The missing half million: how unions can transform themselves to be a movement of young workers

Lessons from the TUC's WorkSmart innovation project

TUC

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Acknowledgements

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SHORT SUMMARY

Background

Despite helping millions of workers every year, and significant union organising efforts, our membership is aging and is worryingly low in far too many parts of our economy. The future of trade unionism itself is at risk unless we add to our organising toolbox, expand our offer and modernise how unions work. We must consider how we reach those who need the protection of unions the most but are currently the least likely to join a union and receive its benefits.

"We learned a huge amount about the context of young workers' lives, their attitudes, the barriers that stand between them and collective organising, their needs, the challenges they face at work, and what they would find appealing in a union offer."

This report

From 2016 to 2019, the TUC undertook a programme of research and innovation to explore how the union movement can better reach young workers. We learned a huge amount about the context of young workers' lives, their attitudes, the barriers that stand between them and collective organising, their needs, the challenges they face at work, and what they would find appealing in a union offer.

Using this new-found insight, our response was to develop WorkSmart – a career-coaching app to engage young workers where they are and bring them on a journey to collectivism at work.

This report presents our process, methodology and findings. It is intended to help the union movement grapple with the hard questions about how we transform ourselves to help meet the needs of a group of workers who far too often are unlikely to be union members.

What next?

The final section of this report is a set of recommendations for unions and the TUC. Overall, this project found that unions must transform their offer to young workers if they want to recruit them at scale. Other recommendations cover how unions communicate, the union offer, and union internal working practices. We hope this report will spur unions to develop their own evidence-based recruitment and organising strategies to bring young workers into union membership.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What's the problem?

Trade union membership among young workers (aged 20–29) is 14.1 per cent, falling by almost half to 7.5 per cent[1] in the private sector – where the vast majority of young workers in the UK work. If we raised membership to 23.4 per cent (average UK density for all ages), we would bring 554,000 new members into the movement. They are among the least likely groups for trade union membership, despite having the most to gain. Younger workers have a disproportionately bad time in the world of work as they are at the sharp end of trends in the labour market, such as precarity and lack of opportunities for progression. And, unlike previous generations, current young workers are not turning to unions as they age and settle down.

Young workers' absence from trade unionism has many interrelating causes. Some causes are not within our control: young workers are employed in a more atomised economy, making collective dynamics at work much harder; their whole lives have been affected by Thatcherism; and their own parents are less likely to be union members.

There is also a structural problem in the economy: young workers disproportionately work in sectors (hospitality, retail, social care) where there are major barriers to organising, including smaller workplaces, high turnover and low staff-contact time. These workplaces are unlikely to have unions organising there – which is a self-perpetuating cycle.

Some causes of the low membership density among young workers are within the control of unions to influence. Traditional ways of reaching and organising workers are no longer succeeding at scale for this group. Isolated campaigns are not bringing a new generation into the movement. And, while many unions are doing excellent work at a small scale to reach younger workers in new ways, this good practice isn't common practice.

There is a gap in the union offer. In general, we do not communicate that we are relevant to and understand the lives, needs and aspirations of younger workers – which may differ significantly to those of older workers.

And there's a gap in how we engage with young workers. In general, unions don't offer the kind of digital experiences young people are used to. For a generation who use Netflix, Spotify and Amazon Prime, it's jarring to be handed a piece of paper to fill in, or to have to call an office when you move home to let them know your new address.

In the private sector, companies that are reluctant to innovate are going out of business. Trade unionism is too important to allow anything comparable to happen.

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1 Office for National Statistics (2019), *Labour Force Survey*

The TUC response

In response to this looming crisis in union membership, the TUC Executive Committee decided to undertake a major innovation project. We set out to make sure trade unionism works for young people by designing new models of collective organising that will be effective in the sectors where they work, appeal to them and work within the context of their lives.

We partnered with Good Innovation, a specialist innovation consultancy, to investigate the lives of young workers and explore what new offer we could make. We used a range of innovation approaches – we were audience-led, evidence-led, agile and lean (described in Section 1: Research Methodology).

We learned about:

› **young workers' attitudes:** defined by how important the young worker's current job is to them, and whether they focus on right now or are more future-oriented. We identified four mindsets: 'desperate', 'progress', 'too comfortable' and 'stopgap'.

› **young workers' needs:**
  – to be aware of, and understand, their situation at work
  – to do something to make change happen in their working lives
  – to get together with colleagues in some way
  – to be supported with the pressures in their lives
  – to do well and get ahead.

› **the barriers between young workers and collective organising:** low expectations of rights and working conditions, a lack of trust between colleagues, a sense of futility in seeking changes at work, and mixed attitudes to unions (where they knew about us at all)

› **the issues at work that young workers experience:** rude and abusive customers or clients, favouritism from managers, unfairness and pay, shift work, workloads and staffing levels, poor routes to progression

› **what young workers want from a union offer.**

Building on this learning, the TUC developed WorkSmart – a career-coaching app to help young workers identify where they would like to go next in work, develop the skills and knowledge to reach their goals, and gain an understanding of their rights at work. Crucially, WorkSmart is designed to guide young workers towards collective action and ultimately to join a union.

❝We set out to make sure trade unionism works for young people by designing new models of collective organising that will be effective in the sectors where they work, appeal to them and work within the context of their lives.❞

A user-testing session using paper prototypes

What should the movement do next?

Understanding the lives, attitudes and needs of young workers is essential to designing an offer that appeals to them. This research offers important findings to be considered when designing recruitment and organising strategies. A key discovery was that, due to barriers we identified, simply informing young workers about the existing trade union offer will be insufficient: there must be a substantive transformation of that offer to make it appealing and to lower the barriers that prevent young workers joining unions.

This report sets out the case for rolling out initiatives like WorkSmart so that the union movement can reach a greater number of young workers and bring them into trade unionism. It also proposes a number of ways that unions can approach their own transformation and innovation programmes. And it underlines the need to communicate differently with young workers.

SECTION 1

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: INNOVATION

The TUC chose to take an audience-led and insight-led innovation approach. There can be a misconception that innovation means doing something completely new and different, but it more commonly takes existing offers or practices and augments or updates them based on new information.

Many charities and campaigning organisations have added an innovation approach to their work. Almost all of the top 25 UK charities have a dedicated innovation team – but this is not usual practice in the trade union movement.

We recognised that we didn't hold the necessary innovation experience or expertise in-house to complete this project, and so partnered with Good Innovation, a consultancy specialising in not-for-profit

organisations. Good Innovation guided us through a process to learn more about the challenges we faced and the context we are operating in from the existing knowledge in the union movement and from our own primary research. Then we moved on to generate ideas based on what we heard, and experimented to improve the ideas through testing.

We conducted extensive user research into young workers' needs, behaviours and motivations. In autumn 2016 the first cohort of around 50 young workers completed a series of tasks using WhatsApp. These tasks ran over the course of a week and explored how they felt about work, what their top issues were and how they felt about talking to colleagues about shared issues.

LEARN

Understand the challenge, the context and the information that is already known

INVESTIGATE

Gather deep insight into young core workers

FIND

Generate and develop new ideas based on our insight

EXPERIMENT

Improve the ideas through real-world testing

Good Innovation's approach to the project

We used WhatsApp as a channel to interact with our research participants because they already use and feel comfortable with it. There were other platforms that would have been easier for the project team, but it was part of our approach to lower the barriers of participation to the group we were trying to reach. This meant going to where they were, rather than expecting them to come to us.

The results from WhatsApp shaped a discussion guide for face-to-face interviews with each of the respondents, in locations around the UK. We asked each of the respondents to bring a friend to the interview as well. Conducting the interviews in pairs both put the participants more at ease and doubled our reach.

The results of the interviews were synthesised using thousands of post-it notes, and a set of key insights was identified. We checked the insights gained with an online panel of new young workers to validate what we thought we had understood, and had it confirmed. That insight is discussed in the next section.

In total we engaged more than 300 young workers in testing at different phases.

A set of interrelating innovation principles guided our work: being audience-led, evidence-led, agile and lean.

Being led by our target audience

Having a clear target audience in mind is essential to developing a new offer. Young workers are far from a homogeneous group and so we needed to be more specific in order to be effective. We identified a narrower target audience who we called 'young core workers'.

Insight from user testing is captured and synthesised

Young core workers:

〉 are 21–30 years old. We chose a slightly older group as we believed they were more likely to be working in a sector they might stay in. As union membership is tied to workplace and role, we were looking to understand young workers who were less likely to move on imminently. We also hypothesised that those in their twenties might be that little more likely to take action due to slightly higher confidence and slightly greater experience of the world of work.

〉 earn low to median wages. This was primarily because we wanted to reach those most in need of the help of trade unions.

› are not in full-time education. Young core workers may be studying part-time but work is the main focus in their lives.

› work in the private sector. We focused on retail, hospitality and private-sector social care where young workers are overrepresented, while trade unions are underrepresented. However, the research findings and results of the project apply much more broadly across almost all sectors to some degree.

› have never been members of a trade union. Younger workers are less likely to be union members than older workers. Young core workers are less likely to be members than the average young worker.[2] We therefore focused our research on the average member of our target group.

› work for an employer of more than 50 staff. We hypothesised it would be easier to move young workers to action in companies with enough other staff to form a collective.

Of course, young core workers are not homogenous. Even within this narrower target audience there is a wide variety of life experience and circumstance. Perhaps most importantly, one-third of this group are parents.

Having defined an audience, it's important to listen to them and believe what they say – even if it goes against our assumptions.

In this project we recruited young core workers using a market research agency. This was expensive, but by definition unions are not in touch with this group, so we had no other way to ensure high-quality feedback

TIP Thinking specifically about who we want to bring into the movement will help us be more effective at reaching them and growing.

Using personas

Personas are a way of bringing research findings to life. They can be used to help you get a feel for your overall audience or sub-audiences within it. In this way personas help you stay focused on who you're trying to reach. Thinking about an offer from the perspective of a clearly defined persona is a good way to cut out your own preconceived ideas.

You can add detail to personas over time and it's common to have print-outs of personas in your workspace, so that all members of a team can share a common understanding of that persona and apply it in a consistent way.

from the right people. Talking to young workers already active in their unions would have given us very different answers, which may have led us to develop a programme that did not meet the needs of young core workers.

Building in time to develop a thoughtful approach to reaching the right audience for your research is valuable. It can be done more cheaply – such as reaching out through your own or colleagues' personal networks – as long as you are sure that you

2 TUC (2016), *Living for the Weekend? Understanding Britain's young core workers*
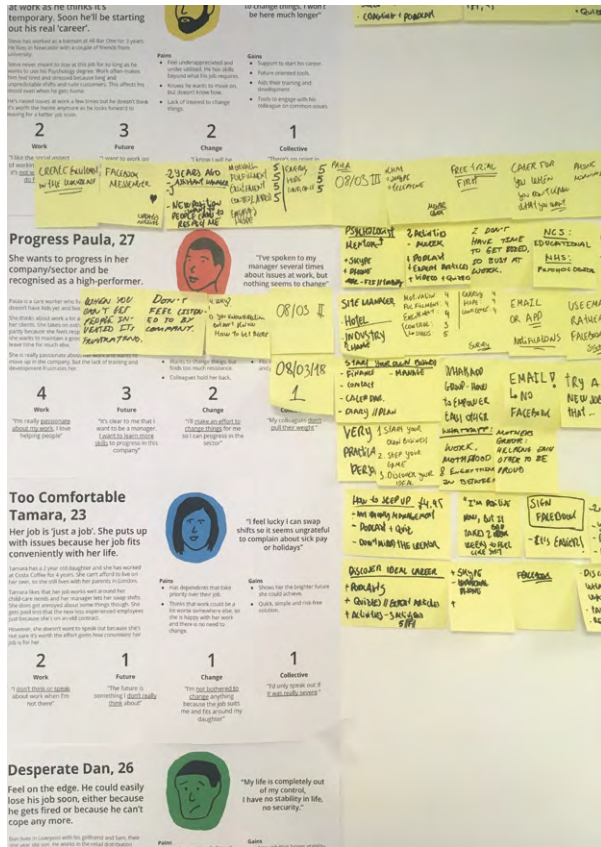
Adding notes to personas on the wall following user testing sessions
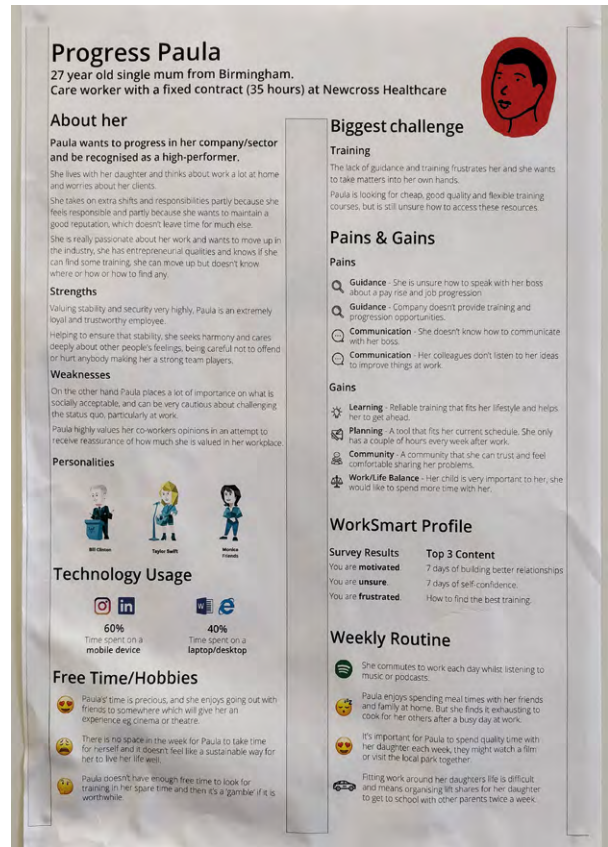
A persona on the wall for reference

are talking to the people you're designing the solution for. The important thing is how much you learn about the audience from the group themselves.

Evidence-led

Instead of using assumptions or gut instinct, an innovation approach uses experiments with your audience, and then analyses the results to identify insights and make decisions.

You can test lots of aspects of your offer, but testing is often used to decide language, look and feel. We found that what some people think young people want isn't very accurate. For example, a designer trying to tailor something for young people may

use lively colours and shapes and graffiti-style writing: but our findings indicate that a simple, clean design with a fresh, modern feel is more appealing.

You can do testing in person or online. In person you get more insight as you're able to ask why people think something or behave in a certain way, rather than just seeing the behaviour.

Being more agile and lean

Delivering projects in a more agile and lean way means starting with the problem rather than the solution, and building on (iterating) what you're delivering as you learn more about what's needed and what's working. The goal of working in this way is to help

Using social media ads to test effectively

Targeting

Target your social media ads at the group you want to speak to. For this project we targeted Facebook ads by age, location and a set of interests that were designed to match our personas. We also tested sub-groups by industry they work in, by gender and by parenthood. It's possible to target ads at the employees of some companies or workers by some job titles.

Testing comms

By creating different versions of Facebook and Instagram ads, varying the text and images, you can find what is most effective. Put a small budget behind the ads for a few days then put the remainder of your budget behind the best-performing version. This results in a much higher click-through rate and a lower cost per person signing up.

Testing concepts

We also tested concepts using a technique called smokescreen testing. You can gauge interest in a campaign issue or offer that doesn't exist yet by running ads for it that go to a landing page to sign up for further information, rather than building the campaign or service in full before being sure the desire is there. This is an example of working in a low-cost, low-effort (lean) way.

mitigate risk and increase chances of success. Developing the quickest, cheapest version at each point to get the answers you need – rather than jumping straight to building a final version – minimises wasting time and money.

For example, in this innovation programme we started with the problem of 'how can we better reach young workers?'. After the research phase we updated the problem to 'what offer can we make that meets the needs of young workers while also lowering their barriers to collective organising?' (see Section 2: Primary Research Findings). We then developed the concept of a career-coaching app. It would have been a very expensive mistake to make an app that didn't truly meet our needs and young worker's expectations, so we developed the exact functionality and content through prototyping first.

Prototypes (mock-ups) are a common tool when testing out ideas. They just need to give someone enough of a sense of what you're proposing to get a response. For example, before we developed WorkSmart as an app we used paper prototypes – literally showing our idea on paper and without any time going into design. When testing content later, we used PowerPoint presentations on a phone that market research participants could swipe through in testing sessions as if the content were on the app.

It was amazing how much we learned from these very simple prototypes without spending any money building something only to find out it may not be wanted. This approach is also an opportunity to co-create the solutions with the target audience. They're the experts in what they want, so it makes sense to work with them to design and improve solutions.
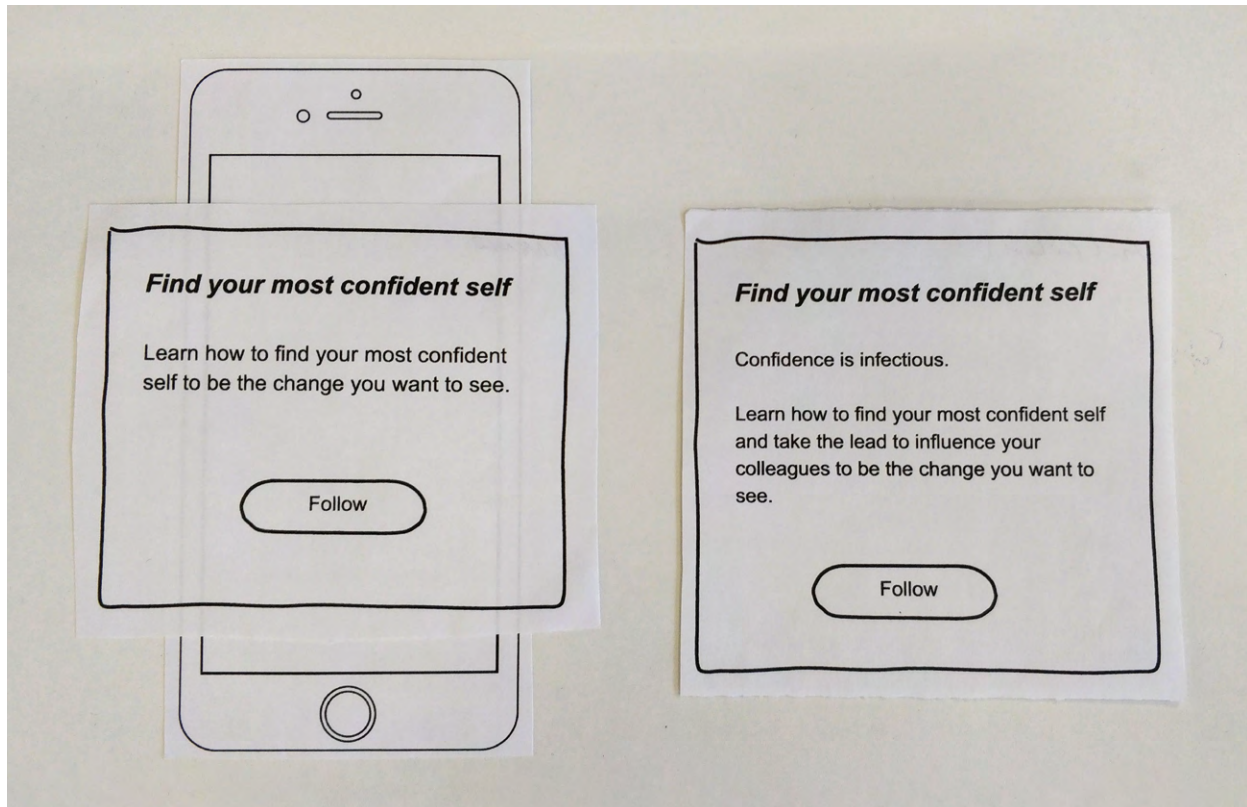
Paper prototype testing language in the WorkSmart app

Agility comes back in once you have reactions to prototypes – most commonly you will need to adjust your plans to take into account the new evidence you've just heard.

We also used elements of formal agile project management. We ran the project in a series of sprints, identifying the outcomes we wanted for each block of time but not always specifying how to achieve the outcome. We didn't plan the next sprint until the previous one was completed.

When working towards an unknown goal, and learning as you go, there's a lot of scope for change and it pays to build that into how you manage the project. This makes it hard to run as a standard project, where you plan all your activity from start to finish at the outset and then work through it linearly. Agile working involves iterating the project plan as well as the product itself.

Breaking down the work into stages, each focusing on researching, testing and evaluating an aspect of the project, helped us factor the (often very significant) changes and learning into the rest of the work as we progressed.

TIP **Think about what one thing you want to try doing differently after reading this.**
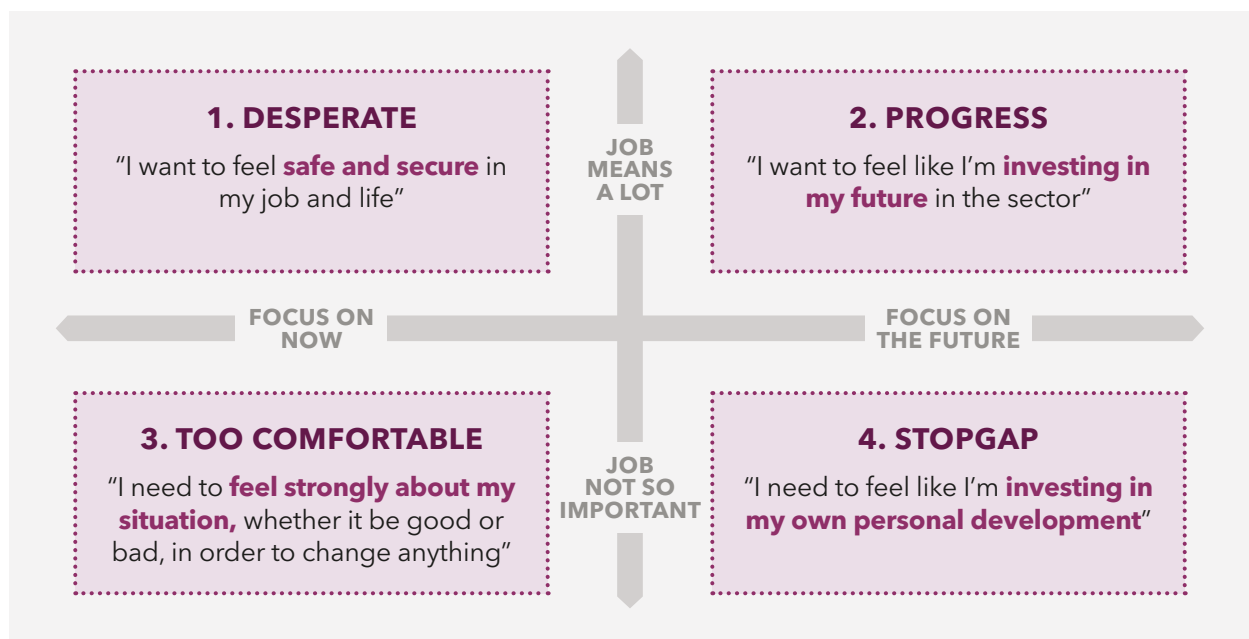
PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Throughout the research phase, we analysed everything we heard and identified a set of core insights that formed the basis of our thinking going forward. The insights are grouped into mindsets, barriers to collective organising, needs and issues for this group.

Mindsets

We found four distinct mindsets or psychological attitudes that different young core workers displayed. The mindsets are defined by how important the young core worker's current job is to them, and whether they focus on right now or are more future-oriented.

Any individual might exhibit traits from one or more mindset and will move between them as their life circumstances change. These don't work as rigid definitions or ways to categorise people – instead this is a useful guide to what might be important to different types of young worker.

We built a persona for each mindset: Desperate Dan, Progress Paula, Too Comfortable Tamara and Stopgap Steve.

1. DESPERATE

"I want to feel **safe and secure** in my job and life"

JOB MEANS A LOT

2. PROGRESS

"I want to feel like I'm **investing in my future** in the sector"

FOCUS ON NOW

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

3. TOO COMFORTABLE

"I need to **feel strongly about my situation,** whether it be good or bad, in order to change anything"

JOB NOT SO IMPORTANT

4. STOPGAP

"I need to feel like I'm **investing in my own personal development**"

1. Desperate Dan mindset

Workers in the 'desperate' group are in the most precarious jobs and under the most pressure. Their job is crucial for survival, making it feel too risky to speak out about poor treatment. The future feels uncertain and they worry about how they'll cope. They struggle to make ends meet and experience high levels of insecurity.

Dan might say:

"The thought of losing my job makes me anxious about speaking out. I'm lucky to have a job – there's plenty of people who don't and are ready to take your place."

"Who would listen to someone like me if I did raise something?"

"My life is completely out of my control. I have no stability in life, no security. I'm only 26 – is this it? Is it going to get worse?"

2. Progress Paula mindset

Workers in the 'progress' group are focused on getting ahead in the sector they are already working in (most typically care). They are committed and conscientious but often don't get recognised as such in the workplace because of their age.

Paula might say:

"I'm really passionate about my work. I love helping people."

"I can see how things could be run better at work, but they just don't listen to me."

"I do just as much work as my boss but get paid way less."

3. Too Comfortable Tamara mindset

Young workers in the 'too comfortable' group see their job as a means to an end that fits around other commitments in their lives. They put up with a degree of bad treatment or conditions because there is also a degree of convenience, such as a job that fits with childcare. It doesn't feel worth it to rock the boat.

Tamara might say:

"I feel lucky I can swap shifts, so it seems ungrateful to complain about my pay or holiday pay."

"Unless it gets really bad it's easier to stay and put up with things. It's just convenient."

"I don't really think or speak about work when I'm not there."

4. Stopgap Steve mindset

Workers like Steve don't feel committed to the work they're currently doing. It was always intended to be a stepping stone to something different, though some have got stuck where they are. Some have a clear idea of which sector they'd like to move to whereas others are unsure.

Steve might say:

"This is just a short-term job, it's not my career."

"There's no point in trying to change things. I won't be here much longer."

"I want to work on things that will benefit me in my future career."

Barriers to collective organising

In developing an offer, we needed to understand why young core workers weren't getting involved in collective organising to change things at work. Understanding the barriers means we could develop mechanisms to lower or mitigate them.

We identified four key barriers that stand between young core workers and collective organising:

1. Low expectations
Young core workers entered the workforce during a time of high insecurity and widespread poor working practices. They don't identify as having problems at work – they think this is just what work is like. If anything, they consider themselves fortunate to have a job. Young core workers say things like: "I have to be at work half an hour unpaid every day for briefings and debriefings, but overall I'm treated fairly."

2. A lack of trust between colleagues
There are very low levels of trust between colleagues in precarious work. Employees are in competition with each other to gain approval from managers, which means they get more convenient shifts and get their leave agreed. Young core workers say things like: "I could never talk to a colleague about something wrong at work – they'd be straight behind my back to the boss and then I'd be in trouble."

3. A sense of futility
When young core workers have tried to change things at work in the past, they've done so alone, and were unsuccessful. Young core workers say things like: "Why would I put my neck on the line to try and change something if it's never going to get better anyway?"

4. Mixed attitudes to unions
This research confirmed our fears that young core workers don't know much about unions. The vast majority hadn't heard the words 'trade union' and couldn't provide a definition.

Where there was some knowledge, it came from older family members who are union members or from reports of strikes in the media. For these young core workers, there was a sense that unions are for 'other people' – older workers not younger workers, the public sector not the private sector, and those established in their careers not just doing jobs. There are also associations that unions are ineffective, irrelevant, bureaucratic, hierarchical and unrepresentative of wider society, as they are seen as older, white and male.

When young core workers with no prior knowledge were given a definition of a trade union, they liked the concept and said they wished there were unions they were eligible to join. Some also had concerns that joining a union could mark you out as a troublemaker, could mean you were penalised informally at work or would find it harder to get your next job.

These barriers meant we needed to take young core workers on a psychological journey through different mindsets towards collective organising:

"I'm not sure I'm being treated/paid fairly."

▼

"Something isn't right."

▼

"It's not just me."

▼

"I'm confident things can change."

▼

"I want to do something/take action."

Mixed attitudes to unions

Starting with the problem (young core workers not joining unions) rather than jumping to a solution allowed us to test our assumptions. Through this in-depth research, we understood that most of the barriers young core workers face to joining unions are not actually to do with unions – but they are starting very far from us (further away than we had realised).

Understanding this led us to develop a pre-engagement journey, before we even introduced the idea of a union: lowering the barriers by raising expectations of the workplace, building trust among the group and giving a sense of hope that things can change, before making an approach about unions.

TIP Think about these barriers in relation to your work as a rep or officer. What implications do they have about how you talk to younger workers?

Needs

Understanding the needs of a group is a powerful way of shaping an offer for them. By meeting their needs, we become relevant and appealing. However, we have to begin with their own understanding of what they need. And our research told us that, given their low expectations from the workplace, many young core workers didn't know that they needed support with poor working practices – so an immediate union offer didn't feel relevant.

Young core workers did identify the following needs:

› to be aware of, and understand, their situation so that they want to make change happen
  – "I want to know what is right and wrong and whether I'm being treated normally or not."
  – "I want to feel like I'm being treated fairly in comparison to others."

› to do something to make change happen
  – "I need to feel more confident in myself and my issue if I'm going to do anything about it."
  – "I want to feel safe and not be worried if I speak out."
  – "I want to feel that things could change before I try to address an issue."

> to get together with colleagues in some way
>   – "I need to trust my colleagues before I share my thoughts with them."
>   – "I wish it were easier to get together with others."
>   – "I want to feel like I'm not doing something wrong and won't be treated differently if I share my thoughts and opinions with colleagues."
>   – "I need to feel there's a benefit to getting together and sharing thoughts and opinions with colleagues."

> to be further motivated to engage if issues in their work and lives are addressed
>   – "I want to feel more in control of my life."
>   – "I want ways of dealing with the stresses and pressures of work."
>   – "I want to be treated with respect by my employer."

> to do well and get ahead
>   – "I want to feel like I'm investing in my future in the sector."
>   – "I want to feel like I'm investing in my own personal development."

Issues

Because of young core workers' low expectations of the workplace, it was often challenging to get respondents to identify issues at work. They thought their experience of work, which we as trade unionists could often see was exploitative or even illegal, was just how work is. In general, issues are felt locally, most commonly with managers. There is a lack of understanding of how decisions are made, for example a fatalism about pay. The most common feeling about pay was that 'it is what it is', that there is no person who can decide to change it so it's not worth trying to.

Through conversation and ranking exercises, we were able to dig down into what issues are strongly felt. The top issues we heard were about:

Rude and abusive customers or clients
Young core workers are on the frontline of service sectors and routinely exposed to unacceptable behaviour from customers or clients. Young core workers don't blame companies for failing to protect them, but do feel hurt when the company then (typically) sides with the customer.

Favouritism from managers
We often heard "I'm fine because I'm mates with my manager": or, conversely, "the manager doesn't like me". Young core workers' managers' attitudes towards them impact on penalties around lateness, shift allocation, leave approval, flexible working and general atmosphere.

Unfairness and pay
A sense of unfairness as a problem came up often. For example, young core workers feel more aggrieved at being paid less than someone else doing the same work or at having worked somewhere for years without a pay rise than they are at their objectively low pay overall. There were also concerns around lack of sick pay. Unfairness is a useful communications frame for this group.

❝I'm upset that I've been there for 11 years and am still on the minimum wage.❞

Shift work

Short notice of shifts leads to difficulty planning personal or family life, which can lead to mental health problems. One respondent lost touch with her friends because she was never free at the same time as them. And it leads to physical health problems, with another respondent unable to make a dentist appointment because she could never be sure of keeping it. Those with childcare commitments are most likely to have a problem with lack of flexibility.

Again, there is a sense of unfairness that young core workers' flexibility (eg to come in at short notice) isn't matched by the employer (eg to swap a shift).

❝You get a call one hour before to cover a shift.❞

Workloads and staffing levels

Young core workers frequently cited as issues unrealistically high workloads, having to stay late unpaid to get everything done, and chronic understaffing.

Poor routes to progression

We heard from many young core workers that they want to do well and get ahead at work. They feel that if they're at school, college or university they can access a careers service. If they're unemployed they can access the job centre. But when they're in employment they feel completely unsupported – and that employers are unable or unwilling to offer training and progression.

Young core workers' managers are more likely to treat them as though they're not serious about work than identify development opportunities or release them for training. There is also confusion about routes to progression.

❝I'm on the technical team but received no training. You ask your colleagues questions and pick it up.❞

❝We also don't get enough training… it can be frustrating for those of us that want to develop our skills.❞

> **TIP** The issues that are important to younger workers are the issues that are important to all workers: pay, precarity, voice at work. But there can be a different emphasis. Do you understand what the young people in your workplace or sector particularly care about? Are those issues reflected in bargaining agendas and communications?

SECTION 3

WORKSMART

Development

Following the research phase, we knew there wouldn't be a silver bullet or an easy answer for reaching younger workers.

We had discovered that we need to take this group on a journey towards union membership: going to where they are first, making an individualised offer, then lowering their barriers to organising and reintroducing them to unions to build collectivism and recruit them to unions.

We searched for a concept that would be appealing and relevant to young core workers by meeting their needs, could lower the barriers to collective organising and would fit within trade union values to deliver.

We ran workshops to generate ideas to that brief. Officers from around twenty unions and young core workers participated in separate workshops. Hundreds of ideas were proposed, which were then synthesised and whittled down. We determined which ideas were strongest by testing whether they were viable (it would successfully bring young workers into unions), feasible (it would be delivered at scale) and desirable (it would attract young workers).

Concept

From the hundreds of ideas generated, we explored five concepts in depth. The strongest of these to meet the brief was an offer around job progression. This finding was backed up by unionlearn research showing that there has been a sharp drop in provision of workplace training and that young workers are particularly affected.[3]

A job progression offer was particularly appealing to the progress and stopgap mindsets. Through user testing we determined this would be provided through a collection of content, tools, advice and interactions that are orchestrated through an app.

Execution

This group wanted to access support and learning on their own terms, to fit around their hectic work and private lives. We fulfilled this by delivering a personalised, mobile-first experience, with bite-size content, that's ready when they are, in accessible language on an app, called WorkSmart. We used cost-effective platforms and open-source data to allow us to scale cheaply and quickly.
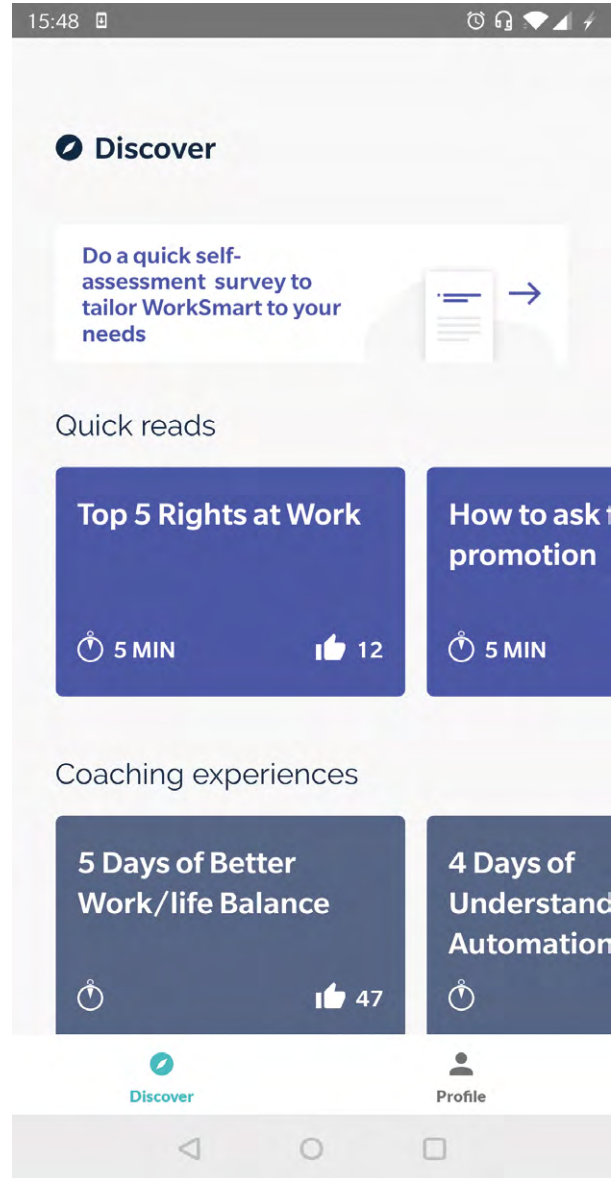
3 Unionlearn (2019), *Training Trends in Britain*
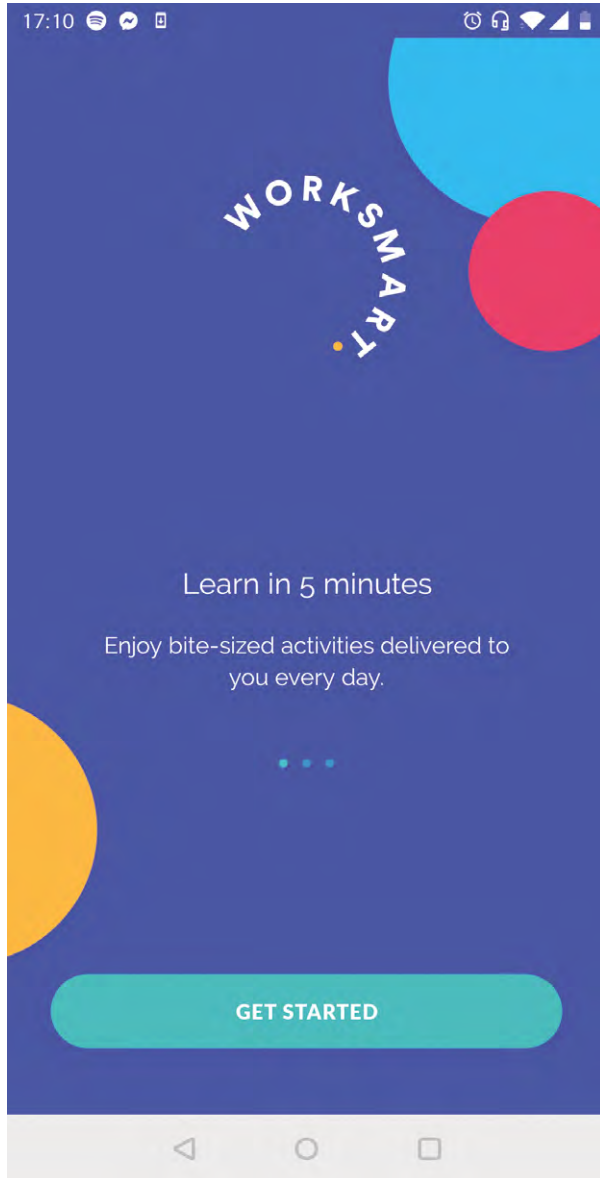
Screenshot of WorkSmart sign up page

Screenshot of WorkSmart app home page

The tone used in the app is friendly but authoritative: young core workers need to feel WorkSmart is approachable but knowledgeable. In designing it we researched and took inspiration from other successful products targeted at this group.

To meet the needs of young core workers and deliver an offer that appeals to them, WorkSmart helps users tackle some of the barriers to progression they're facing in the workplace. This includes a lack of quality careers advice, poor careers pathways, high training costs and an overwhelming and confusing choice of training options.

Their first interaction is an initial survey exploring attitudes to work and making change. It takes a few minutes but delivers instant value to keep people on the app and help deliver a tailored experience (which is very important to this group).

The first substantive part of the offer is development of coaching experiences. Young core workers begin an experience and return to the app over a number of days for a few minutes at a time, swiping through pages of content (short informative text, reflective questions, GIFs and emojis) in a similar way to Instagram stories. The content is derived from interviews with experts and a synthesis of existing materials and resources. Taking a coaching methodology (supporting young core workers to find their own answers) into the digital realm ensures the offer is both scalable and empowers the group.

The content is a mix of soft skills development issues such as confidence-building and having difficult conversations, and quizzes about rights at work. We used quantitative analysis further validated by qualitative testing to choose which topics there was the biggest demand for. Other parts of the offer we hope to develop in the future include listing relevant training courses in a user-friendly way and tracking progress and achievement through digital badges.

WorkSmart is intended to be both a standalone product that supports young core workers to get on in their working lives and a gateway to collective action, which may lead to organising and ultimately trade unionism.

As part of the research phase, we identified barriers to collective organising for this group. To remove those barriers, we must raise expectations of the workplace, build trust between young core workers, give a sense of hope that things can change and then finally reintroduce unions in a new light. To achieve this, WorkSmart offers rights information, presented as top ten lists, in quizzes and as tools, eg a salary checker, where young core workers can find out if
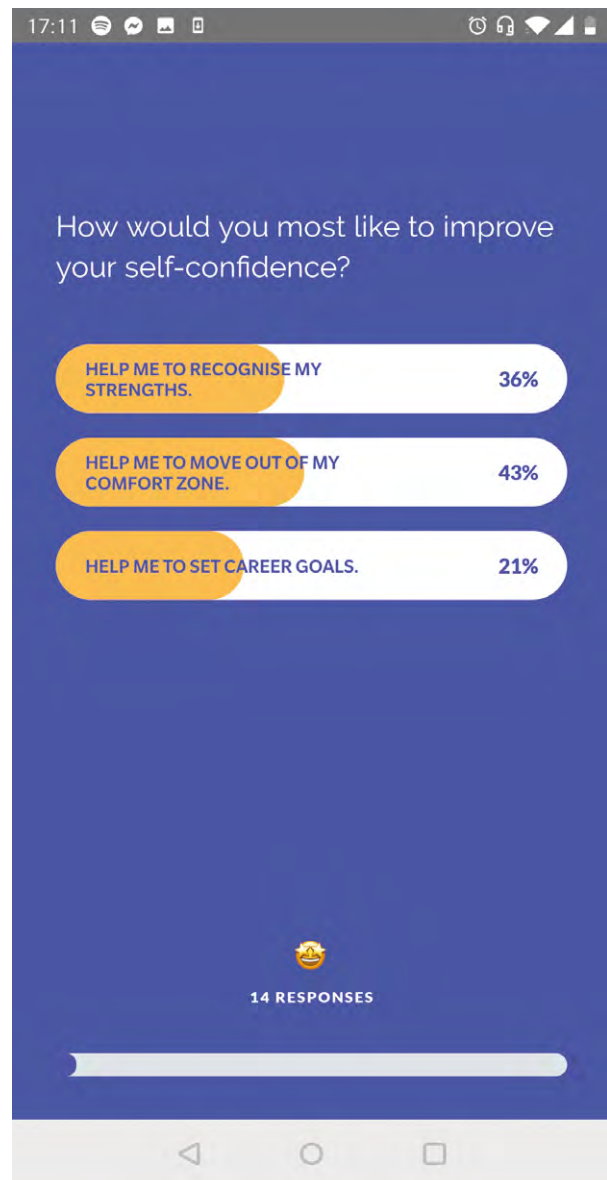
Screenshot of WorkSmart poll result

they're being paid over or under the average for their role. There are also more subtle mechanisms, eg polls, where young core workers can see the aggregate results of how others feel to build a sense that they are not alone.

We will develop a community area where young core workers can connect with each other and get peer support with workplace problems. When WorkSmart presents unions to young core workers, it will do so as a trusted voice and within an ongoing relationship.

Pilot findings

The WorkSmart pilot ran from June 2018 to March 2019. The results were consistently very positive. Feedback from initial users has exceeded our expectations, and many of our hypotheses were validated.

Every feature and piece of content has been tested and improved, then tested and refined again. We also ran a set of experiments to prove different elements of our case.

Proving we can attract young core workers

Taking a lean approach, the pilot recruited only enough people to prove we could attract young workers – not to achieve scale. Over 3,000 young workers showed an interest by signing up to a mailing list to be the first to hear when the app was ready, the majority from Facebook and Instagram ads. The initial survey was completed by 1,611 people. Over 300 young workers downloaded the app during this period, and a further 100 did for a later experiment. We ran 18 user testing sessions.

Testing consistently showed that WorkSmart hits a real unmet need and is therefore highly attractive to young workers. We heard that participants loved the branding and concept. They told us they didn't know of anything else like it and that it was valuable to them. People said that even at this stage there is "something for everyone".

Young core workers are possibly the hardest group for unions to reach. WorkSmart is one key offer in what should be a suite of options to get young workers into unions. In particular, it should sit alongside offers for those who are the closest to taking action. There are similar gains to be made from understanding the expectations of other groups of young workers of taking part in organising campaigns and contributing to collective action.

### Generating clusters of young core workers by employer, location or sector

We knew that we needed to be able to segment users by sector, employer and location in order to create clusters for unions to be able to organise more easily. On their own, a lone young worker recruited to a union will benefit less than one who also has union co-workers, and they will be harder for the union to support effectively.

However, young core workers needed to build trust in WorkSmart before giving out this information. We realised that we couldn't ask for this during the sign-up process, as it would prevent users signing up. Through user testing, we worked out how and when workers might be willing to disclose this information – and we discovered that using tools like the salary checker were vital, as users were more happy to offer the information when they felt as though they were getting something of value.
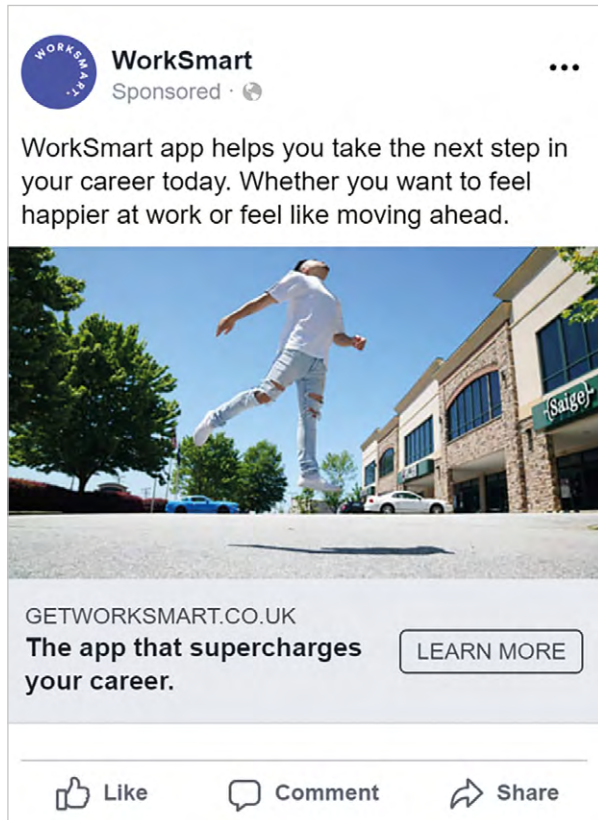
Above and right, Facebook ads to recruit young
core workers

We know that we also organically attracted young workers at the same employer through the information they shared with us using the salary checker. To further prove we could generate clusters of prospective new members in defined employers, we ran a test targeting young workers at Aldi, Lidl and Iceland. With a small budget, we quickly signed up 40 people working at those companies to the mailing list, 23 of whom downloaded the app. This shows that we can build clusters of workers within WorkSmart, which could provide valuable leads for organising.
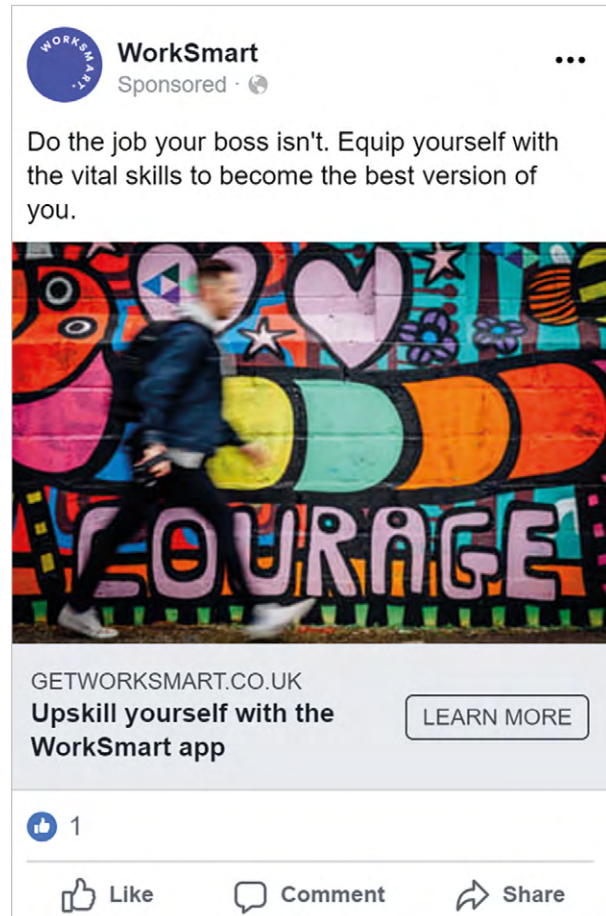
Moving young core workers to action and into unions

We ran a further small experiment to test whether we could move young core workers from using WorkSmart towards taking action (signing a petition) and joining a union.

Of 100 young core workers in this three-week test, 17 per cent signed a petition, 10 per cent were interested to hear more about unions when given a basic description in accessible language, and 7 per cent wanted to join a union after having been told how much it would cost.

These results are extremely encouraging. Young core workers are typically unwilling to expose themselves at work by taking action and are currently uninterested in unions. Our hypothesis was that young core workers would arrive at the app with varying levels of willingness to take action, and some would need to spend longer being warmed up to action. So we can assume that, over time, we would also see more cautious users following their active counterparts into taking action, after they had been exposed to the career and workers' rights content for a longer period.

Qualitative findings also validated the final step in the journey. Young core workers were not drawn to union branding and logos when shown them in testing sessions. However, after building a relationship with a brand they like and trust, they were receptive to hearing about unions. Participants who stated they wouldn't ever join or contact a union at the outset had been moved even during a single testing session to say that if WorkSmart recommended they speak to a union rep they would do it. This shows the effectiveness of a trusted voice that has an ongoing relationship with young workers introducing them to unions.

Where next?

The learning from WorkSmart provides an opportunity to appeal to a new generation of potential trade unionists and a chance to organise young workers at scale. The testing stage provided key lessons that can help inform the future work of the TUC and unions, as outlined in the next section of this report.

The next stage for WorkSmart is to focus on developing the learning and skills offer and to grow the number of users to over 5,000 in a year.

Concepts like WorkSmart are disruptions to the traditional union offer, but too few are developed from within the movement and in line with our values. The ease with which new digital-first services can be set up means that there are now many other organisations encroaching on core union ground: offering campaigning support or legal advice but not the protection or collective power of union membership. These organisations offer services to workers that fit well with how young workers instinctively engage, but they don't have our commitment to building a movement for workers' power. The union movement is in danger of being overtaken at speed: WorkSmart offers important learning for unions, that can help us ensure a way to get back in the game, and make sure future generations aren't deprived of the awesome power of collective organising by the core institutions of the working class – trade unions.

A judge for Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT's) inclusive innovation programme global future of work challenge said:

"Providing a valuable app such as WorkSmart will be an important element to attract[ing] young unorganized workers to join trade unions and it is smart that TUC [knows]… to learn from best practices."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding the lives, attitudes and needs of young workers is essential to designing an offer that appeals to them. This research and pilot offers important insights for union recruitment and organising strategies.

Overall recommendation – there is value in unions taking a different approach

A key discovery was that simply informing young workers about the existing trade union offer is insufficient. That means trade unions must look at and reshape the offer of trade unionism itself to meet young workers' needs and expectations, if they want to recruit young workers. Merely re-presenting the same offer through modern communications methods is not enough to recruit young workers at scale.

❝Trade unions must look at and reshape the offer of trade unionism itself to meet young workers' needs and expectations.❞

It is not appropriate to present an offer to young workers based on structures that have not changed substantially in decades – that will not induce them to join. Nor will offering services that are not relevant to this group, such as home insurance or will-writing.

Unions should consider:

› how they support workers, the offer and joining journey in unrecognised workplaces – which is where most young workers work

› whether they can make an individualised offer upfront, as a way of bringing younger workers into the movement – and then take young workers on a journey towards collectivism

› whether new members could get instant access to support on joining. There needs to be a consistent approach across the movement to providing support and representation to young workers at the point where they realise they need us. Some unions already offer instant support to staff in companies that are organising priorities. Young workers could be seen as a priority organising target in the same way. Of course, unions can't be sustainable if members then leave immediately after benefiting from advice and support. But there are innovative mechanisms that could protect unions from this – eg members who receive advice within their first three months could repay the cost if they leave within a year.

› forms of portable membership. Young members change jobs much more frequently and we lose a lot of people when they move to workplaces with a different recognition agreement.

WorkSmart and other new products

› We should develop the learning and skills aspect of WorkSmart. The TUC will seek external funding to take this forward and to grow WorkSmart's user base.

› Unions should explore the routes we didn't take in this project, to develop other products to reach young workers. These could include looking at additional ways to support young workers with job progression, providing immediate solutions to make everyday life easier, and bringing groups together with positive shared goals or through shared identities.

› It could be beneficial to introduce young workers to trade unionism before introducing a specific union. For those who are already close to joining, the choice can feel confusing. For those who are furthest from unions, there is a longer conceptual journey. It would be more efficient to support this group towards unions together as a movement rather than duplicating effort. Unions could then take responsibility for those working in target industries and employers. WorkSmart is one way to achieve a pre-union journey, but there could be other ways for unions to come together to allocate their recruitment effort more effectively.

› Think about the role of reps. Reps need to see recruiting and developing young members as part of their job. With such pressures on their time, it's understandable if this falls down the list but face-to-face contact is important alongside digital recruitment. And it's critical to find the next generation of workplace leaders while they can still benefit from the experience of older reps. Unions and the TUC should prioritise how they support

> **"Younger audiences have higher baseline expectations of digital. We need to change to meet these expectations."**

reps practically and structurally to ensure they have the time to carry out this vital job, eg developing resources to support reps in understanding young workers, their aspirations and ambitions, as well as the barriers to union organising.

Union working practices

Unions need to think about how they change their working practices to have a chance of developing successful projects and products to recruit more young workers. Unions should:

› Think more specifically about your target group and let them guide you. 'Young workers' is too broad to be a useful target audience, which is why we developed a narrower audience – young core workers. Developing an offer will be more successful if the starting point is the needs of the group a union is trying to reach. And if we test concepts with real users and are honest about the results, going with what is shown to be working, then new offers stand a much greater chance of adoption.

› Listen to the kind of young workers you want to reach before expecting them to listen to you. The young workers who are already part of our existing structures are not typical, so we need mechanisms to hear from non-members.

› Think about how your union tackles the barriers to collective bargaining set out in this paper.

› Younger audiences have higher base line expectations of digital. We need to change to meet these expectations – in the experience of joining, in communications from unions and in organising and campaigning approaches.

  – We should use the most appropriate digital or offline methods in each case.

  – Where digital is to be used, it should be from a 'digital first' approach – designed with digital in mind from the beginning rather than as an afterthought.

› Innovate: unions have to create a space and capacity outside business as usual to experiment, trial and test – and not to worry if it fails. This will be a challenge to union organisational culture and will need a degree of decentralisation, giving decision-making authority to those running the experiment. Alternatively, unions could create a 'walled garden', where a team can build its own culture. This can be a good starting point before the organisation is ready for more radical change.

› Share information with the rest of the movement: we all have an interest in building union membership across all sectors. Unions should be open about what's working for them and what isn't. And the TUC should play a leadership role in building skills, knowledge and sharing information – such as through the TUC Digital Lab.

Getting to grips with the challenge we face – and what it will take to overcome it – is daunting. Not everything we try will work, but the cost of not trying new things is too great: unions will fall further and further out of step with workers, ultimately terminally losing relevance. And the potential gain is equally great – a revitalised and growing, modern movement.

Communications

Unions too often fall into the trap of believing that if only they communicated better with young workers, young workers would start joining in numbers again. Our research suggests that this is false – that greater action than merely refreshing how we communicate with young workers is needed. But this project did offer some insights into how to better communicate young workers, which may be useful as unions take the actions above.

› Use the visual style that appeals to this group when targeting them, rather than what we think appeals. This typically means clean, modern design.

› Go to young workers, don't expect them to come to you. That means talking about the issues that matter to young workers, in language that resonates with them, in the spaces where they already are or on platforms designed for them.

› Employers treat young workers as if they aren't serious about work, as if they're unreliable and not worth investing in. We mustn't make the same mistake. When talking to younger workers we can recognise that they're serious about work by talking about workplace issues, rather than feeling we have to draw them in with something less substantive.

FURTHER READING

*Living for the Weekend? Understanding
Britain's young core workers*
https://bit.ly/2cJupOu

*"I feel like I can't change anything" Britain's
young core workers speak out about work*
https://bit.ly/2MqmATk

*Innovation from all Angles – how charities
can use innovation to improve*
charitycomms.org.uk/innovation-report

TUC

Changing the world
of work for good