemes for older and vulnerable people.

Size: employ over 800 staff who embody their values of: being ambitious, passionate, agile, commercial and ethical.

Stonewater achieved a 'One Star' rating in the [2019 Best Companies survey](#) and are ranked 78th in the *Sunday Times* Top 100 best not-for-profit organisations to work for and 25th in the best housing associations to work for in 2019.

Context

Stonewater recognised that an effective workforce voice would be a vital ingredient to achieving the strategic aim of creating a highly engaged workforce. The Executive Director Group were aware, however, that many staff forums had failed to realise their potential since the introduction of the ICE regulations and were determined to avoid the common pitfalls of being too driven by individual concerns and not leaving space for innovation or ideas.

Instead, they determined to focus on best practice and, in a series of training workshops for representatives and managers, helped by an independent facilitator, the new forum

established a way of working intended to achieve the following:

- a highly informed workforce who understood the strategic objectives of the organisation
- effective representation for every worker's voice, not just those with a specific problem
- a regular, accurate temperature check of the views of staff, both positive and negative
- high levels of engagement between the representatives and their constituents, based on the gathering of hot topics rather than individual concerns
- an effective means of challenge through the professional development of counter-proposals based on thorough preparation and working with managers.

Representatives and ways of working

Over the next two years, where the representatives' skills were refreshed through additional training, the forum contributed to a number of key issues that helped to shape Stonewater's path to their entry into the prestigious *Sunday Times* 100 best companies to work for. During the discussions that led to the Digital Transformation programme, for example, the staff forum helped to inform the strategic narrative through the informed voice. Moreover, the managers were willing to listen to properly thought through challenges and ideas.

The Forum has also contributed significantly to a number of restructures that have made change more inclusive and understood from all perspectives. There is a view that the Forum's most significant contribution to the business has been how it has played a crucial role in dealing with dissent, particularly where significant change has occurred.

Stonewater recognise that listening to staff is vitally important. The Forum have helped them to do this more effectively for two reasons:

- The Forum, in helping to create a more informed workforce, has been able to provide people with a greater sense of perspective when change has affected them individually.
- That perspective has created room for managers to focus on '*real grievances rather than grumbles*'.

In particular, they have refined the collection of the accurate staff temperature check by adopting three key questions on a regular basis:

- What are the hot topics in your area at the moment?
- Have you had any good work experiences you can share with us?
- Do you have any ideas that might help the business run more effectively?

Reception

Their 2019 staff survey referenced the staff forum and 60% of staff expressed satisfaction with how it operates and communicates. This survey was completed by nearly 86% of colleagues against a national average of 69%. The survey indicated that 72% of staff were engaged, a 6% improvement against the previous year's result. There was also a 7% increase in the number of colleagues who consider themselves to be 'highly engaged' against a national average of -14%. These are significant improvements in a relatively short space of time, which is a clear indication that the People Strategy has already had a positive impact, despite the deliberate avoidance of so-called 'quick wins'. The director of people and OD has purposely avoided the 'you said, we did' approach to feedback, favouring team action planning using an appreciative inquiry-based method for identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Other significant results included a 5% increase in leadership satisfaction and 80% of colleagues stating that they feel that they can be themselves at work. These results

indicate that improved communication around the organisation's strategic narrative is being noticed and that the initiatives on inclusivity have had a positive impact. Arguably, the most important aspect of the results show that colleagues have gained a much wider perspective through the various voice and communication mechanisms and are less anxious than a year ago – 13% now as opposed to 18% previously. A low number of what can be described as the truly disengaged at only 4% is a further indication of how perspective can reduce cynicism and suspicion if an organisation has a strategic plan to engage people.

Lessons for employers

- Improved communication around the organisation's strategic narrative has been noticed and reflected positively in a staff survey.
- Initiatives on inclusivity have had a positive impact.
- Voice and communication methods have allowed colleagues to gain a wider perspective leading to reduced cynicism, anxiety and suspicion around strategic plans.

3 British Business Bank

Business sector: the UK's economic development bank, set up in 2014, having been established out of what was then the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The Bank is still 100% government-owned but its employees are recruited from both commercial and public sector organisations.

Size: The British Business Bank has undergone rapid expansion since its inception, from around 70 to 350 employees across two locations, along with a number of mobile workers based across the UK.

Context

The chief commercial officer who was involved in setting up the Bank described how, from the outset, the Bank *'wanted to create the right growth mindset and culture to deliver some quite stretching objectives'*. The organisation held a ballot for all workers on whether to recognise trade unions and/or instead to set up their own colleague engagement forum, and *'the Colleague Forum was the overwhelming majority decision of our colleagues at the time'*.

The organisation held a discussion with all colleagues on what the values should be for the new organisation. There was strong engagement with the early elections and the first elected colleague reps were involved in drawing up their own terms of reference, including consulting the ICE regulations. Since then, most elections have been contested by multiple candidates, with *'people showing leadership potential by wanting to represent their colleagues'*.

However, after the first three years the Colleague Forum followed the common pattern of having exhausted easy wins and was becoming too focused on individual micro-level concerns – what was felt to be becoming a less strategic agenda. As the organisation had been growing fast, they had struggled to adapt to the size of the constituencies representatives were representing, meaning the Forum also grew to include 12 representatives and was becoming unwieldy. It was unclear whether the Forum was for representatives to engage with HR or with the senior leadership – issues that all contributed to a dip in confidence.

To try and bring things back on track, the organisation went through a major exercise to refresh the Colleague Forum. After a new set of representatives was elected, they redrew the terms of reference as part of a major rethinking exercise about what the Forum should be for, to *'make it more strategic and business focused and less operational'*. Management attendance evolved to include regular CEO involvement alongside the chief people officer and chief commercial officer and a rolling roster of other Executive Committee members attending relevant discussions. The agenda of meetings changed to prioritise colleagues' hot topics before management. Colleague representatives were given training by an external provider and elected from among themselves a 'Core Four' to attend all meetings with management on behalf of the group, after the full group had met beforehand to filter the hot topics from their colleagues.

To help reduce the number of non-strategic issues being brought to the Forum, the company used an all-colleague event where the Forum was relaunched. Colleagues were shown boards with examples of issues that had been raised and asked to vote 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they thought the issue was one that should be brought to the Colleague Forum or should be dealt with elsewhere, such as by line managers, to help engage everyone in thinking about the issues relevant to the Colleague Forum. *'Since then, nothing's been discussed at one of the Colleague Forum meetings that I feel shouldn't have been raised.'*

The Forum was also asked to join 'Squads' working on action points from the employee engagement survey. The Forum now also has its own intranet page and a newsletter written by representatives for colleagues which they created to help communicate the issues discussed at meetings with the rest of the workforce. The Colleague Forum Chair has also attended ExCo meetings, while other representatives also attend team meetings of the business areas they represent.

Representatives and ways of working

Elections take place on a rolling basis each year so that no more than a few representatives leave the Forum each year. Meetings occur every other month and typically last around two hours, with the agenda jointly set by management and representatives. All representatives are given a department they are linked to and represent, which is separate from the department where they work, *'so that they don't feel compromised and don't have any conflict with their line manager'*.

Reception

Overall, the representatives feel that they are listened to and valued by the organisation and rate levels of trust with management at *'maybe 8-8.5 out of 10'*. From a management perspective, the Forum is extremely valuable, with a member of the senior leadership team commenting that: *'Like any business we rely on our people to deliver our objectives ... we wouldn't have got there if we didn't have colleagues who are engaged and keen to be on that journey with us ... the Colleague Forum is a significant part of that.'*

Lessons for employers

- Steps taken to refresh the Forum have led to representatives feeling that they are listened to and valued by the organisation; this included refocusing on strategic issues and changing management attendance patterns and the order of the agenda so colleagues' issues were discussed first.
- The Forum has its own newsletter to communicate issues discussed at meetings with the rest of the workforce.

4 B&Q

Business sector: a DIY and home improvement retailer (a subsidiary of Kingfisher Plc).

Size: around 300 stores and 22,000 employees across the UK.

Context

B&Q operates a multi-tiered People's Forum with store-level, region-level and national forums, plus a wider Kingfisher Colleague Forum. Colleagues at each level elect members to send as representatives to the higher-level forum, with elected store reps from every store attending regional forum meetings. The National People's Forum elects three of its own reps to attend the Kingfisher Colleague Forum. To ensure buy-in from all levels of the organisation, including frontline workers and line managers, the National People's Forum includes two store reps from every region – a manager rep and a frontline workforce rep, plus a smaller group of reps from other support functions.

Representatives and ways of working

Store reps have a monthly in-store meeting with colleagues following a structured agenda and also represent their stores in a regional meeting with the region managers every four months, while the National People's Forum comes together three times a year for a two-day session at Head Office, where they have a series of meetings with various senior management representatives, including two hours with the CEO and HRD, so they can ask questions, put forward views from the grassroots and be consulted on a range of strategic issues. Eight weeks before national meetings, reps hold a digital YamJam session to review their hot topics and set the agenda, while between meetings reps keep in regular contact via Yammer and other digital tools, which they also use to keep an ear to the ground and gather hot topics from the store-level reps. For urgent issues, management organises a conference call to seek the feedback of the People's Forum, rather than wait for the next scheduled meeting or risk not consulting the workforce. To help feed back to their regional and store-level forums on what was discussed at the national level, the National People's Forum devises a single slide deck that reps can take back to their regions and help disseminate a consistent message across the organisation.

The forum has undergone a major transformation over the eight years since it was founded to reach its current form – under the previous system a new set of reps was appointed to advise on each major change programme as and when it happened, but there was no institutional memory or permanent forum to consult with. Since the changes, the board has taken a much more active interest in the forum and the CEO now attends the national forum meetings each time, bringing considerably increased credibility to the body. Whereas for the first two years they had minimal participation in some stores and colleagues were appointed uncontested, limiting the quality of reps, there is now much more interest in the body and elections are generally well contested because *'people realise what impact they can have'*. Elections are run professionally and new reps are given training in how to carry out their roles and to make sure they know how to ask strategic questions, represent the whole business and *'present a collected view'*. The term of office for the latest round of reps has been extended from two to three years to provide more stability and opportunities to gain experience.

Reception

The aim of the People's Forum is *'to engage colleagues in B&Q's strategy and represent them in sharing ideas, influencing decision-making and working to build solutions to make B&Q the best place to work and a more successful business'*. In recent years the People's Forum has made its mark in helping involve workers in decisions around the fair allocation of bonus pay and the removal of night shifts, while raising frontline workforce concerns about the design of safety shoes available to wear and helping to prevent the introduction of a new marketing campaign that was felt to be patronising and unpopular by frontline workers.

The work of the People's Forum has led to staff reps being much better informed about strategic issues facing the business, with reps saying, *'I didn't expect to be sat grilling the CEO on organisational performance – I've learned a lot more about how the business operates'*. This knowledge and understanding is then passed on to their colleagues and helps to foster greater trust with management, as reps come to *'see the board are human, just like they are'*.

From a board-level perspective, the People's Forum is now seen as a vital strategic partner and an important priority in any decision-making, as board members now routinely ask *'What does the People's Forum think, have they been consulted?'* They are a key tool in helping provide a sense-check on management decision-making and in helping to act as an official channel of internal corporate communications, explaining strategic issues the business is facing to their colleagues on the shop floor.

Lessons for employers:

- A multi-tiered People's Forum allows representation for all levels.
- Elections are run professionally and reps are given training, meaning they know how to ask strategic questions, represent the whole business and *'present a collected view'*.
- The CEO attends the national forum meetings each time, bringing considerably increased credibility.
- The People's Forum is now seen as a vital strategic partner and a key tool in helping provide a sense-check on management decision-making and in helping to act as an official channel of internal corporate communications.

5 UK Hydrographic Office

Business sector: a UK government executive agency sponsored by the Ministry of Defence, which provides hydrographic and marine geospatial data for a variety of mariner and maritime organisation customers across the world.

Size: total workforce of about 850.

Context

Around 300 members of the workforce are members of Prospect and a handful of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). Prospect have a longstanding official union recognition agreement in the workplace.

The unions have two forms of regular information and consultation meetings with management – a set of monthly meetings with the head of people and a quarterly meeting with the chief executive and other relevant senior executives which they refer to as Whitley meetings, after the historic Whitley Councils in the civil service. These meetings are in

addition to and separate from the formal union negotiations which take place through the pay committee and health and safety committee, or individual union casework, though the same union reps may be involved in all cases.

Representatives and ways of working

At the monthly meetings with the head of people the union reps cover a range of topics, beyond just HR issues, including things such as Brexit and other national issues, internal policy updates, concerns about particular technologies in the building, mental health, diversity and inclusion issues or the rollout of the new government learning programme. Individual casework is generally not discussed in these meetings and kept separate.

The quarterly meetings with the chief executive last one to two hours and are usually more strategic in nature and cover major change issues affecting the organisation, business performance and governance issues. In recent years they have focused on two major areas of change: the practical change of moving to a brand new building constructed on site for them and the structural change of shifting what the organisation does – moving towards being more of a provider of data and a marine geospatial information agency, and how to explain what this will mean for staff. These meetings are an opportunity both to keep the workforce informed and to solicit feedback and provide a ‘reality check’ for the senior leadership.

Union reps generally have a 20-minute pre-meet before meeting with management, so that they can share their priorities and agree on what the agenda is aiming to cover. Reps are also generally felt to be informed enough to ask challenging questions about strategic or technical issues, such as what the new technology being rolled out means for specific kinds of workers, such as cartographers. Their involvement led to changes to the new building to include rooms designated for well-being with frosted glass and blinds, while consultation with the workforce also led to changes to zoning and hot-desking arrangements. Meanwhile, the consultation over the strategic changes *‘led to changes in how we communicate the corporate plan and vision’*, which was originally too complex and was simplified to make it more understandable for workers.

Workforce representatives can also engage with senior management between meetings; the chief executive is seen as very approachable, sitting in an open-plan office where anyone can come up and raise a quick question or issue. The unions are also working to be taken more seriously as a stakeholder, encouraging management to come to them more proactively rather than just waiting for the next quarterly meeting.

Reception

Union reps and managers alike feel that *‘trust levels are good’* in the organisation, with both sides seen to be acting in good faith – something that is fostered by regular and constructive meetings. The head of people commented that the meetings bring *‘a better understanding of staff issues and concerns’* and make sure that *‘we direct our efforts where we need to’*. The chief executive was clear in his view of the need for strong consultation channels with the workforce in order to support innovation, saying that *‘good ideas don’t come from the top, good ideas come from anywhere in the business’*.

UKHO also has a culture change programme, ‘WOW (Ways of Working) Voices’, with staff representatives from every department involved in developing new ways of working in the new offices and drawing up reward and recognition programmes. WOW Voices is another route for gathering feedback from the workforce and for feeding information down to workers, which was felt to complement the union information and consultation arrangements. The ExCo also holds YamJams with all staff every quarter to take questions from the workforce.

In addition, there is a separate Diversity and Inclusion Forum, sponsored by a senior staff member, with a series of sub-groups covering mental health, disabilities and so on, to work on promoting those particular subjects. These groups include both union and non-union representatives and are felt to be a '*very positive*' opportunity to drive change in these areas, including providing mental health first aid training to staff, though the fact that staff working in these groups aren't given dedicated facility time to allow them to work on these projects in the same way union reps are for their other duties means that they can be very dependent on supportive line managers to give them enough time to be properly involved.

Lessons for employers:

- The unions have two forms of regular information and consultation meetings with management – a set of monthly meetings with the head of people and a quarterly meeting with the chief executive and other senior relevant executives.
- Workforce representatives can also engage with senior management between meetings.
- Regular and constructive meetings foster good levels of trust.
- A separate Diversity and Inclusion Forum, with a series of sub-groups covering mental health, disabilities and so on, works on promoting those particular subjects.
- A culture change programme, 'WOW (Ways of Working) Voices', involving staff representatives from every department, is another route for gathering feedback from the workforce and for feeding information down to workers and complements the union information and consultation arrangements.



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