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of work for good

Digital in UK unions: measuring our digital journey

2019 survey from TUC Digital Lab

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted for the TUC Digital Lab by the digital consultancy Outlandish, a worker co-op agency, specialising in digital design and development for social good. Lead researchers were Harry Robbins and Polly Robbins.

Outlandish also host events and networks around digital transformation at their North London co-working space for social start-ups, Space4. To find out more, visit [Outlandish.com](https://outlandish.com)

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Short summary

Next year, millennials will make up more than 50% of the workforce. Those who entered work during the internet age are nearly all instinctively digital-first. They're also mobile - connected throughout the day, from wherever they are.

That has raised workers' expectations of digital interaction with companies, government and organisations. And it's something long-standing organisations like unions can find hard to match.

'Digital' in an organisational sense has come to mean this idea of reinventing how our organisations work, in order to meet the new mainstream expectations of them. This report looks at how well UK unions are prepared for that digital transformation.

Unions surveyed for this report were at different stages of a digital journey. Some have established dedicated digital transformation teams and are aiming to increase productivity by digitising parts of their operations. But more still see 'digital' primarily as a communications channel.

They were also at different stages in resourcing digital roles and systems. Smaller unions tend to prioritise digital roles in communications. Larger ones focus also on digital membership and IT roles. Smaller unions typically spend a much higher proportion of their overall income on digital roles and tools.

All unions agreed they would benefit from greater digitisation across their functions. Larger unions had the highest ambitions, seeing the greatest benefits in all areas except cost-saving.

In terms of risks to wider use of digital, smaller unions identified skill and resource gaps. Larger unions were concerned about skills too, but also supplier relationships and the risk of picking the wrong technologies.

Digital strategy approaches also differed across unions. Most had a strategy, but for the majority it was held in departments such as communications, rather than at organisational level.

Unions had significant concerns about their digital tools, with many rating current systems poorly. But across most categories of tools there were examples of good experiences. This suggests room for collaboration between unions.

There is broad agreement in the potential for unions to come together to share the digital transformation journey.

Most commonly identified needs were around sharing best practice, building networks of union digital practitioners, and collaborating to find trusted suppliers and technologies. These union needs will be a key focus for the TUC as it works with affiliates to develop its Digital Lab offer.

Aims and approach

The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of current digital capacity and priorities across UK trade unions.

It is hoped that this learning will help the TUC, unions and other supporting organisations to improve their impact by:

- Benchmarking the state of the movement for future analysis.
- Identifying and sharing best practice.
- Identifying areas where the TUC and other organisations can support unions most effectively.
- Predicting future trends and needs.

We conducted detailed telephone interviews with digital lead staff at 12 unions. Four further unions submitted answers in full or part by online survey. The statistical analysis below focuses mostly on the 12 unions for which we had complete data, but the analysis and narrative draws on the other submissions where relevant.

We also added to the interviews and survey responses with questions from a concurrent TUC survey into organising, and desk research to gather publicly available information on all TUC affiliates' websites and social media presence.

What is digital?

There is no single accepted definition of 'digital' between unions. So, other than prompting for roles that might be considered digital (developers, designers, data scientists, digital comms specialists, etc) we did not attempt to define a single definition in this research. Instead we allowed unions to answer the questions with reference to what they each considered to be 'digital'.

One conclusion of the study is that different unions currently have quite different conceptions of what digital means to them.

At one end of the spectrum unions had a very narrow conception of digital as what might be termed "digital communication". This is the part of the union's communications function that deals explicitly with social media, web content, mass email etc.

At the other end of the spectrum, some unions had a much broader conception of digital, which encompassed some traditional "IT" functions, digital communications and other strategic functions such as service planning.

The dominant view in contemporary 'digital transformation' literature is that developing a broader conception of what digital means in the organisation is in itself a part of the transformation process.

The Co-op, NCVO and Government Digital Services (GDS) all have working definitions of digital similar to that devised by GDS co-founder Tom Loosemore:



Tom Loosemore
@tomskitomski



Digital: Applying the culture, practices, processes & technologies of the Internet-era to respond to people's raised expectations.

11:00 AM · May 10, 2016 · [TweetDeck](#)

Under this definition, applying concepts such as user-centred-design and iterative development to the redesign of organisational processes could be considered 'digital' because they use the approaches of the internet era, even though they may not necessarily be building, using or deploying a new technology in every instance.

Another useful perspective is [outlined by Cassie Robinson](#), Head of Digital Grant Making at The National Lottery Community Fund. She splits digital initiatives into eight types based on the applications for grants her organisation receives.

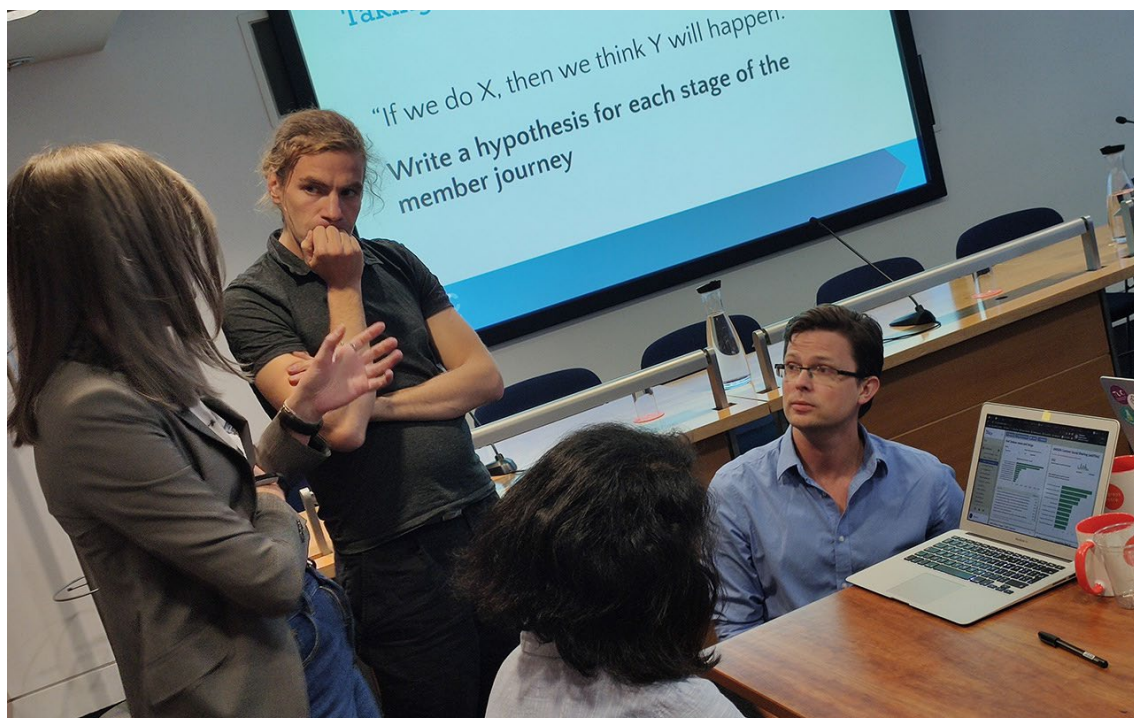
For her, 'digital' covers work around: "Digitising processes", "Basic Digital Infrastructure", "Digital skills and digital inclusion", "Designing new services", "Digital Engagement", "Tech for good or digital innovation", "Organisational redesign and transition" and "Digital practices and good leadership".

Broadening unions' own understanding of what counts as digital will be an important step in helping the whole organisation work together more effectively on digital change projects.

A wider concept of what digital means for the union will help them to increase the involvement of different people across the organisation and draw on a wider base of skills and experience.

Adopting a broader digital transformation definition could also help unions to make the most appropriate use of digital. There is a risk that organisations try to update outdated processes and activities by bringing new tools to bear on the same old task – a digital lick of paint that delivers a marginal benefit but leaves the original functions unchanged.

In some cases, a deeper transformation view – looking at the best way to achieve the union's original aim in the new digital-first environment – could result in much greater productivity gains.



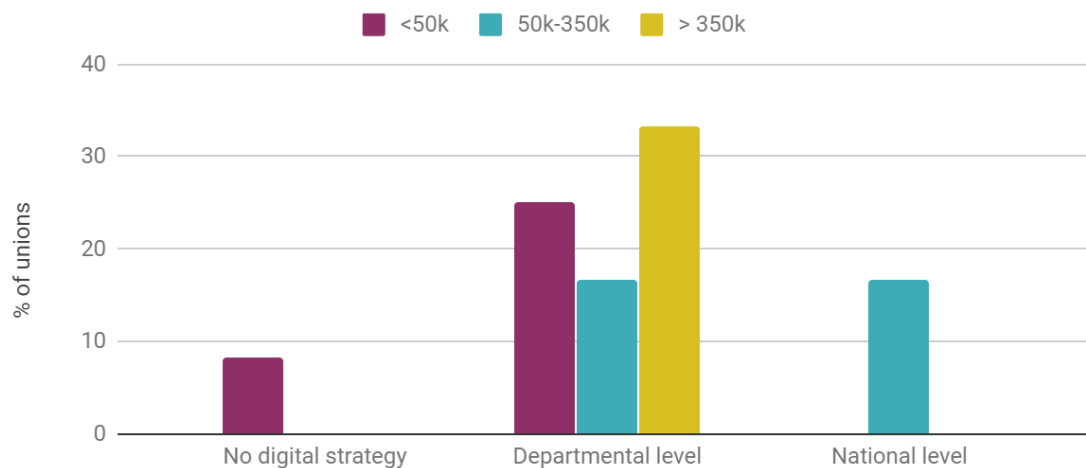
TUC Digital Lab workshop on improving the use of membership data in unions.

Strategy

Almost all of the unions had digital strategies at the “departmental or regional” level. This often correlates to a digital communications strategy, held within the communications department.

Two medium sized unions considered themselves to have national organisation-wide digital strategies, and one small union considered itself to have no digital strategy.

Level of digital strategy co-ordination:



It is certainly useful to consider strategies for digital communications, to help the organisation use the right communication tools for the right jobs, prioritise those channels which will be the most effective for the union’s aims, and allocate marketing money and staff resources in the most effective way.

However, organisations further along the digital transformation journey may also develop strategies for digital more widely. This could be a strategy on how they plan to transform their operations using digital, held by a department responsible for this work in initial stages, or ideally owned at the most senior level, given the need for senior leadership in addressing wider organisational change factors which will influence the strategy’s success.

Many organisations at the forefront of digital transformation are now moving away from a specific digital transformation strategy, to mainstream digital into their overall organisational strategy.

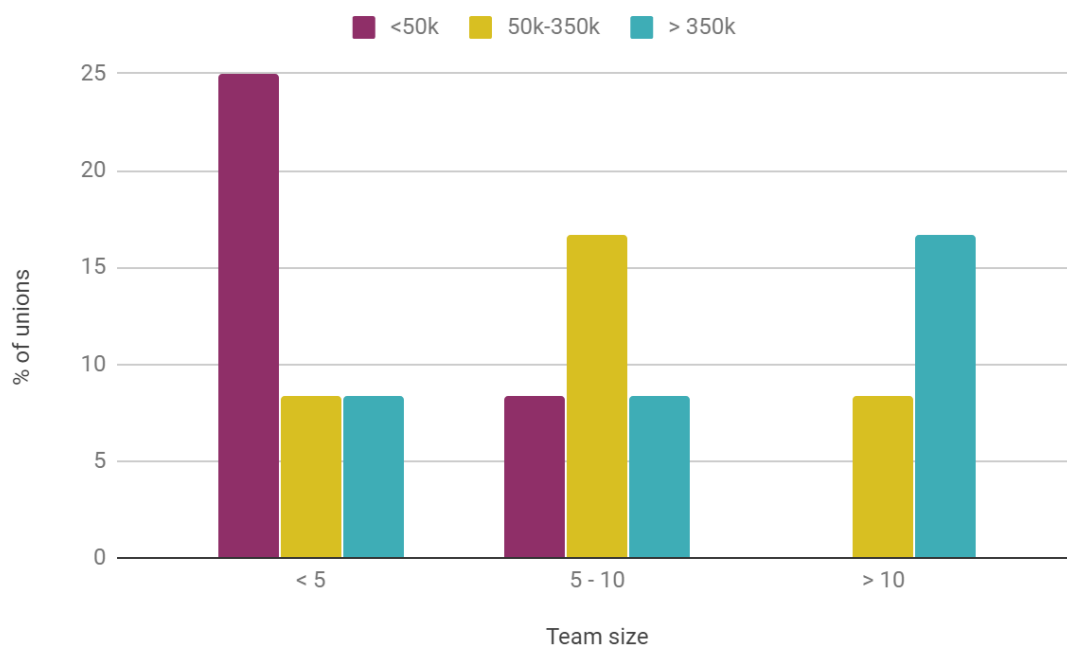
Whichever stage a union is currently at in their journey, it will be important to ensure their digital strategy or strategies have buy-in and oversight at the most senior level.

Teams and resources

There was a great deal of variation of digital team size, and the size of a team did not correlate strongly with the size of the union (e.g. as measured by membership/income).

Of the unions interviewed, 42% had small teams (fewer than five people), 33% had medium size teams (between five and ten people) and 25% had large teams (more than ten people).

Digital team size by union membership size:



It was surprising not to find a stronger correlation between union size and digital team size. There could be a number of explanations for this including:

- Larger unions had more specialised teams that they considered to sit outside of digital.
- It is harder for one person in a large organisation to have an overview of all the digital functions.
- Small and medium-sized unions may have more pressures forcing them to turn to digital rather than more expensive traditional approaches.
- Larger organisations may be slower to adapt to a changing environment.

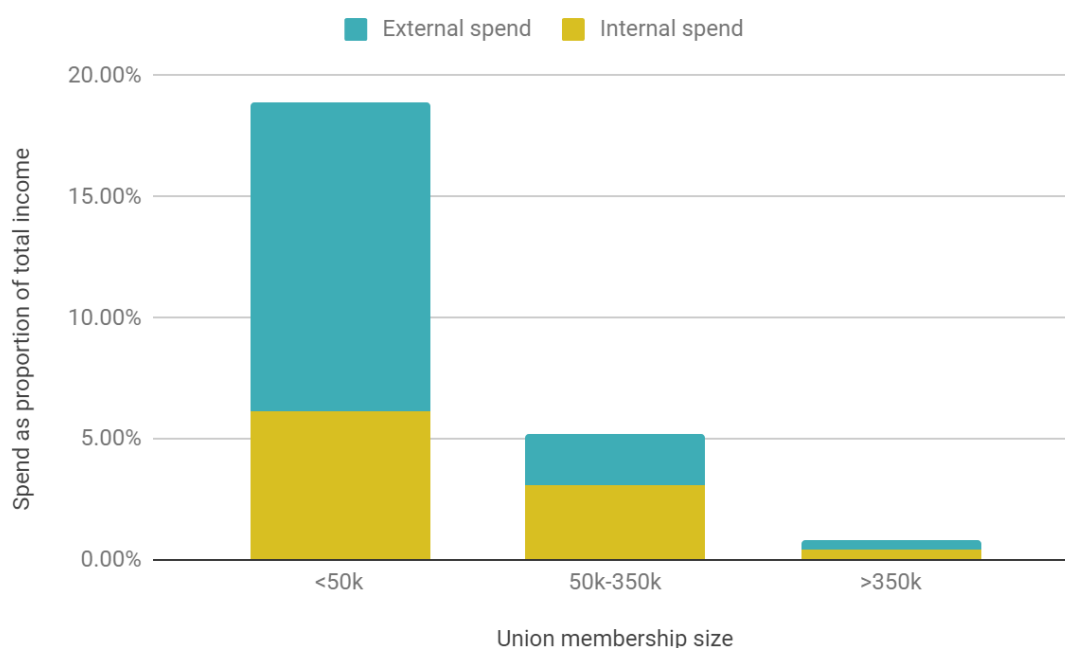
It was notable that the ratio of members to digital employees was much greater in larger unions:

Size of membership	Members per digital staffer
< 50K	8,136
50K-350K	16,304
>350K	124,481

While the ratio is at first sight quite high (15 times higher in larger unions compared to smaller ones) many digital services are inherently very scalable - providing the service to ten times as many members does not need ten times as many people.

Nevertheless, this suggests that the digital team make up a much larger proportion of spending in smaller unions.

Total spend on digital as a proportion of union income:



It is worth saying that the methodology for calculating this data rests on a number of flawed assumptions. We have used broad proxies for income per member and cost per staff member, which will not be at the same rates in different unions. There will also be differences following on from the differences in defining digital mentioned above. Unions were estimating their total digital spend and may have done so by grouping different types of cost from each other. The grouping used to preserve the anonymity of the unions also distorts the data somewhat.

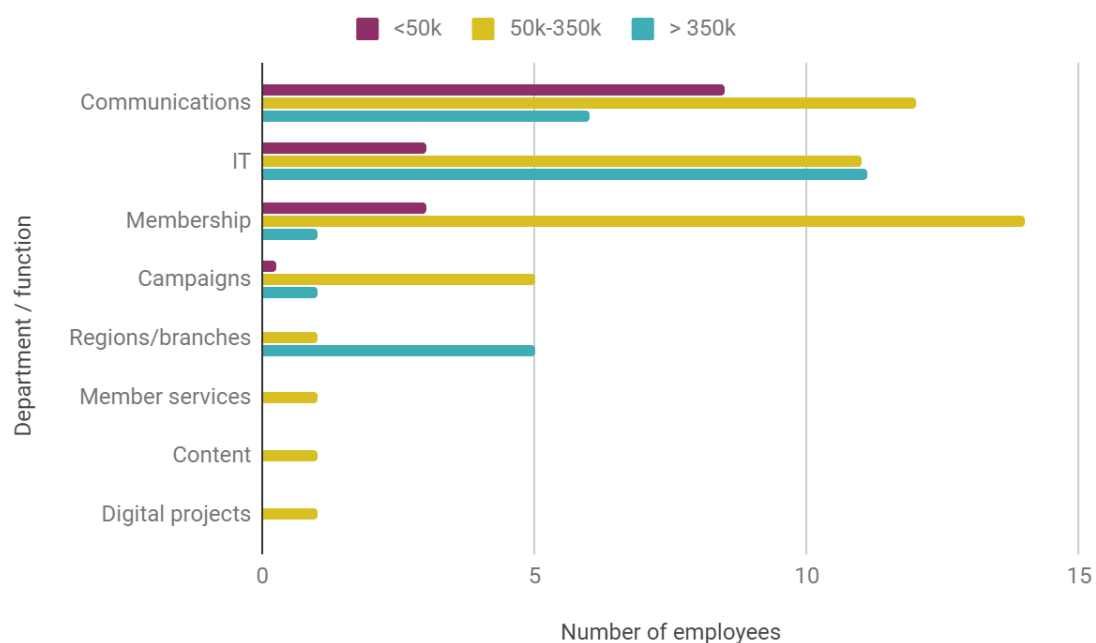
However, the figures are fairly stark and warrant further exploration - if the larger group of unions had ratios of digital team to members similar to the smaller unions then 368 of their staff would have digital roles, and they'd spend an additional £55m per year on digital.

Some of the smallest unions who contributed partial data via online survey were not large enough to dedicate staff members to digital work, and this work was added to the responsibility of one of their existing staff.

Distribution across departments

Communications, IT and membership departments accounted for the vast majority of digital-specialist union employees. It's notable that smaller unions had a bigger focus on comms than IT, while medium sized unions had more of an emphasis on their membership departments.

Digital employees by department / function:



It's also notable that, when asked the question in this way, the medium-sized unions surveyed had nearly twice as many staff that they considered to be digital specialists compared to the larger unions.

From the qualitative part of the survey it certainly seemed that several of the medium-sized unions had started to take a more holistic approach to understanding their activities. For example, they were more likely to ensure data from campaigning and other engagement activities was fed back into the membership and communications department in order to improve services, retention, engagement and recruitment.

Project teams, with a role serving the organisation in digital transformation projects more widely, rather than purely within specific departments are starting to be established in some unions, but this is currently very much the exception.

Project teams like this have become a more common way to organise work in larger NGOs. They can be organised as central digital teams, supporting other departments to digitise

their work, or on a 'hub and spoke' model, with a small central team providing digital design resource to digital specialist teams already embedded in different departments.

More digitally focused organisations are now starting to move on from this model to one where digital is fully mainstreamed into the organisation's structure - a concept explained [in this post from Hanna Thomas](#) of digital campaign group 350.org.

It is notable that in the unions interviewed, those who have gone through significant organisational changes in recent years, such as mergers or relocation, seem to have more far-reaching digital transformation projects. The wider need to examine systems and processes caused by such changes could provide these unions with an incentive to update their ways of working. And conversely, organisational inertia - the tendency to carry on doing what they've always done - may be holding others back.

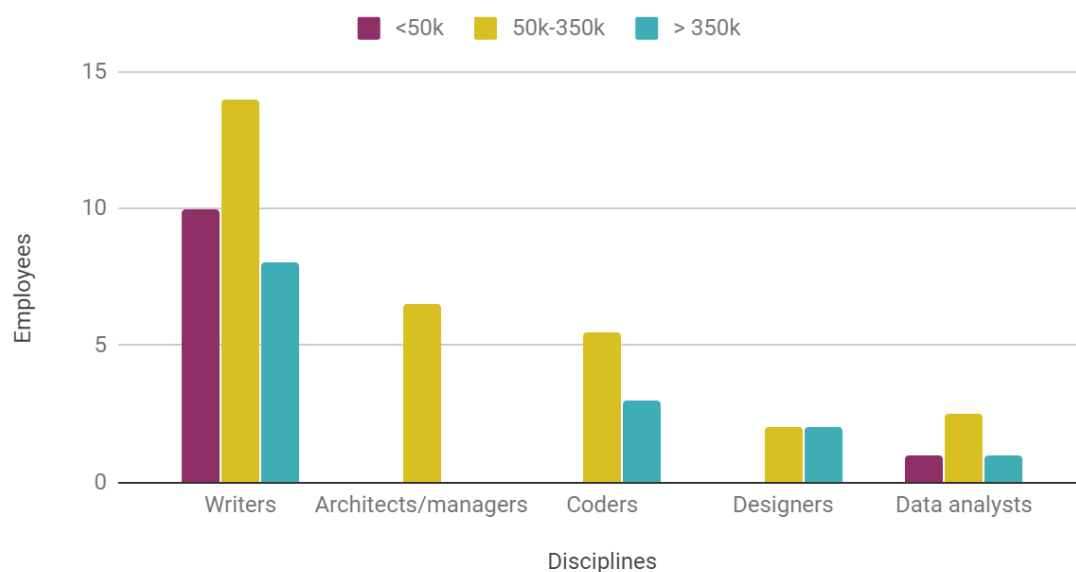
Distribution across specialisms

We asked unions to quantify specialist skills amongst their existing digital staff.

The most common digital specialism across all union sizes was "writers", who accounted for over half of the total number of digital employees. This again points to the heavy focus on digital communications, and the need to originate good content across web, email and social platforms.

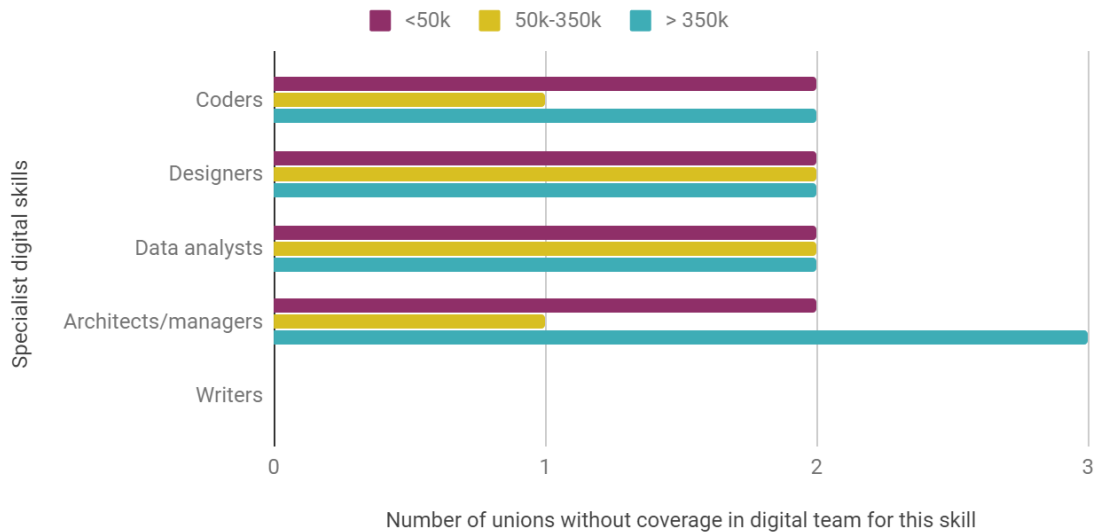
Some unions employed dedicated architect/manager roles to design and run digital projects, and some employed coders to develop or manage new software for the union. Though coding as well as design seemed to be functions that unions were more likely to engage externally than internally. Data analysts were also few in number, though spread more evenly across unions by size.

Digital skills by union size:



There were a number of skills gaps in the reported data. This chart shows the likelihood of a typical union of that size band to have no staff with that group of skills. All unions employed at least one staffer responsible for written content online.

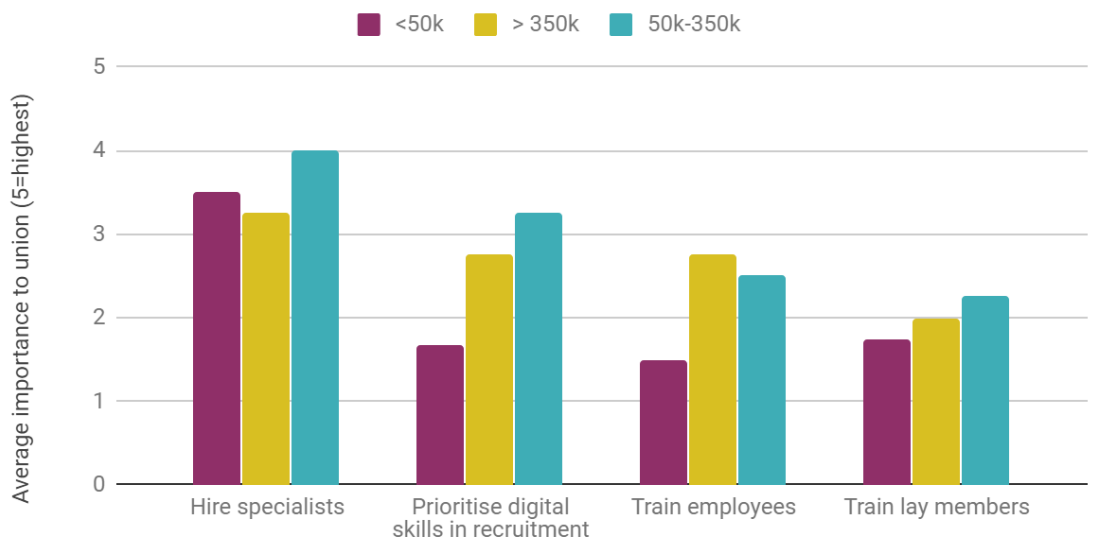
Skills gaps in digital teams:



As noted earlier, this is partly measuring organisations' definitions of 'digital' as well as how many people with particular specialisms that they employ.

Whilst most of the unions asked had experience of hiring specialists in order to access digital skills for the organisation, relatively few put a high importance on recruiting for digital skills across general roles in their organisations.

The majority did not provide consistent training opportunities for staff to help meet the skills gaps they have in digital across the organisation. And fewer provided consistent training in digital skills to lay activists.



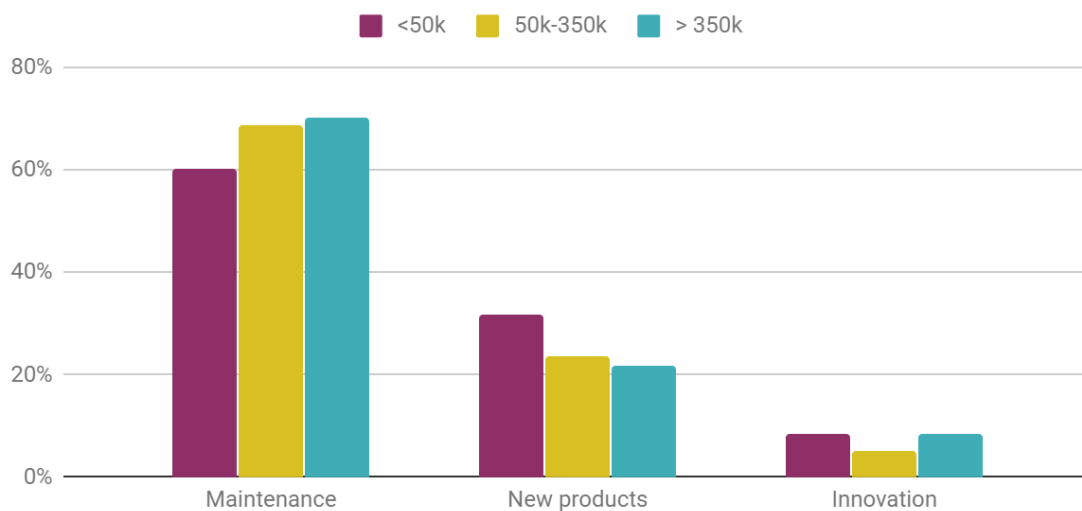
When asked what basic level digital skills were most important for the union to develop a quarter said “general attitude” and others suggested “social media”, “digital marketing”, “digital organising” and “mobile tools”.

When asked which more specialist digital skills they saw as most important, more than half of unions mentioned better data analysis skills. Coding was next most popular followed by CRM configuration, CMS management, writing for the web and user experience (UX).

Maintenance, new products and innovation

Spending across different union sizes was fairly consistent in terms of short term spend (maintenance), medium term (new products and services) and long term (innovation).

Spending on short-, medium- and long-term needs:



As digital technology progresses fairly rapidly there may be advantages in increasing innovation spending or pooling limited resources between unions to help share the learning from innovation.

Innovation and research towards longer term trends affecting unions and our members' working lives is also potentially an area where unions are less in competition with each other. Understanding the implications of deep learning and AI, for example, might be useful for a number of unions to explore, but are not critical points of competition for them.

Opportunities and risks

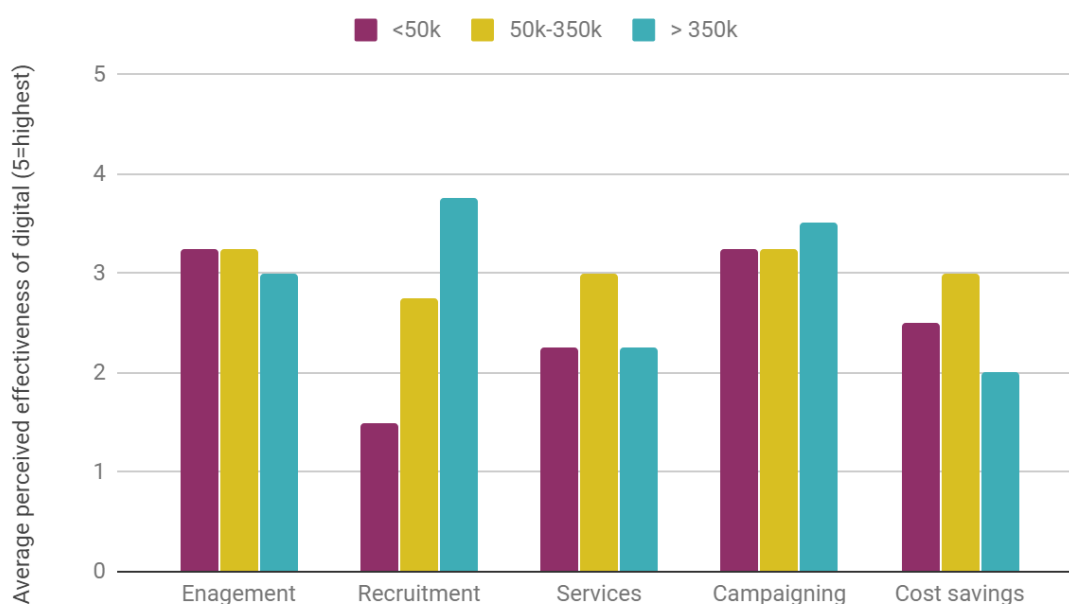
There was broad agreement across all unions surveyed that their current exploitation of digital opportunities was fairly average - between 2.5 and 3.5 out of 5 in most areas.

The notable exception was recruiting new members, where larger unions felt they were doing better, and smaller unions felt they were doing worse.

This might be explained by the cost of effective CRM integration into websites and a lack of capital to invest in smaller unions.

Similarly, investing to grow through techniques like paid-for advertising might be less affordable to smaller unions.

Current effectiveness of digital by opportunity, by union size:

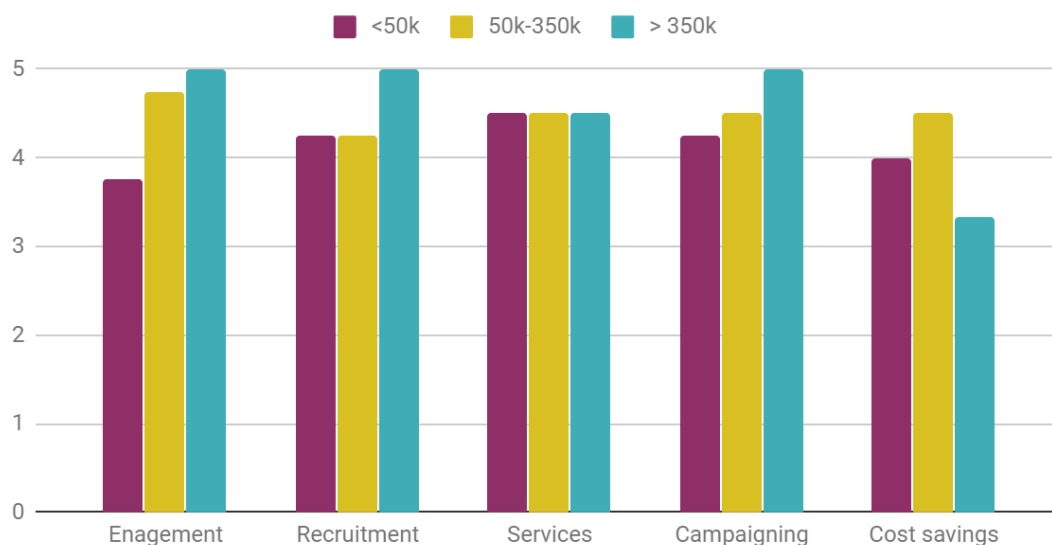


We also asked what unions thought would be the potential benefit in further work in each of these areas. All unions believed that there was greater potential benefit in each area than had so far been realised.

Larger unions had notably higher optimism about the potential future impact of digital on the union than the small unions in all areas apart from cost savings, where they were more pessimistic.

This suggests they are to some degree factoring in a greater investment in digital in order to realise larger benefits from it.

Potential benefit from further digital investment, by union size:

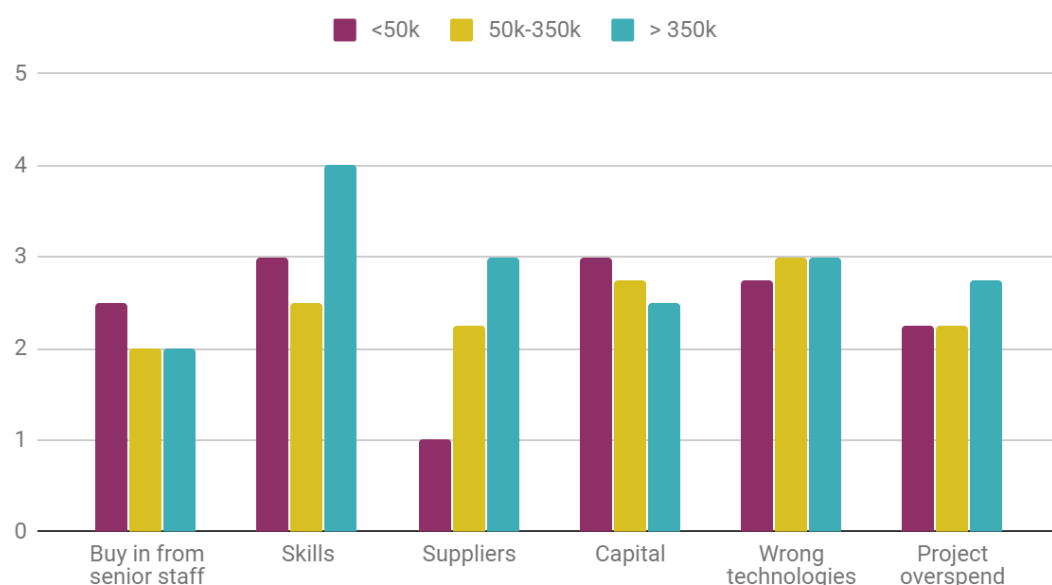


We asked unions what they perceived as the greatest risk or blocker to the development of digital in their union. Unions broadly rated risks as average, and no single issue stood out clearly in terms of people's perceptions of what might stop greater digital adoption.

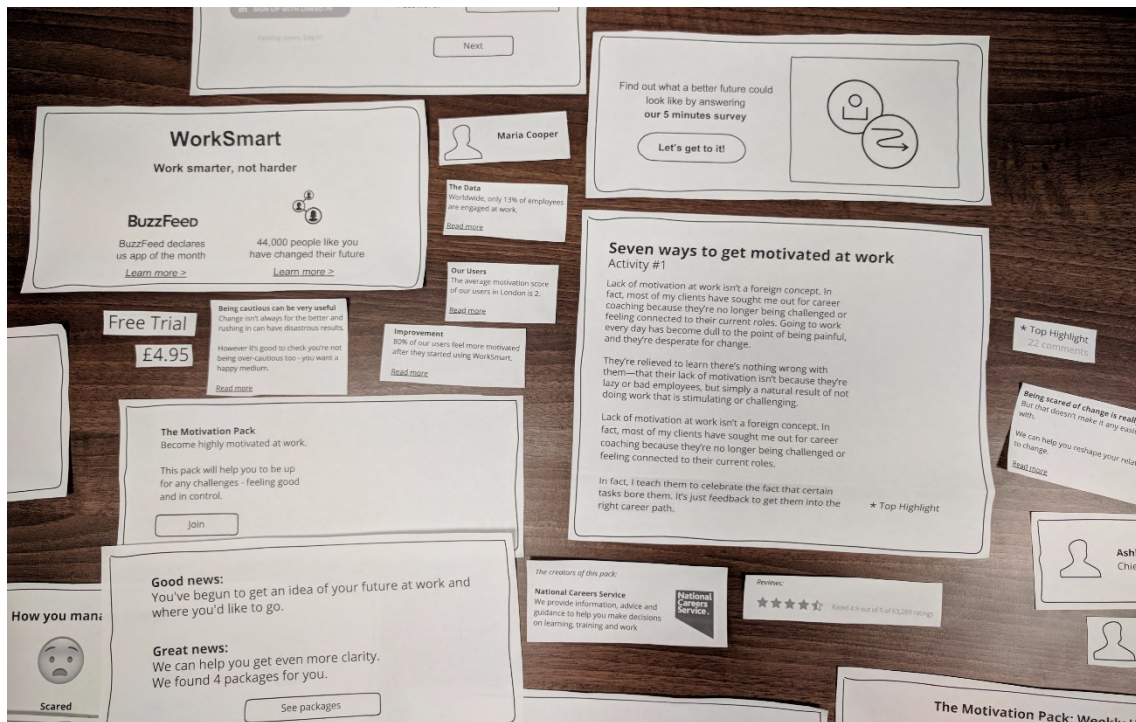
Small unions had by far the least issues with technical suppliers. This may be because they are making less heavy or advanced use of their union systems, or because they have a smaller number of suppliers for a smaller tech toolkit.

Large unions had notably more issues with skills shortages. Again, this could mean they have a higher skills requirement in order to access more advanced uses of digital.

Risks and potential blockers, by union size:



Across all unions the greatest perceived risks after skills shortages were the risk of investing in the wrong technologies and of having insufficient resources to spend on the technology that they needed.



The TUC's Reaching Young Workers project sought to minimise risk of over-investing in the wrong technologies by user testing new functionality in a very basic form – such as paper prototypes. This helped validate assumptions before committing to build anything.

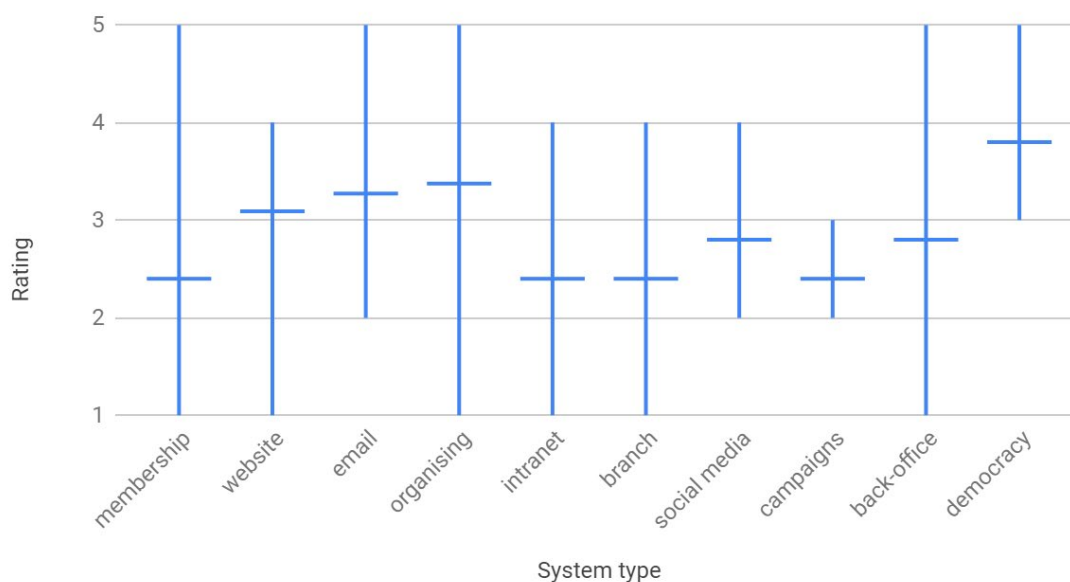
Current systems

We asked unions to rate the systems they were currently using across a range of functions.

All but two unions that responded had at least one system that they rated as either “bad” or “very bad”. Two thirds of respondents did not rate any of their systems “excellent”.

Overall there was a wide range of ratings for almost all categories of systems, however campaign systems were consistently ranked as below average.

Ratings of unions' current digital systems:



In the chart above, the top of the vertical blue line represents the highest rating for each system type; the bottom of the vertical bar represents the lowest rating, and the horizontal bar represents the mean average.

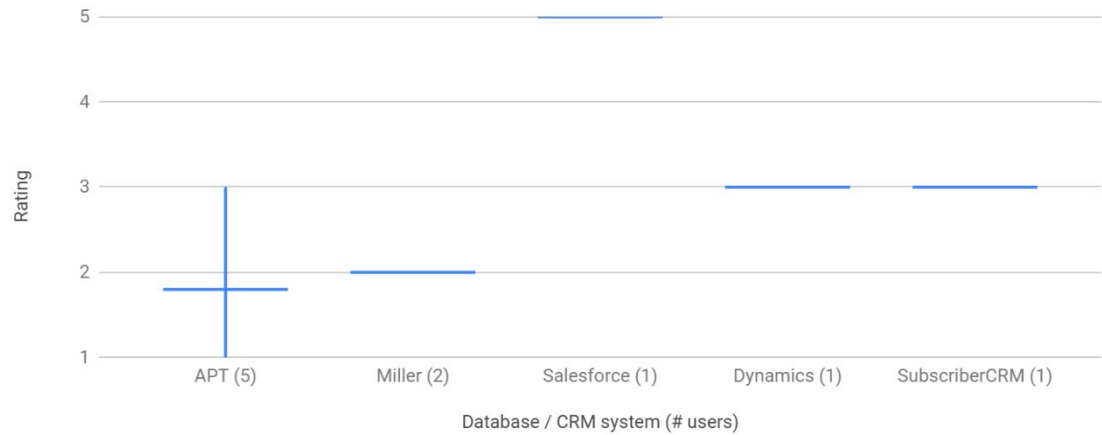
The positive news here is that, in each system area other than campaigning, at least one union has a system that is working well for them. This raises the possibility of some useful knowledge transfer across unions.

Since none of the unions are very happy with their current campaign tools there may be some opportunity to develop a shared solution, or shared ways of using existing solutions more effectively. Alternatively, unions could work together as a user group of organisations, to have greater power when accessing support or development priorities from particular vendors.

Unions were asked to name specific software systems that they used, and whether these worked well or badly for them. Again, there was significant variation between unions in

most areas. Not all unions used each of these system types, and some had bespoke systems or were between systems at the time of the survey.

Database/CRM systems



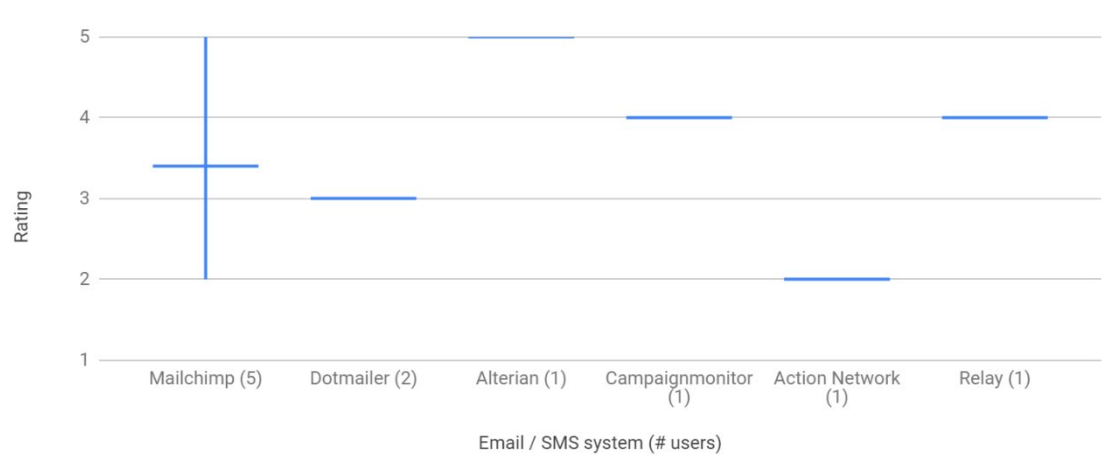
For the most part, levels of satisfaction on core membership database software were low.

Unions are more likely to use union-specific software for this function, given the perceived needs of our organisations. However, this may result in poor software experiences compared to the larger and more generic systems used in other categories.

The system reported as working best for a union in this category, was a generic CRM tool rather than a union-specific tool. There could be a trade-off here for some unions in terms of making their operations fit the software, rather than the other way around.

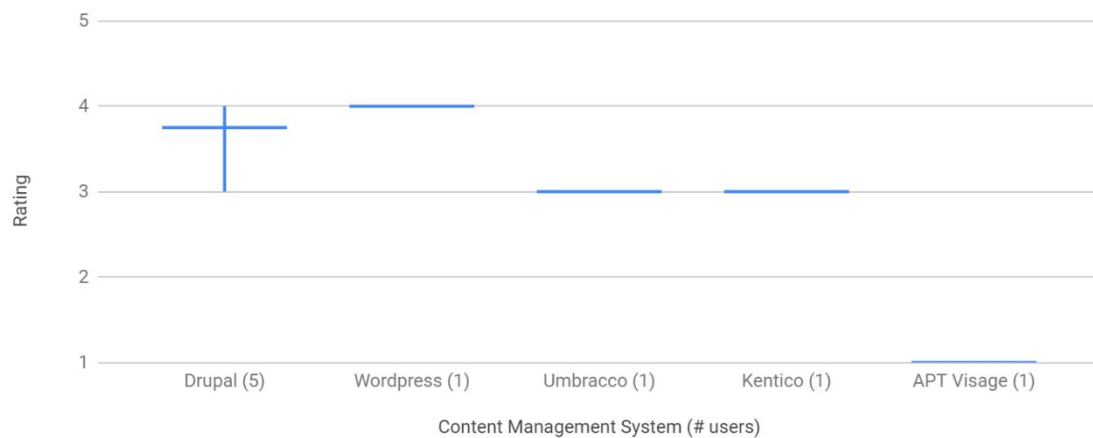
Given the importance of this type software to the operation of unions, this is worth further investigation.

Email / SMS systems



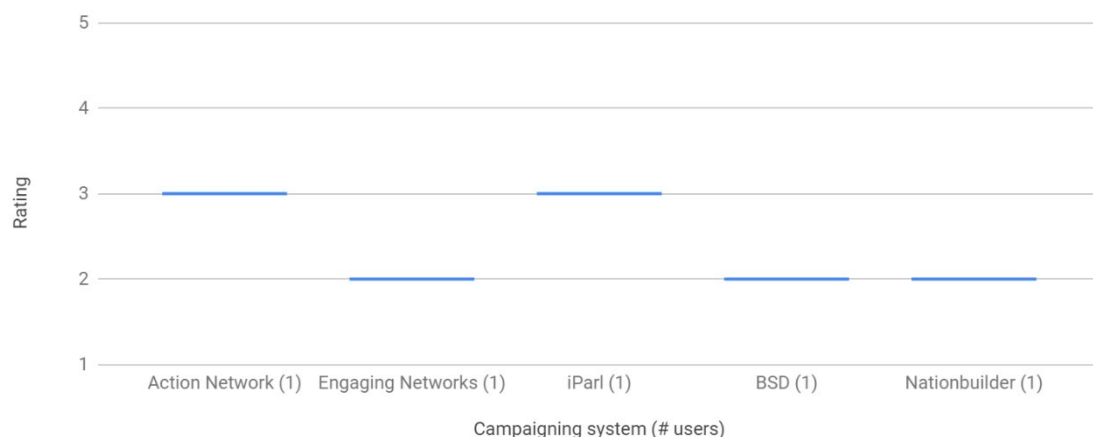
Unions broadly scored their tools in this category well. This is a category where there are a large number of mature Software-As-A-Service products on the market to choose from, and where needs for unions will have a close match to these products' other clients.

Content Management Systems



In the systems that run union websites, the two best-scoring tools were Open Source technologies. Though two proprietary systems, focused particularly around online marketing techniques, were also popular with the unions which used them.

Campaigning systems



Campaigning software was another category where unions reported mostly middling to poor experiences. However, it was also a category in which fewer unions had currently invested.

The systems covered here include structured ways to easily set up online forms that mobilise members to contribute to campaign actions. Typical functions are petitions, email lobbying actions, devolved event management, social sharing actions and fundraising tools.

Several unions flagged up that their current level of ability to use certain systems (e.g. having the right expertise to access more advanced functionality) was possibly more of a blocker than the shortcomings of the system itself. Where this is the case, there may be scope to organise shared training sessions around aspects of more advanced functionality of common systems, or techniques common to different systems.

Data and GDPR

From the organising survey questions, unions responded that they had an average of 73% coverage of email addresses for their members. The range amongst unions asked was from 37% to 96%.

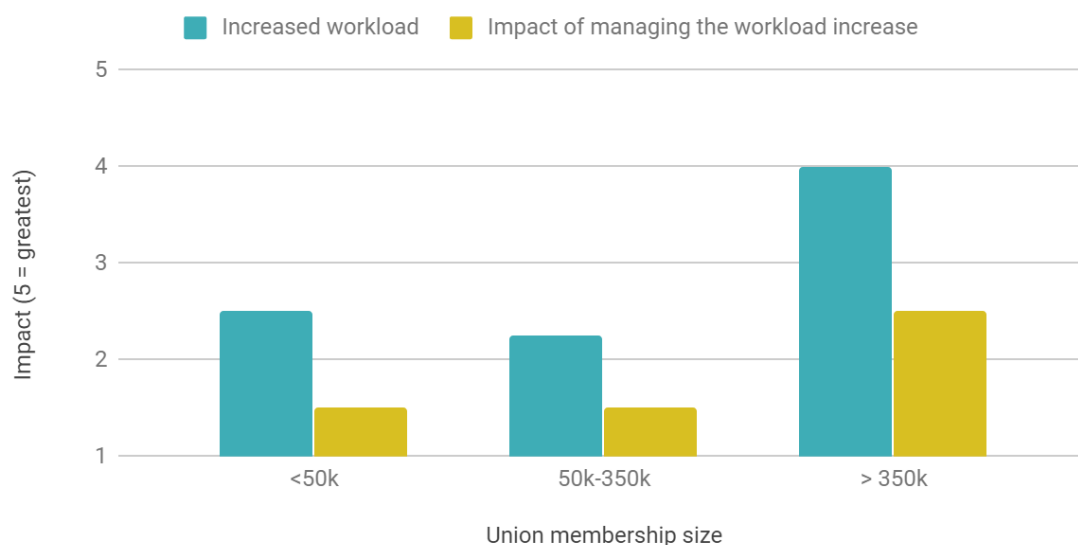
Unions representing members in professional occupations were more likely to score highly here. Those where members were less likely to be given an email address by their employer were less likely to have an email registered with the union. All unions asked said that they used email as an engagement channel to members in some way.

95% of unions asked also stored mobile phone numbers for members. The average coverage was 62%, with a range from 23% to 83%.

There was less of a clear difference between different categories of union than there was for email address. 67% of unions asked used SMS as an engagement channel with members.

For many unions there will be a clear benefit in finding ways to increase the coverage of digital contact details amongst their membership, and in making sure these records are regularly updated. With so many unions using email and mobile as key engagement channels, bringing as many members as possible into the channel will serve to increase the impact of engagement work that is already underway.

Impact of GDPR on workloads:



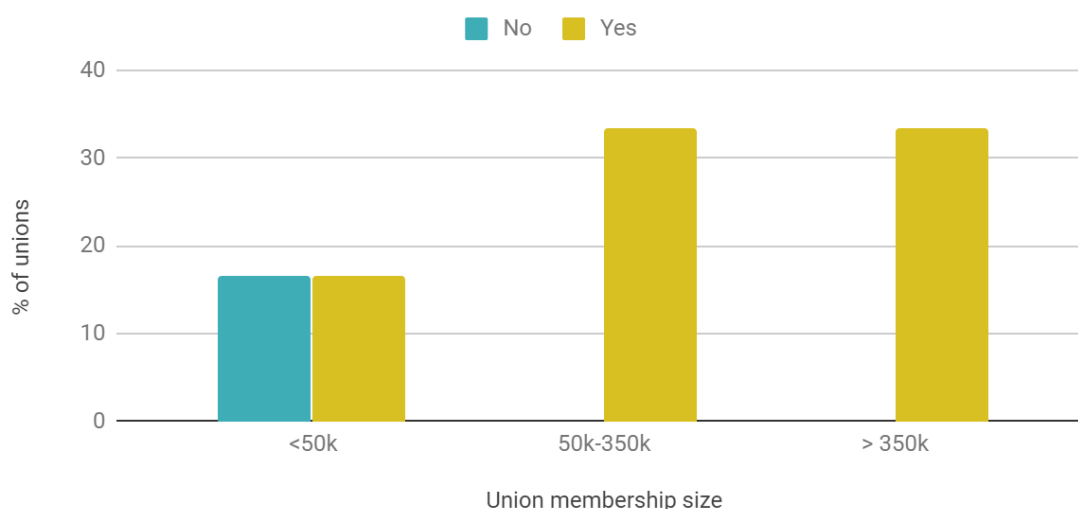
None of the unions reported that they are unable to cope with the workload caused by the new General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), which place increased duties on organisations using personal data, especially where it includes sensitive data like union membership. However larger unions did report a much higher increased level of GDPR-related work.

All of the unions that were interviewed had appointed internal Data Protection Officers, as the legislation requires.

Online joining

All but two of the unions interviewed offered a way for new members to join the union online, though it's worth mentioning that quite a lot of unions' web pages for doing this are fairly clunky, or do not work well on mobile, which will be a very common channel for people seeking to join up on the spur of the moment, or when being approached by a colleague.

Unions offering online joining:



Some unions have done good user experience (UX) work to understand how prospective members use their online joining forms, and where the pain points are (however small) that cause them to drop out after starting the process. The TUC ran a workshop on this in 2018, and there are useful pointers [in the documentation for this](#), where unions want to improve the effectiveness of their forms.

The proportion of members who are joining unions online also varied greatly, with everything between 10% and 90% of new members joining online. This reflects different patterns of union membership. Some unions that have more formalised and stable union organisation in workplaces still believe check-off to be their most useful recruitment method. For those that are seeking to grow membership outside of recognised employers, online joining will be very important.

Some unions also report a high degree of paper-based recruitment as they find reps manage to sign up most workers face to face in their induction meetings. However there could be useful wins for unions in improving processes, even where these are more likely to be conducted by a rep. Developing tools for reps to sign members up face to face, with data captured digitally, can reduce data input workloads over paper forms, and increase speed and accuracy of processing new memberships.

Campaigning

Unions are increasingly developing their online campaigning capacity. Of the unions who responded to questions in the organising survey, 93% had experience of using either online petitions or supporter email actions. Some unions qualified this by saying it was either a new activity for them, or something they only did a few times a year.

The TUC's Megaphone project (megaphone.org.uk), launched in January 2019, was used by 9 unions in its first 6 months of operation. It is an open platform for TUC affiliate unions to create their own petitions and email actions. It provides the functionality of services like Change.org, but also offers campaign consultancy and technical support from a union perspective. As more unions run campaigns through it, it builds a larger central supporter list that can be mobilised to support new union campaigns as they come online.

Some unions had used it to take their first steps in online campaigning, whilst others were using it as another channel alongside their own in-house campaign systems, such as Engaging Networks, Nationbuilder or Action Network.

Online learning

Trade union education is an area where digitisation has made significant progress. Greater pressure on learning budgets has led to a focus on online learning to increase numbers in a cost-effective way. And a pressure on facility time for reps has also made it more important for many reps to be able to access learning in a way that suits their own availability, rather than attending physical courses scheduled at a particular time.

Adapting to these users' needs has led in many cases to a demand for more online or blended learning provision.

Usage statistics from TUC Education show that 35% of reps accessing the TUC's basic reps' courses (stage 1 Union Reps, stage 1 Health & Safety, stages 1&2 Union Learning Reps) last year did so through online learning. That includes reps from all 48 TUC-affiliated unions. Some larger unions have also developed their own platforms to host online learning specific to their own unions.

Social media reach

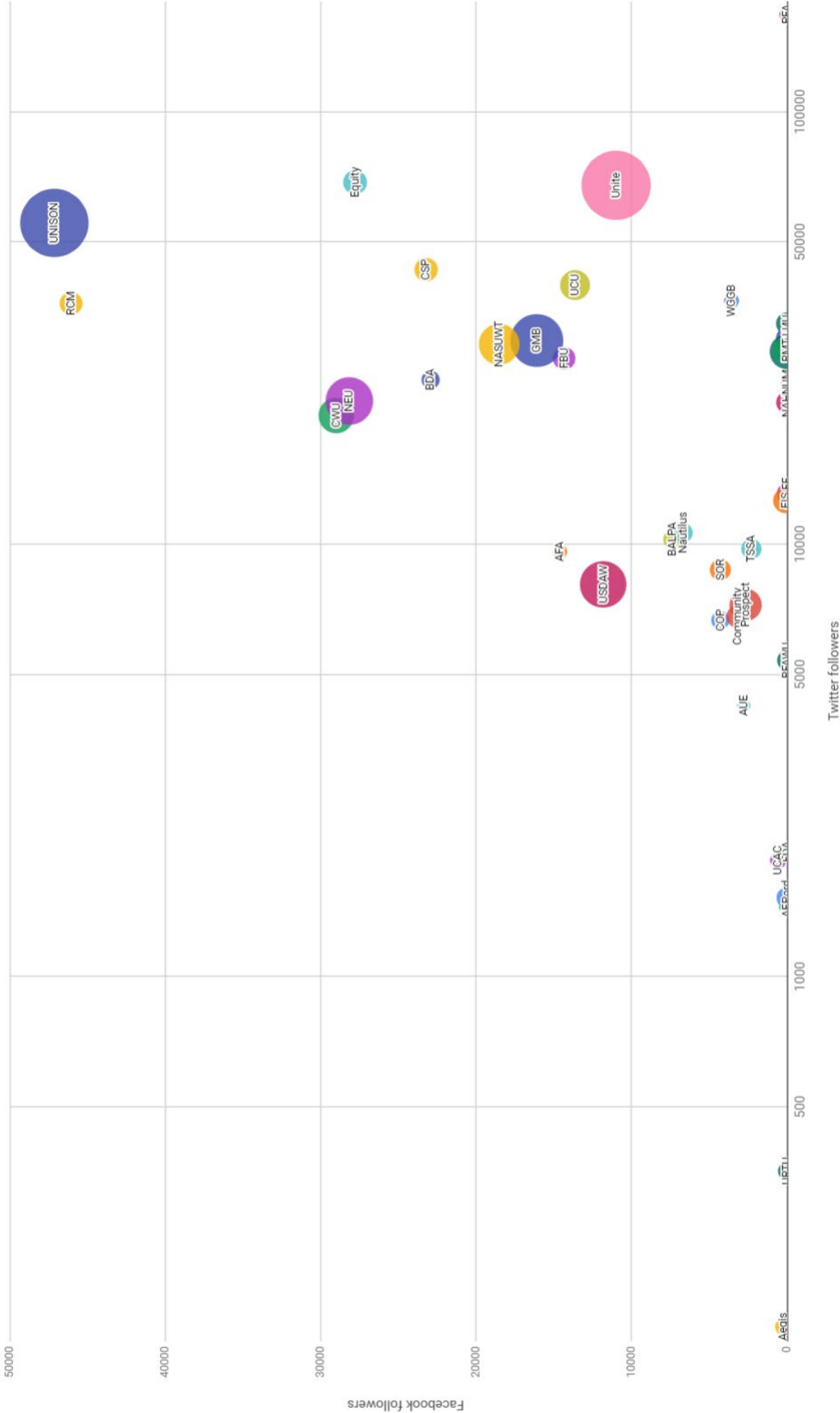
As well as analysing the information from the interviews and surveys, we analysed the public profiles of each union on Twitter and Facebook.

This data is not intended to be a performance metric - unions may have good reason for focussing (or not) on one or more channels. It's intended instead to show the general relationship between Twitter followers, Facebook followers and union size.

There are also some anomalies in the data. For example, where a union has a Facebook Group rather than a Facebook page, we've used the Group membership count instead of the follower count (since that was not available).

The diagram below shows each union's Twitter followers (where available), against Facebook followers (or Facebook group members/followers) where no public follower count was available. The size of each bubble reflects the number of members in that union.

Social media reach by union size
Bubble size = union membership



The social media data shows that the majority of unions are using both Facebook and Twitter to some degree, though there are a significant number focusing most heavily, or exclusively, on Twitter. Twitter can be an effective tool for reaching circles of influencers, so this may indicate social media being used to update traditional union press office functions.

The lack of a strong focus on Facebook for many unions may suggest that they have chosen not to pursue it due to resource restrictions. For pages, the most effective way to use Facebook to engage and mobilise supporters is via paid promotion, and the strategy should be to get supporters off Facebook where possible and onto more effective channels that unions have better control over, such as email lists.

Whilst Facebook does need a conscious plan to resource if it is to be useful, that spending can be a very cost-effective way to find new supporters and prompt less engaged members to notice union messages. Going to where the members are is often an easier way to engage with them than expecting them to remember the union and seek out its messaging online. This will need a dedicated focus on content though. The content that works well on other platforms won't necessarily perform well on Facebook.

Some unions have effectively used Facebook's custom audience feature, where a member list can be checked against Facebook (providing this is clearly communicated in a union's privacy policy). This can allow the union to send follow up messaging to people who don't respond on email at critical moments like balloting campaigns. It can also help the union to send their messages online to people who closely match the profiles of their average members, potentially helping them find a receptive audience.

In some situations, the low numbers on Facebook may also suggest that unions are following a strategy of using Facebook groups as a networking tool to organise activists at small scale, rather than supporters at a larger scale.

Website size and domain authority

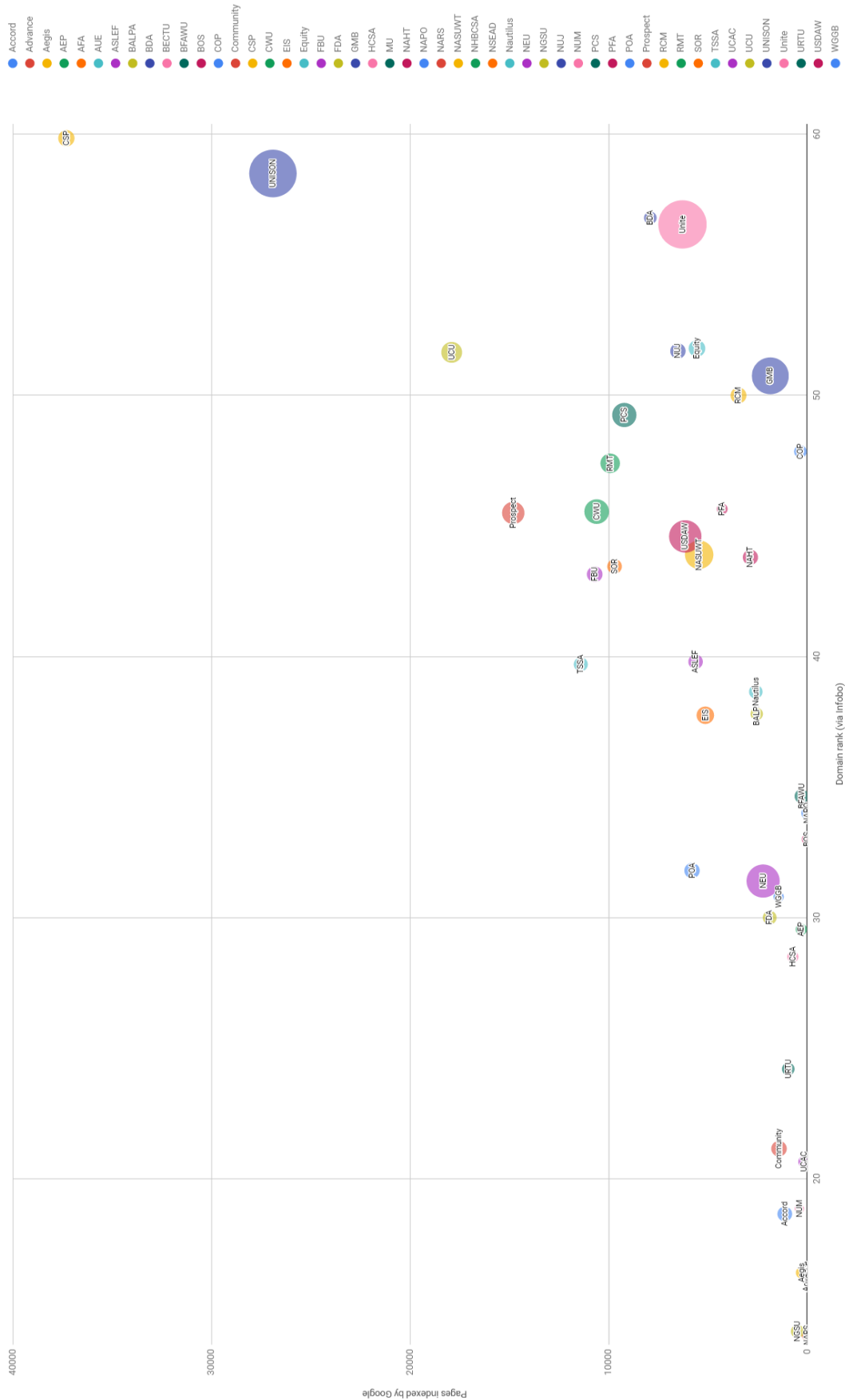
Domain authority is a metric for websites that is a good indicator for discoverability of a site by search - in other words, if a site has higher domain authority then it is more likely to be featured in search engine results. This is especially important when it comes to popular search terms such as "legal rights at work". Optimising sites for these terms is often much cheaper and more sustainable than pay-per-click and other advertising.

There is a clear relationship between the number of pages that a union has on its site and how high their domain authority is. The CSP for example have a large number of specialist articles that serve their members, but which also act as a way of attracting potential new recruits. UNISON is notable amongst the more general unions for having an extensive and well-structured support section of their site which serves to attract new members that have in interest or need that the union may be able to serve.

Unions should consider moving content from password-protected members areas onto their public-facing website. This will make content more valuable to their existing members (through greater discoverability) as well as making sites more attractive to new members.

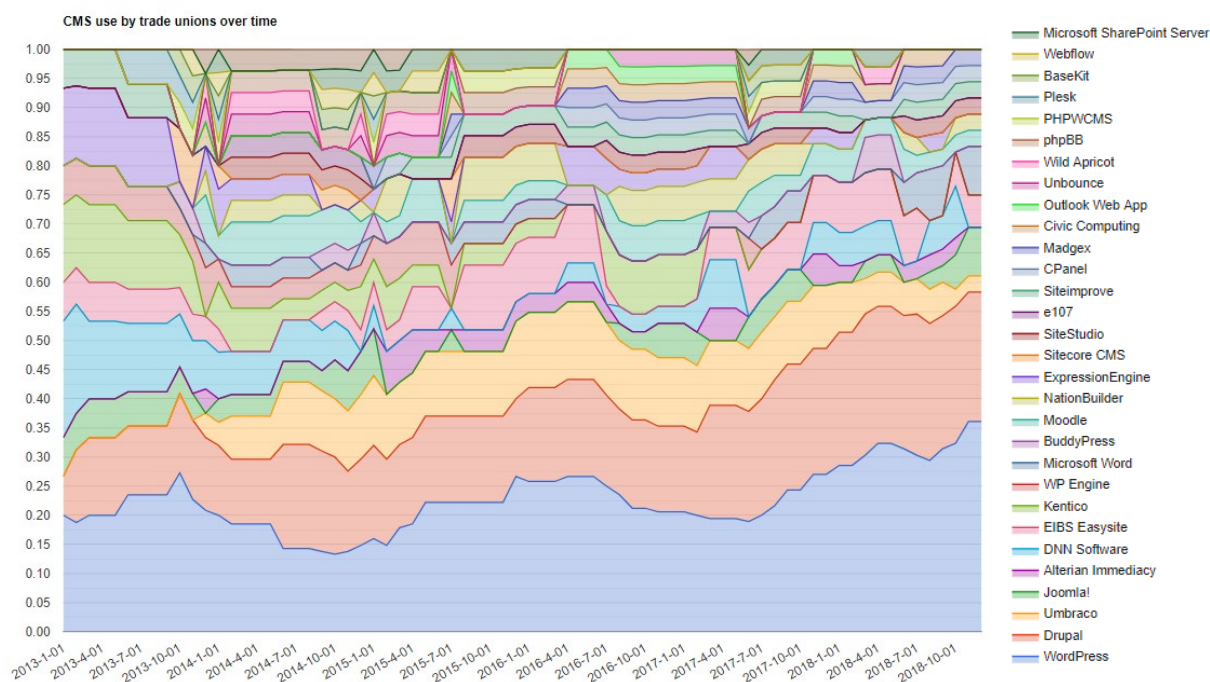
This chart shows website domain rank (via Infobo.com) compared to the union's number of indexed pages. Bubble size= number of members.

Indexed pages vs domain rank



Web technologies

Trade unions use a wide variety of technologies on their website, though a clear majority use the world's two most popular Content Management Systems (CMS) - WordPress and Drupal. These two systems alone accounted for about 60% of the unions in the UK, which is slightly higher than the proportion of the top 500 charities that use them (50%) and roughly consistent with the world's top 1m websites by traffic (47%) [source: *builtwith.com*].



It's very notable that for all CMS other than Drupal and WordPress the usage is very variable over time. There are many systems that have come in and out of fashion in the last six years. Less popular CMS currently in use include Kentico (3 unions), Umbraco (2 unions), and Webflow, Sitecore, Civic Computing, DNN Software and phpBB (all with 1 union each).

This means a clear majority of union websites now use Open Source tools for their CMS, which is a big change from just two years ago. Open Source products are developed and distributed for free by broad communities of developers. This means the software doesn't have licence fees, though that doesn't always result in a cost saving to the union - development agencies will still charge to implement and customise the system.

Benefits in moving to major Open Source tools are: portability and flexibility in finding support if you need to move between agencies for development or hosting, reduced risk of losing your website if the company providing a proprietary system go out of business, and a wide range of ready-made additional functionality contributed by the developer community.

As a downside though, whilst greater transparency in development helps ensure best practices are followed and fixes to any problems developed quickly, larger Open Source tools may be more likely to be targeted by hackers than minority proprietary systems. A

union moving to WordPress or Drupal needs to make sure that their support package for the site includes timely assistance in keeping software versions up to date and secure.

Mobile compatibility

Of the 47 union websites analysed, 33 made use of Viewport meta tags in their stylesheets to enhance usability on mobile devices. Different approaches were taken here but doing work to make websites responsive to mobile is only going to grow in importance. For many websites, more than half of visitors are using mobile devices rather than desktop or laptop computers (for the TUC website it is 56%).

Typically, a mobile responsive website will scale and reposition different parts of the page differently when it is viewed on a small and narrow screen or a large and wide one. This can make text much easier to read and stop navigation for complex sites cluttering small screens. Changes made by Google in recent years have made mobile optimisation even more important, with web pages penalised in search results if they don't display well on mobile searches.

Where unions' website designs are getting old and may not work well on mobile, a project to update those aspects of the design would invariably be worth the money spent.

Advertising and tracking

We detected user-tracking code and analytics in the majority of union websites. This means unions are able to understand how their websites are being used over time and seek to optimise the site or content where problems or opportunities can be identified. 10 of the unions also used Google Webmaster tools (now Google Search Console) to help optimise their search results, and one used MSN/Bing Webmaster tools.

Some website also included more advanced tracking tools. For example, 8 websites were using a Facebook tracking pixel and 15 used Google Global Site Tag, and 6 used tracking service Hotjar. These allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of advertising spend. For example, when advertising on Facebook to recruit new members in a target company, a tracking pixel can tell the union not just how many people clicked the advert, but how many then went on to complete the online joining process, and hence how much each new member cost to acquire.

However, although many unions are set up to collect this data, the survey suggested that fewer unions had the capacity or capability to make the most of the data collected. Many unions cited this as one of their major challenges/opportunities.

What's going well?

There was a wide variation in how well our survey respondents thought things were going in the wider union digital sector.

When asked for three examples of things that they thought were going well across the movement, two respondents replied that they did not know of anything positive that they would especially focus on.

But most respondents were able to give examples of growing trends in digital take-up in unions, or of specific projects they had seen from other unions.

These included:

- Better use of social media for organising.
- More professionalised communications on social media.
- Better use of campaign tools such as Nationbuilder and Action Network.
- Improved use of shared office tools (Dropbox, Google docs) for union work.
- Campaigns delivered well online: GMB Amazon campaign; USDAW Time for better pay; RCN Scrap the cap campaign.
- Organising drives in new sectors using digital tools to network workers: Unite TGI Fridays, and BFAWU McStrike.
- Tools for reps and organisers such as Unite pay claim generator.
- Service tools to members such as HK (Denmark) work on employment rights chatbots.
- Campaign tools such as Megaphone (TUC petition platform for affiliates).

The arms-length [Innovation Lab from Denmark's HK union](#) was also mentioned as an exciting development for unions to emulate.

Several unions also flagged the need to look outside the union sector for other useful good examples. It was felt that charities and other membership organisations could be good sources of inspiration in digital best practice.

Scope for collaboration

Unions suggested a range of ways that coming together across the movement could help their digital journeys. There was broad agreement that the TUC, and in particular its Digital Lab project could be a useful resource in developing these.

We have grouped suggested interventions here around general themes, ranked in order of the number of unions suggesting each of them, from areas of highest common interest to least:

- Sharing best practice and case studies of what's working.
- Networking across the movement.
- Collaboration in finding trusted suppliers.
- Support in auditing and benchmarking current provision.
- Collaborative research into optimising common functions like joining processes.
- Collaborative research into common tools.
- Providing advice and consultancy to TUC affiliates on strategy and implementation.
- Broadening access to digital training by hosting more online.
- Building digital working groups of non-competitive unions.
- Collaborative development of shared tools.
- Collaborative development of shared extensions to existing tools.
- Building a knowledgebase of current union technologies.
- Developing higher level digital training courses for union staff.
- Finding good hires for union digital roles.
- Developing capacity at a movement level to boost affiliates' communications.
- Facilitating support between peers from different unions.

Where next?

Ten questions for union leaders

Based on the findings of this survey, the TUC Digital Lab have compiled some key questions for union leaders to be asking.

Doing this research within a union could help leadership better understand where they are on their digital transformation journey and refine their strategy ongoing.

1. How does your union define digital?

Where does the responsibility for digital change projects sit in your structure? Who is your digital transformation lead?

2. Where are the opportunities for your union?

In which areas of work does your union stand to gain the most from digitising your activities and processes? Where are the quick wins that you could start with?

3. How does your union approach digital skills?

What are the core digital skills you need all new staff to have? How can you ensure these are factored into your recruitment and training processes? Which skills can you bring in from agencies, and which need to be built up in house?

4. How do you structure digital teams?

How do teams with digital experience come together in your union?

5. How effectively are you signing up new members online?

What proportion of prospective members don't complete your online joining form after starting it? What has been done so far to reduce this number? What does the digital welcome journey for a new member look like? Can you measure how well this is working for you?

6. Are your current systems meeting your needs, now and in the future?

Can you map out your most important digital tools (such as member database, financial systems and communications tools) and how they relate to each other? Where do you feel you are currently missing opportunities, due to not having tools to make the most of them? Are other unions using the same core systems that you are?

7. How do you approach data?

Do you have the data you need to understand your members and work with them? Do you have processes in place to keep it accurate? Do you have processes to understand and mitigate the data risk in any new digital projects?

8. How do you evaluate progress on digital?

What measurements of success does your union have to monitor its digital journey? How will you know whether new initiatives are working? What new data will be needed to help you make decisions with greater certainty?

9. What is your approach to innovation?

How easy is it for people around your union to identify and try out changes to their work? What principles could ensure you are able to understand your users' needs, test new approaches, and learn from what happens?

10. Do you have a culture that can support digital change?

What ways of working will you need to change in your union if you're going to take full advantage of digital?

Four challenges for the union movement

The responses we found also suggest some areas where unions could benefit by working together more closely, or where the TUC could offer support to unions collectively.

1. Developing a stronger member offer to young workers

All unions are currently struggling to engage and recruit young members. One factor making this important work more difficult is young workers' higher level of expectations for a digital-first member experience.

Details will differ between unions but establishing and sharing information on young workers' self-perceived needs from unions will benefit all unions undertaking change projects.

The TUC's reaching young workers project has many useful lessons in designing digital work-related services that appeal to young workers. There is also scope for deepening research into how young members would like more core aspects of union membership to develop.

2. Building a network of digital change champions

There is scope to form wider networks between unions to look at issues of digital change.

In making digital more mainstream in our organisations, unions will need to find ways for people to network outside of their regular channels, and to get a greater range of voices and experience into the debates.

Building wider communities of support and mentorship for those interested in digital from different roles across unions will allow good ideas and good practice to be shared more effectively. This will be especially useful in unions that are not large enough to have sizeable digital teams of their own.

3. Greater alignment in the tech that powers unions

Given the levels of dissatisfaction in unions with many of their current technologies, this could be a useful area for further development.

As an initial step, can we form working groups amongst unions using the same technologies, to help all unions take practical steps to get more out of their existing tech?

Are there opportunities to share or sponsor the development of new functions or services that could be beneficial to a number of unions? An initial example of this is the TUC's Megaphone campaign platform, but there will be many others, small or large.

Further in the future, could unions even develop elements of a shared core technology platform? This would be more ambitious but could work in the way that Government Digital Services' platform has helped individual departments to develop new digital services without reinventing common elements such as identity checks, payment gateways or notification tools.

4. Reducing wasteful competition

Whilst the details of unions' own situations are different, depending on industries and approaches, there are many common challenges we face.

The biggest of these are around reaching out to the majority of unorganised workers in the economy. Viewed from a movement viewpoint, the competition that can occur between unions in tightly defined industries, is less significant than the potential for overall growth.

We also know that digital change works best when conducted in the open. What more can unions do to encourage a culture of openness and non-competitive mutual support, to help all unions realise the benefits of digital change more quickly and without duplicating effort and costs?

And practically, how does the union movement come together to communicate with non-members in currently unorganised sectors, and help direct them towards unions in a way that makes sense to the workers and is sustainable for the unions? Digital will have a large part to play here.

Eight principles for union digital transformation

When considering the changes that may be needed in organisational culture in order to successfully run digital change projects, it is useful to have a set of guiding principles.

This approach was pioneered by Government Digital Services but has been adopted by many other organisations and sectoral collaborations.

In February 2019, the TUC Digital Lab convened a workshop for a group of senior trades unionists, which established a draft set of principles for digital transformation in UK unions, and to guide the Digital Lab's work.

The principles from the workshop were:

1. Be driven by data.
2. Commit realistic resources.
3. Start with user needs and keep them involved.
4. Take small steps and learn as you go.
5. Understand the problem before creating solutions.
6. Everything we do helps build the union.
7. Make things usable and familiar.
8. Collaborate widely.

These principles are explained in more detail on the TUC Digital website as a resource for unions to use and adapt as they find helpful.



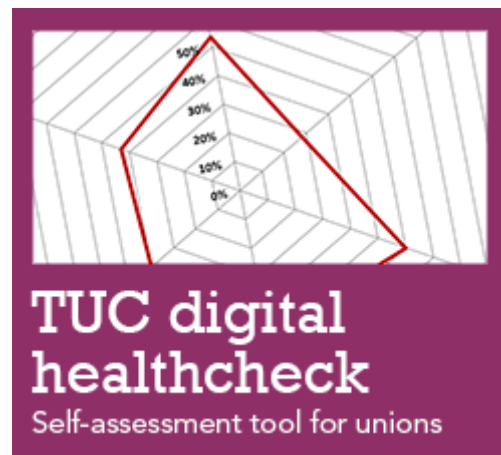
Digital principles workshop, run by the Digital Lab with facilitation from the Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology (CAST)

Digital healthcheck

Unions wanting to examine these questions in more detail may also find it useful to complete the TUC's digital healthcheck tool as part of the exercise.

It's an interactive spreadsheet to log and quantify the various aspects of your digital infrastructure and processes. It can help you understand where gaps or opportunities may be, as you develop your digital strategy.

The tool will be updated later in 2019, but the [current version is available](#) on the TUC Digital website.



The TUC Digital Lab

Established in 2019, the TUC's Digital Lab is a project seeking to bring the UK union movement together and build a network to collaborate on the challenges of digital transformation.

The project hosts regular workshops aimed at surfacing and documenting current good practice in digital across different themes of union work.

The Digital Lab works with affiliates to pilot new initiatives that could benefit unions more widely.

It aims to help unions benchmark and evaluate their current digital journey, through this research and the interactive Digital healthcheck tool.

You can find events, resources and documentation at <https://digital.tuc.org.uk>



TUC Digital Lab workshop on online balloting

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

For the core of this research, the TUC Digital Lab worked with Outlandish to develop a semi-structured questionnaire that combined quantitative and qualitative questions. We sought to conduct telephone interviews around the questionnaire to improve the response rate, standardisation and qualitative aspects of the responses. We were able to arrange phone interviews with 12 unions.

Interviews were completed in June and July 2019. The unions interviewed by Outlandish accounted for around 60% of the total trade union membership of the UK.

The interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity in the public report to maximise openness in responses. Because of the relatively small sample size, we are not publicising the list of unions that took part to preserve anonymity. The raw data has been analysed by the TUC to identify specific areas where individual unions can most effectively be supported.

The questionnaire was also distributed to other unions via email. Four additional unions provided partial answers to the questions online. Where incomplete answers were provided, the response was included in the overall analysis but not in the figures presented here to avoid skewing the statistics.

To help with the analysis we have segmented the unions into three groups based on their membership: those with fewer than 50,000 members, those with between 50,000 and 350,000, and those with more than 350,000. These groups were equally represented in the interviews.

Working with the TUC's organising team, we added add some additional questions on the use of digital in member engagement and organising to an organising survey conducted slightly earlier this year. Those questions were answered in full or in part by 19 affiliates.

Combining the two surveys, the number of affiliates who contributed some form of data to the research was 24.

We also conducted desk research to gather publicly available information on all TUC affiliates' websites and social media presence. To scan union websites, we used the BuiltWith.com analysis tool.

Domain authority analysis made use of work done earlier this year by union-specialist digital consultancy infobo.com.

We aim to repeat this audit in 2021, to measure areas of change and to help inform the movement on the progress of our common digital journey.

Appendix 2: Comparison with a leading digital NGO

To get a sense of benchmarking against good practice in the wider voluntary sector, we also interviewed a major campaigning NGO. We agreed not to disclose the name of the organisation, but they are known in the sector as a digital leader.

This NGO had an income of roughly £20 million. This is on a par with the income of a union of around 100,000 members.

The NGO estimated that they spent £3.53 million on costs that they identified as being related to digital – 17.5% of their total income.

They employed 44 digital specialist staff in total, many times more than the average union:

- 17 in communications and marketing roles
- 12 in campaign roles
- 8 in membership roles
- 4 in data focused roles
- 3 in IT related roles

As with the unions we surveyed, the main skill group that they recruited for was around content creation (24 people). However, they also employed a higher proportion than unions of their total digital staff from other specialisms. There were 4 coders, 4 data analysts, 1 web designer. 8 staff were recruited as architects/project managers to work on digital projects.

Digital and IT in the organisation is represented by a CTO-type role at board level, though digital specialist staff are spread throughout the organisation's departments.

The organisation predominantly uses major and generalist digital tools that are also used by some unions – such as Salesforce for CRM and the Open Source website system WordPress – rather than specialist or custom-built software.

There is not a direct read across on many of these numbers, as costs and income will differ significantly for unions, given unions tend to spend a larger proportion of income on direct member support and legal fees. The NGO's supporters will be much cheaper to service than union members.

But it is significant that the proportion of spend on digital is so much higher than the average for major unions. It clearly reflects a major decision to prioritise use of digital in both the way they engage with members and the ways they operate their internal processes.



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