



# Working with trade unions to improve homeworkers' conditions: Benefits for retailers and suppliers

This briefing outlines some of the ways in which trade unions can work with retailers and suppliers to improve conditions for workers – including homeworkers – and the business benefits of joint working.

## What are trade unions?

Trade unions are independent, membership-based organisations of workers that represent and negotiate on behalf of working people. They give advice when their members have problems at work, help improve wages and working conditions by negotiating with employers, and make sure that their members' legal rights are enforced. You can find more information about trade unions and what they do here: [www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionsatwork.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionsatwork.pdf).

## Benefits of working with a trade union

Working with a recognised trade union can bring many benefits to retailers and suppliers around the world. In particular, trade unions can help companies to:

- **Build trust among the workforce.** Unions provide a mechanism for dialogue between workers and employers, which helps build trust and commitment among the workforce and ensures that problems can be identified and resolved quickly and fairly. This brings significant productivity benefits for companies. Recognising a union also means there is a single point of contact for negotiating terms and conditions for workers, which is simpler, more efficient for the employer and fairer than dealing with workers individually.
- **Ensure workplaces are safe.** Union representatives help to lower accident rates at work by ensuring safe working practices and reducing stress-related ill health caused by, for example, working long hours, being bullied or working in poor quality environments. Evidence shows that unionised workplaces are safer workplaces<sup>1</sup> – which has the added benefit for employers of significantly reducing the costs of ill health and accidents.
- **Reduce the burden of audits.** Unions are well placed to work with employers to identify and address poor working practices and non-compliance with labour standards. By surveying their members about workplace conditions, coordinating workers to monitor workplace practices, and providing a safe route for workers to report non-compliance, trade unions help employers achieve more than traditional audit and social compliance approaches, thus reducing dependence on social audit.
- **Improve staff retention.** Trade unions negotiate on their members' behalf with employers to find solutions that meet business needs, while ensuring that workers are treated fairly. By giving employees a voice and supporting them when they are unhappy at work, unions significantly improve staff retention and reduce absenteeism. Improved working conditions in unionised workplaces also give employees a powerful incentive to remain in their jobs for longer, and to use their time at work more productively.
- **Make better business decisions.** Because unions represent workers from a large number of similar organisations, they have a broad perspective on issues affecting companies and industry knowledge that can be very useful to companies. Informing and consulting with experienced union representatives can also help companies take better-informed business decisions, for example in relation to shift patterns or the type of equipment to invest in.
- **Promote equality.** Trade unions actively fight discrimination and help to promote equal opportunities at work. Union representatives are well placed to identify incidences of discrimination, and to work with employers to ensure that anti-discrimination policies are properly implemented. This helps make workplaces more attractive to workers – improving staff retention, absenteeism and productivity – as well as reducing management time spent addressing grievances.

1 For example, a study for the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that employers with trade union health and safety committees had half the injury rate of those employers who managed safety without unions or had some other process to involve staff. ('Safety cultures: Giving staff a clear role', Report by Public Concern at Work for HSE, 1999 ([www.hse.gov.uk/research/crr\\_pdf/1999/CRR99214.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/crr_pdf/1999/CRR99214.pdf))).



- **Provide access to learning and skills.** Helping members to access education and training is a key priority for unions. Research shows that union recognition has a consistently positive effect on the amount and range of training that is provided to employees.<sup>2</sup> In turn, higher skilled employees bring productivity benefits for employers.
  - **Save money.** Early identification of problems in the workplace can lead to significant savings, for example by reducing the costs employers face as a result of accidents, ill health and staff turnover. Unions also have a strong record of working with employers to identify efficiencies and cost savings – both employers and employees have a shared interest in business success.
  - **Increase productivity.** Unions help build high-trust workplaces where workers are healthier, better skilled and more able to resolve grievances – all of which lead to a more committed and productive workforce. Unions can also help maintain productivity during periods of employer innovation – by providing ways of consulting with workers over change and reducing the chances of staff resistance.
- **Develop ways of addressing poor homeworking conditions.** Unions are a good source of information on workplace practices, and can work with employers to develop effective ways to address non-compliances and implement strategies to improve performance.
  - **Monitor working practices and codes of labour practice.** Unions can play a key part in monitoring and enforcing labour standards, for example by surveying homeworkers to identify non-compliances and the effectiveness of policies and procedures.
  - **Organise and represent homeworkers.** In some cases, unions may be able to work with communities of homeworkers to enable them collectively represent their concerns to suppliers and employers.

### How trade unions can help improve conditions for homeworkers

Trade unions' wide-ranging skills and experience mean that they are well-placed to help companies with particularly challenging workforce issues, such as how to ensure good working conditions for homeworkers. In particular, unions can work collaboratively with retailers and suppliers to:

- **Identify where homeworkers are present.** Good relationships with workers and wider industry knowledge means that union representatives are well equipped to work with employers to map supply chains and identify where homeworkers may be used.
- **Identify poor homeworking conditions.** Union representatives are well placed to identify where working conditions and practices for homeworkers fall short of best practice standards. For example, they can ask homeworkers about their working conditions

and provide a safe route for homeworkers to report violations of labour standards without fear of reprisal.

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### Further information

You can find out more about the work of trade unions in the following publications:

- *The Road to Recovery: How Effective Unions Can Help Rebuild the Economy*, Trades Union Congress, 2010 ([www.tuc.org.uk/touchstone/roadtorecovery/touchstone8.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/touchstone/roadtorecovery/touchstone8.pdf)).
- *The Union Advantage: The Positive Impact of Trade Unions on the Economy and British Society*, Trades Union Congress, 2009 ([www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionadvantage.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionadvantage.pdf)).
- *Trade Unions at Work: What They Are and What They Do*, TUC ([www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionsatwork.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/unionsatwork.pdf)).

You can also find out more information from the following organisations: the Trades Union Congress (TUC): [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk); the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF): [www.iuf.org](http://www.iuf.org); the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation, (ITGLWF): [www.itglwf.org](http://www.itglwf.org); the European Trades Union Congress (ETUC): [www.etuc.org](http://www.etuc.org); the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC): [www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org).

<sup>2</sup> 'The impact of the union learning representative: A survey of ULRs and their employers', by Nicolas Bacon and Kim Hoque, Nottingham University Business School, Research Paper 9, April 2009 ([www.unionlearn.org.uk/files/publications/documents/149.pdf](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/files/publications/documents/149.pdf)).