

Unions and digital disruption

TUC Digital Lab - February 2021

Acknowledgements

This paper arises from a seminar and discussion held on 25 Nov 2020 by members of the TUC Executive Committee and General Council, or their senior nominees.

We are particularly grateful to Kevin Courtney of NEU, Kate Dearden of Community and Andrew Pakes of Prospect for feeding their experiences into the seminar and report.

Cover photo: PeopleImages / Getty Images

© Trades Union Congress

TUC Digital Lab, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS
020 7467 1269 digital.tuc.org.uk

Please ask if you need an accessible format.

Contents

Short summary.....	4
What do we mean by 'digital disruption'?	5
Where are the disruptors?	7
How can unions respond?	11
Case study 1: NEU building on core strengths with digital.....	11
Case study 2: Prospect adapting start-up behaviours in a union.....	12
Case study 3: Community learning in partnership with disruptors.....	13
Considerations for unions.....	15
Further reading:	19

Summary

In recent years, new digital start-ups have changed the faces of whole industries. New entrants have risen to dominance in their sectors and previously major players have collapsed. The pace of change has only intensified with the digital-first response to Covid-19.

Unions aren't commercial businesses but as organisations we don't exist in a vacuum. We too can find our position eroded by disruptive innovation if we fail to understand how it works or adapt to it.

There are a growing number of new non-traditional actors providing ways for workers to access support and advice at work, or to come together to campaign or self-organise. These are often working in areas where unions have lower density, but some are also challenging unions for members in core sectors. Some are in a start-up stage, but others are already interacting with hundreds of thousands of workers.

A number of unions have already responded with programmes of digital innovation, drawing on lessons from the ways digital disruptors operate. These might seek to access new groups of potential members, develop the union experience to match rising expectations from members, or enhance the core strengths that differentiate us.

Unions need to be engaging in a strategic conversation about what disruptors mean to our areas of activity, and what our responses should be – whether as a movement or more locally for different unions, sectors or particular challenges.

Recommendations for unions:

- Develop the union's understanding of collective uses of digital as well as the individual benefits for members.
- Share learning on digital across unions – being movement generous where we are able to identify and develop good practice.
- Foster a culture of failing better – trying more small interventions, learning from things that don't work and developing incrementally.
- Focus resources internally to establish the core technologies a union needs, and the staff roles and skills be needed to make digital more mainstream.
- Examine potential cultural changes in the union that would give innovation a better chance of succeeding.

What do we mean by ‘digital disruption’?

For most people of working age in the UK, digital has been the default channel for most interactions, even before Covid-19 drove even more activity online.

The growth of mobile as a channel has made a huge difference too. For under 35s, not only is nearly everyone an instinctive internet user, but they’re using it at any time, and wherever they are.

2020 has been the year that millennials started to make up more than half the workforce. Their whole working lives have been during the internet age, and for them new ways of working and running their lives are instinctive. They expect things to be immediate and always accessible. They expect transparency, and flexibility with them in charge.

Combining this huge potential reach to new users, with their rapidly rising expectations, and the greater ease of starting a new online business has meant an explosion in digital start-up services.

New entrants have risen to market dominance in just a few years. Unions know all too well that Uber are atrocious corporate citizens. But they’ve gone from nothing to 3.5 million user accounts in London alone. And that’s had a big effect on incumbent organisations across the economy and society as a result of this kind of disruptive innovation.

Disruption comes from the bottom of a market

It’s important to recognise that this disruptive innovation is not necessarily about making good things better. It’s most often about making products and services more accessible or more affordable.

Using Uber as the example, they didn’t get so large just by competing on service with the gold-standard of black cabs. They expanded the market instead. The lower price and transparency of access meant people started using them who had never considered using taxis before. They made it normal.

Once they got that toe-hold in, they relentlessly moved upwards in the market, using the learning and new reach to displace established competitors.

Disruption responds to changing expectations

Blockbuster are another big name that are often brought up in warnings about disruption. They were still huge in 2001 when the founder of Netflix tried to sell them his start-up and they turned him down.

At the time, Netflix was just taking website orders for DVDs and posting them out. They were serving people at lower margins than Blockbuster, in areas Blockbuster’s infrastructure didn’t cover.

Blockbuster had actually experimented with a digital service themselves, but it was done completely separately from the core of the business. The board members all came from the retail side and saw their own online trials as a threat that could cannibalise their declining high street sales. So they effectively stifled their own digital product, rather than be open to where the change might take them.

A lesson here might be the need to understand and respond to the changing expectations of our users, even if that means we may end up competing with ourselves until we can make it work.

Disruptive platforms aren't neutral

Often a good way to test out new ways of working is by setting your activity up within a third-party platform. This could help cut corners in developing your own services, if the core functionality is already supplied by the platform. In other cases, it allows you to access existing groups of customers already using that platform.

But platforms themselves are often not neutral, or may even be opposed to our own goals. We need to make sure we're not undermining ourselves further down the track.

For example, Waterstones' original online store didn't do well at first. They didn't believe they could compete directly with the scale of Amazon so in 2001 they struck a deal to close their online store and redirect people to a Waterstones branded version of Amazon's site instead, getting a small cut of Amazon's sales.

However this ultimately helped Amazon reach more of their customers for repeat purchases, making their situation even worse.

Where are the disruptors?

We might not always realise it, but the potential Netflixes to unions' Blockbusters are out there already. More are starting all the time. The ease of making new digital services means that many new entrants have identified new ways of doing specific parts of the work that trade unions currently do.

Some of these disruptors are new products from old organisations. Some of them are totally new ideas. They could be allies (some already are good friends and partners) or they could be rivals for unions in recruiting members. They may amount to nothing or they may change the game for everyone.

Some of the new entrants into our space are purely commercial offerings, aiming to make a profit once they have established a niche to work in, and seeing workers' or employers' needs as something that could support a new service. Others are more focused on delivering social change, whether as companies or non-profits.

Amongst the latter group are organisations in the #workertech movement – a loose term for start-ups that seek to use digital to deliver change for better in people's working lives. A group of ethical investors and foundations have supported and incubated a series of projects in this space, seeking to encourage people with innovative ideas to take up funding to develop them into new businesses and organisations.

Disruptors fall loosely into four categories: platforms, campaigners, services and challengers.



Platforms

Platforms let users access online tools to self-organise or run their own campaigns, cheaply or for free. These new tools could be used by individuals or by organisations to let them access new functionality or audiences.

Campaigners

Digital campaign groups are able to increase the volume and reach of campaigns they run. Some are specifically work-related, whilst others are progressive organisations broadening into work related issues. It's easier than ever for people to set up a new campaign and get people together around it.

Services

New services use digital to cheaply deliver things like employment advice or training direct to workers. Some services are free, where existing organisations are expanding their remit direct to the public, others are paid, where companies have identified something that workers will be willing to pay for.

Challengers

We've also seen a growth in new unions, or organisations seeking to do very similar things to unions, as these are easier than ever to set up now.

Independent unions can set up branches as pop-up craft unions, helping them expand into sectors with a strong worker identity. Sometimes this is happening as a grassroots reaction in industries with no clear sectoral union to choose. Some are set up where unions have split or there have been disagreements.

It's very cheap and easy to make a convincing website. A new service can look legitimate online to an untrained eye, even if they don't have a real union behind them, with the legal status and rights that come with registration with the Certification Officer.

Some disruptors overlap categories, and there's also potential for them to link up with each other or other actors - such as platforms enabling challengers to set up new unions more quickly, or campaigners helping give them more profile on particular issues.

Examples

To give a flavour of the breadth of companies, organisations and projects in this space, here are some basic summaries of just a few of them.

Unionise is a start-up service trying to build community amongst the workers of tech startups themselves – a sector with very low union membership in the UK. It's a private company owned by the two founders.

They're focused on being a paid advice line with exclusive "getting on at work" content and community networking. They are trying to reinvent some of what unions do and trading on the association, whilst also being clear they don't want to be a formal union themselves.

But for people in an industry where almost nobody has any experience of real unions, will their potential members be able to tell the difference?

unionise.co.uk

Edapt are a commercial start-up providing casework and legal services to education staff. They pitch themselves as being like a union, but both apolitical and cheaper.

Given the existing high union density in the sector, they are targeting those teachers who are currently members of unions primarily because they want individual support, rather than those who join for the collective support and campaigning as well. Edapt are hoping to win them away from current unions.

Without the overheads, service obligations or democratic structures of a union, they can focus on a more limited set of headline support services. This (and commercial investment in their start-up stage) allows them to be slightly cheaper than union membership, which may be attractive for some members.

edapt.org.uk

Earwig are an interesting interpretation of collective action online. They're only a prototype at the moment, but are being backed by groups like the RSA, Resolution Trust and the ethical venture outfit Bethnal Green Ventures.

They are building a grassroots network of construction workers to introduce more transparency into the mess of agencies, umbrella companies and worksites. Workers collaborate to warn each other about what's going on and help avoid day-to-day pitfalls.

And they're also looking at how they can work pragmatically with employers to use data from the network to improve how the industry works for everyone.

earwigwork.com

Wobblyapp are an activist collective, developing tools to enable digital syndicalism. They envisage a platform that can power pop-up unions, with organising and collaboration tools to help workers build their own secure networks within the platform. It is a ready-made set of basic union processes.

Branches set up with this would be able to affiliate with each other and grow into federated unions – creating networks of autonomous branches with digital processes for shared democratic decision making across a company, industry or region.

It's a heavy ask for unorganised workers to use as a first step, but if completed it could power a burst of pop-up unions within companies or sectors - helping that form of unionism to multiply rather than scale.

wobbly.app

Organise are a three-year-old #workertech start-up, which seeks to find new ways for workers to become organised and win change at work, delivered as a commercial business.

They use online campaigns to bring groups of workers together and surface issues for organising using online surveys and discussion.

They have recently rolled out a paid enhanced support model. A monthly subscription of between £1 and £13 entitles members to legal advice, online community, campaign- and organising coaching and downloadable self-organising tools and resources.

They currently report 900,000 supporters. Around 1,500 members are currently donating to support them or using their paid service. They have also been funded and backed by a number of trusts and incubators.

organise.org.uk

How can unions respond?

When we think about changing the course of an institution that may have been around for a hundred years, it can feel like trying to turn a super tanker. It's easy to get jealous of the speedboats that are zipping around us.

But both the new entrants and the incumbents have differing strengths and different risks.

Newcomer services	Incumbent unions
Able to think the unthinkable, and test anything without organisational baggage.	Can consider mission first – with fewer concessions to commercial return.
Flexibility to change course where needed.	Existing capacity (membership, resources, experience), which can be repurposed.
No universal service obligations – easier to trial new interactions.	Existing legal framework with important rights.
Access funding from investors and support from incubators.	Have a wider movement to collaborate with.

The challenge for us is how we all respond to the changing environment. There are loads of potential paths here and all unions will have their own different opportunities and attitudes - individually or as a movement.

Case study 1: NEU building on core strengths with digital

Unions have two significant advantages over many disruptors. Firstly, we have the right to represent members in the workplace (something that is very narrowly legally defined), with a broad network of volunteers undertaking this role. And secondly, most commercial services' focus on individual support means they can't offer collective support and bargaining.

As education has fragmented and privatised in the UK, unions like NEU now find themselves negotiating with thousands of schools directly rather than a more manageable number of LEAs. This has given NEU a growing challenge in maintaining their collective work advantage over start-ups, and this is where they have focused their digital transformation work this year.

As an example, their new "Escalation app" tool offers branches tailored support in identifying and escalating coronavirus safety concerns. The tool is built to deliver self-service for reps at a huge scale, helping the union to directly exercise collective strength.

But its design also provides a crucial feedback loop to NEU. This helps them stay abreast of developments across 20,000 schools and deploy branch support and contacts as needed. And it helps them to communicate this key strength more effectively to their members, demonstrating the value of being in the union.

Other new technologies have been deployed this year to build NEU's strength in the workplace. They were early to adopt online conference calls at scale, hosting up to 20,000 at a time on calls that helped members understand the union's critical role in big political decisions that affected them. Another organising call with Jesse Jackson motivated 200 activists to take the first steps towards becoming new reps. Phone banking software spread the load for the union in following up directly with them and this initiative doubled the number of BAME reps in the union.

They are seeking to use digital to build the strength of connections between reps, and hence build workplace strength and profile. One simple but important initiative has been to set up WhatsApp groups in as many branches as possible, for reps to network and quickly share relevant experience with each other. NEU have also dramatically increased the volume of online courses they have run during the pandemic.

Taken together, these techniques aim to help NEU build rep density in schools where they have few or even no reps currently (especially in primary, where smaller schools make it harder to sustain active branches). They see this innovation around their core strengths as an important way to maintain their relevance in the face of new disruptors joining the market.

Case study 2: Prospect adapting start-up behaviours in a union

Following the merger of Prospect and Bectu, the union looked closely at how they defined and developed their offer to members and prospective members.

It is easy to get trapped in the here-and-now, especially in a year that has seen such severe crises, so the union has specifically devoted time to learning about the coming challenges in the world of work and what they mean for the union. They have sought out disruptors and academics in the UK and internationally to help them understand the organisational behaviours that they could usefully develop.

Building a learning culture has been particularly important in the context of the pandemic, which has dramatically accelerated the rate of change at work, as digitalisation has affected more workers than ever. The resulting fragmentation and distancing between workers have been particularly challenging for unions, with our structures built around managing in a face to face and centralised workplace.

Prospect have similarly devoted time to learning around their members' expectations. Members are interacting with many other organisations and companies, and are getting used to new ways of working, which they expect the union to offer as well. Looking at the whole experience of the union from the perspective of the member has helped Prospect deliver an experience which works more efficiently at all points and make the most of resources.

Prioritisation has become an important part of this. It is easy to add in more and more areas of work as things change, but they are more likely to fail if the union isn't honestly prioritising and deciding which other areas of work they will stop doing to free up the capacity needed.

The union have tried to develop ways of working which foster innovation, re-ordering teams to bring key expertise together, and focusing more on appreciating failure as well as monitoring success. The failure rate in the commercial world is high, as live-testing new ideas is the best way to find which will work. Learning from what fails is as important as from what works.

A greater focus on the structuring and analysis of data in the union has helped develop new areas of work for the union. Prospect have piloted the international project Weclock.it, a tool for workers to run research projects, gathering workplace data to add strength to bargaining. They have also looked at how reps can better understand data issues, including being good stewards of member data and bargaining with the employer over data rights.

And related to this is thinking about how the union can become more open and movement generous. One benefit here is around sharing good practice better across unions, to help avoid waste and duplication.

Case study 3: Community learning in partnership with disruptors

Community have experimented in working with digital disruptors, as part of wider work to reflect increasing change in their members' working experiences.

More members are switching career or sector. New technologies and start-ups have seen the extent of "gig" and freelance work grow, disrupting the world of work and the union's job in representing those members, who may no longer have a traditional employment relationship.

This presents the union with a challenge in staying relevant to the needs of their members. But by changing to understand that better, the union hope to be able to better represent prospective members in these growing sectors and work patterns.

Community have learned in the process by partnering on projects with disruptors that they feel are value-aligned to the union and non-competitive. This has been a change in approach as they would probably not have worked with such organisations in the past.

As an example, the union have launched a partnership with LabourXchange – an online platform that links self-employed workers with companies who need additional temporary work.

Many craft unions have long represented the self-employed and there is a lot of good practice to learn from. Community are concerned that as these forms of work become more prevalent across other sectors, there isn't the longstanding awareness of unionisation there that there is with for example actors or musicians. This means there are fewer options for workers to exercise power at work as a result, especially harming the prospects for low paid workers on new digital platforms.

Community have been experimenting with different ways to reach out to and represent these workers. The partnership with LabourXchange is to help workers on the platform better understand their rights and provide advice, support and guidance.

Workers sign up for free with LabourXchange and can be contacted by employers looking for work. They are guaranteed at least the Living Wage. The platform costs are paid by employers, who pay around £10 per booking, or a £150 finder's fee for permanent staff. Users can choose to become free "associate" members of Community, which gives them access to union-provided content on the LabourXchange portal. This helps introduce the union to these workers, who can choose to upgrade to full union membership at self-employed rates.

Community's involvement helps design and safeguard good employment policies, such as the ban for employers on taking workers more than three times without offering them a permanent post, if the worker would prefer such an arrangement.

Finding a way to supplement hours in other part time jobs, or to top up family income with some extra hours, without being exploited by platforms and employers due to your weak bargaining power, makes a huge difference to its users.

Working in partnership in this way has helped Community actively learn about supporting and organising with casualised workers, and how a union can tailor its offer to better match what those workers perceive as their needs at work.

Considerations for unions

Innovating for collective action

Unions need to be wary about getting into new areas solely focused around providing services to individuals if this might come at the expense of losing our collective focus.

However individual engagement is often the first step to a collective approach. There isn't always such a finely drawn line, and we need to fully understand workers' self-perceived needs at work before we can develop interventions that they will be happy to take up.

If we do engage in new digital services, they should ideally have a collectivist end point that we are working towards – either through developing the offering or by taking workers on a journey that brings them closer to collective action and unions.

Being open to diversification

Some of these industries and groups of workers may be able to exercise worker power in ways outside the formal union model, and unions could possibly diversify to enable this. For example, supply teachers don't always easily fit the teaching union model, but they may benefit from digital tools like the ones Earwig are devising for construction, to help them share information and get better deals for supply in certain areas.

Where the normal union model isn't working for particular situations, we need to consider ways to offer different models of organising, around the core values of unionism, as an alternative to simply not being present in that area.

Digital offers us ways to personalise unions better to prospective members' expectations. It could allow larger unions to offer a kind of a craft union experience for more sectors, helping make workers identify more closely with a union that has a professional as well as class focus.

Unions could offer sub-brands or spin-off unions, based around core infrastructure, but made appropriate to the self-perceived needs of different groups of workers.

Placing these initiatives at arm's length from the core union could give them more licence to do things differently and gain important learning from it. Sometimes the flexibility required could be hard if the initiative is wholly within a major union.

Attitudes to other players

There can sometimes be a competitive scepticism around sharing information between unions. But where similar transformations need to take place, there is a lot that unions can do to use our movement to help us avoid making costly mistakes with the technology.

Unions could do more potentially to pool information on new technologies and tactics in the TUC and share it between unions who could benefit. This could be in the form of

pattern libraries, publishing and networking, either bilaterally or through the TUC Digital Lab.

In some cases it will be advantageous for unions to work together to develop shared products and platforms, or make them more sustainable to operate. For example, NEU are investigating potential wider union uses of their in-house developed conference voting tool, NEU Democracy.

The TUC Digital Lab is developing a best-practice white-label online joining product for affiliate unions who do not already offer paperless direct debit joining. We also operate the Megaphone.org.uk petition platform to support affiliate unions' digital campaigns and organising activity within a shared infrastructure and shared channel for promotion.

On a larger scale, the AFL-CIO has established the Action Network co-operative as an arm's length tech company developing and maintaining dedicated campaigning and organising platforms for the union movement and progressive allies.

Start-ups are often filling vacuums where you might expect unions to be, but where industrial or employment changes have created gaps. We can't fill them all, so our approach to other players should be more flexible, working alongside some, supporting some to grow, or being clearer internally about our opposition to others where we don't think they are serving working people's long-term interests.

Also, many competitor unions are organising in sectors we don't work in because it's hard to do under our traditional model. They aren't generating sustainable membership yet, but they are doing campaign work and achieving isolated wins on some important issues. Can we be more movement generous to them at times?

There will be a difference between them and companies which may portray themselves as unions, but which don't meet the democratic and independent requirements to be an effective vehicle for working people's interests.

A new normal for unions post-Covid

The factors behind digital disruption have been in play for unions for years. But the pandemic has made a sudden intensification of these change happen in a very short time.

And the upheaval across the economy has put whole sectors under threat, threatening specialised unions along with their industries, and changing many workers' future career prospects and working arrangements.

We won't return to the same environment post-Covid. We'll still have more working from home in many industries, and so unions will need to innovate in organising our own members, in ways that will be similar to the kind of work we'll need to organise in harder to reach sectors.

Unions can be doing more in our campaigning agenda to address forces which are changing our world, such as encouraging good data practice rather than workplace surveillance or engaging with platforms to advocate for better ways of working.

The TUC and unions could also work together more to define the challenges we face in common and understand what best practice might look like in facing them.

Approach to risk and return

We have to do more to understand the costs and benefits of innovation. Traditionally unions have focused on choosing new initiatives based on how many members they will be expected to bring into existing branches and structures.

This isn't always how digital disruptors are making decisions. Of course, they are very evidence-led, picking directions for development based on what works. But they are more likely to be working from where the users are, learning which services and products are viable in working with them.

It also means we have to become more comfortable with risk and with expecting and learning from failure. We can't only start major projects that we know will work, or we will move much too slowly to match the changing times. We need to do more small-scale experimentation and learn from the results.

Luckily, digital services lend themselves to timely measurement of outcomes, so small and cheap experimentation can be refined and optimised before we decide on what to scale.

Resourcing digital in unions

Digital competitors often have low start-up costs and low legacy costs compared to incumbent unions. This means unions will have to be very focused on increasing the use of digital in the organisation wherever feasible. Digitising existing processes that may be less efficient can help us free up resources for new work.

Focus on new technology has increased with the needs brought about by the pandemic. But we also need a shift towards funding for the different roles and skills that will allow unions to mainstream this work. And whilst many unions moved to cloud technology or new CRM systems before the pandemic and have reaped the benefits, there is still a need in others for core infrastructure that will let them become more flexible and responsive to members' changing needs.

We have to be prepared to invest to see a new approach through to mainstream use. Start-ups generally plan to need investment for three to five years before they are sustainable. That can be a hard political ask for unions, who are facing pressures to come up with viable new approaches that generate new members more quickly, and pressure from existing members to spend as much as possible in providing services and resources they need.

Given the high failure rate of digital start-up projects, and the level of commitment to see through a programme of change, these projects will need strong buy in from the leadership of a union to be given the best chance of achieving useful scale.

Digital transformation

Unions are on a journey towards digitising how we operate, and it will take time to work through. Many are still at a stage of professionalising digital comms and campaign work. A challenge for them will be in mainstreaming digital so it is seen as something that is the responsibility of all parts of the organisation, rather than solely the domain of specialists working in a digital broadcast medium.

Large organisations can find it hard to work in more agile ways. Last year, EC members came together to look at principles for union digital translation and uncovered eight cultural and organisational factors which could help in developing this work. Programmes to define and foster principles for union digital specific to individual unions could prove helpful in helping digital innovation succeed.

Further reading:

- [**Measuring our digital journey**](#) – TUC Digital Lab report, tracking unions' progress in several aspects of digitisation and digital infrastructure.
- [**8 principles for union digital transformation**](#) – TUC Digital Lab resource. Guiding principles for undertaking digital change projects in unions, with guidance on how to implement them.
- [**Introducing Megaphone, the TUC's new online campaign platform**](#) – Blog on the TUC's free platform for affiliate unions to run digital campaigns and organising projects.



TUC Digital Lab
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS
digital.tuc.org.uk

