

Exploring the relationship between union learning representatives and employer-provided training in Britain

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Union learning representatives (ULRs)

- New type of workplace activist
- Promote workplace learning, encourage members to take-up training, and work in partnership with employers to raise skill levels
- First ULRs trained in 2000, 18,000 in post by 2007, target of 22,000 by 2010
- Employment Act 2002 - ULRs statutory rights to paid time off

Positive ULR Impact Claimed

- TUC- 'significant increase in engagement with management ... improving the learning culture'
- 150,000 employees helped to access courses
- Government- 'particularly effective in targeting people with low skills, or low confidence in their own ability'
- Wallis *et al.* (2005: 283) 'successful in promoting and facilitating employee-centred learning opportunities'
- Cases increased training provision (Warhurst *et al.* 2006)
- Wallis and Stuart (2007)- learning partnerships

- Hoque & Bacon (2008 forthcoming)– no overall relationship between ULRs and employer-provided training
- Not affected by employer unwillingness to negotiate and consult with unions over training or union membership density. But some other factors may be important.

Aim: evaluate the influence of ULR characteristics and management support on the relationship between ULRs and employer-provided training.

ULR characteristics

- Specialists vs. generalists- time spent on training issues.

Are training issues crowded out for generalists?

Or are generalists networked, less inclined to identify with the employers' training agenda, considered by employers as more representative of members' views?

- Full-time or part-time?
- Level of experience- experienced union reps vs. new to representative role. Extra skills of experienced reps or are they less than wholehearted- 'crowded out' or 'secondary issue'

Management support

- Working relationships with managers
A good cooperative working relationship may enable ULRs to influence employer training provision.
- ULR access to facilities

First aim – describe ULRs' individual characteristics and the support they receive from managers, comparing ULRs and non-ULR reps

Second aim - test the influence of these factors on the relationship between ULRs and employee reports of training activity.

Data

Worker rep survey: most senior rep in workplace. Can identify whether the respondent is a ULR, their characteristics and support from management. 501 observations used (non-union reps excluded)

Employee survey: training incidence dependent variable and individual/ job characteristic controls

Management survey: workplace control variables

Results

ULR characteristics and management support (table 1)

- 51% of ULRs did not spend any time on employee training (64% in private sector). 'Inactive' in this regard
- Among ULRs that are the sole rep at the workplace, only 43% spent time on employee training (37% for non-ULR reps)

Different types of ULRs (figure 1)

'Hybrid' ULRs: involved in training plus six or more other rep activities

'Dedicated' ULRs: involved in training and fewer than six other rep activities

'Engaged/ inactive' ULRs: not involved in training but involved in six or more other rep activities

'Disengaged/ inactive' ULRs: not involved in training nor involved in six or more other rep activities

Characteristics and management support offered to 'active' reps (table 2)

- management support is limited
- differences between public/ private sector ULRs
- differences between ULRs and non-ULR reps

ULR characteristics, employer support and employer-provided training

Training is no higher in workplaces with a ULR that is involved in training than in workplaces with a ULR not involved in training (table 3)

Full sample: Training is lower in workplaces with a 'dedicated ULR' (table 4)

Public sector: Training higher in workplaces with a 'hybrid' rather than 'dedicated' ULR. Level of experience (or inexperience) and facilities also important (table 5)

Private sector: Training higher in workplaces with a 'hybrid' rather than 'dedicated ULR'. Level of experience also important (table 6)

Discussion and conclusions

- Large proportion of ULRs are not spending time on training matters – ‘inactive’ in this regard
- Large proportion of ULRs are playing a ‘hybrid’ role (but no evidence of ‘crowding out’)
- Public sector ULRs are more experienced than non-ULR reps and more likely to report good relations with managers
- Private sector ULRs are less likely to be full time than non-ULR reps and report poorer relations with managers
- ‘Hybrid’ ULRs associated with higher training levels than ‘dedicated’ ULRs in both public and private sectors
- Facilities important in the public sector
- Experience is important in private sector but opposite is true in public sector

Policy implications (for unions)

Public sector – recruit newer reps into the ULR role and continue to campaign for facilities

Private sector – encourage more experienced reps to adopt the role

Both sectors – given different outcomes associated with ‘hybrid’ and ‘dedicated’ ULRs, seek to recruit existing reps already embedded in union networks (reverse causality a possibility though)

Caveats

- Training is not universally higher in workplaces with ULRs that have supposedly positive characteristics than in all other workplace categories
- WERS 2004 surveys only the most senior rep at the workplace
- Inferences concerning non-employer provided training are not possible using WERS 2004

Scope for further research (though we have identified: levels of ULR inactivity; heterogeneity in the characteristics of ULR reps and levels of support; and the importance of support/ characteristics re training outcomes)