Introduction

UNISON is the UK’s biggest public service trade union. It represents 1.3 million members who deliver essential services to the public. These are services that protect, enrich and change lives. Its members work in all areas of public service. They work in hospitals, town halls, universities, colleges, schools, social services and clinics. Most people in the UK rely on these services.

There are UNISON branches in all sorts of organisations in the UK. As a trade union, UNISON represents and supports its members in issues at work. It looks after their welfare and campaigns for changes on their behalf. UNISON also has a role in local and national negotiations and in collective bargaining. This is where UNISON negotiates with employers and groups of employers for all of its members collectively. One of its key roles is in campaigning on behalf of members. This could be for changes that will benefit members such as better wages or working conditions or against policies that threaten members’ jobs. UNISON therefore campaigns against government spending cuts that will have a negative impact on public services and those employed in this sector.

UNISON, on behalf of its members, has concentrated its campaign efforts over the past two years on the future of public services and the challenges that they face from government cuts. Public sector cuts planned by the coalition government in 2012 would mean more than 730,000 public service job cuts.

This case study looks at organisational structures and how UNISON’s structure is designed to allow it to make decisions and respond to changes quickly in order to help its members.

The structure of an organisation

Organisational structure refers to how the workers within a business are organised and how they relate to each other. A visual representation of the structure can be shown in an organisation chart. This shows who has authority over whom and the different roles that workers carry out.

Certain organisational structures suit particular types of organisations. This will depend on the size of the business, its aims and the way it sees itself (known as its corporate culture or image). It may also be affected by factors outside of its control (external factors) such as the nature and spread of its customers. Structure is often linked to the type of business. For example, it could be organised by:

- product - for instance, a chemical company could be split into paints and plastics
- function - for instance, departments of finance, marketing, human resources and operations
- geography - this could be by UK region or even internationally e.g. Europe, Asia, America.
It is important for a business to choose a structure that helps it operate efficiently. The structure should also help to achieve the organisation's aims and objectives and make best use of people and resources. The main types of business structure are:

- **Hierarchical (tall) structure.** This means that the business is organised in layers, with the higher layers having more authority than those below them. The advantage of a tall structure is that every role is clearly defined. Decisions can be made quickly by those at the top of the organisation but communication may be slower as the message has to pass through all the layers.

- **Horizontal or flat structures.** Here there are fewer layers and more people in each layer. Decision making may need to take account of several groups within a layer. However, communication is usually more effective. Flat structures often work well with skilled and motivated workers.

- **Matrix structures.** Sometimes the business needs to use people with a variety of skills who are drawn from many parts or functional areas of the business such as marketing, operations, finance, and human resources. These can be organised into teams to complete projects.

UNISON has a complex structure that reflects the complex nature of the work that it carries out. Its structure is split by function and by region. UNISON's 1,100 staff work in either its new centre on Euston Road in London or in one of the 12 UK regions. Within each region there are employees responsible for different areas of the union’s work. These areas include health, learning and development, and local government and education. The members are organised into branches throughout Britain and Northern Ireland. This tall structure helps it to act quickly and respond to changes:

- The National Executive Council, which is elected by members, can focus on policy and providing leadership.
- The UNISON Centre concentrates on providing a range of services to members and the regions such as legal, financial, and personnel services.
- Regional employees can deal with issues particular to their geographical area e.g. when a local employer announces redundancies.

Managing organisational structures

The type of structure that a business has reflects how it behaves. It defines its culture or way of working. A highly centralised, hierarchical structure means an organisation is run from the top. It may have a well-known person at its head who makes most of the decisions. A decentralised structure is likely to create a much more democratic culture, where everyone’s opinion is valued. Decisions will often be made by groups of people or in consultation with different layers.

The national structure of UNISON is centralised with many decisions affecting the whole union made by the senior members and workers in the new UNISON centre. However, UNISON’s culture is one of equality. It is a culture that gives people freedom to express their views and to be part of decision making. Therefore, some power is given to the regions so that they can make decisions. Quite often the people in the regions will have a better idea of local needs. This decentralisation helps UNISON to be responsive at all levels.

![UNISON member](image)

‘I feel there is a genuine ‘no blame’ culture at UNISON. I am able to contribute my opinions to the highest level and be listened to and complimented on my work.’

Whatever the structure, there are certain key features that are common:

- **Span of control** – the people for whom a manager is directly responsible. A narrow span means tight control; a wide span can provide more opportunity for employees to contribute. This can lead to better motivation. There are narrow spans of control in tall structures and wide spans of control in flatter organisations.
- **Chain of command** – how authority passes down the organisation. It also shows who has power delegated (or passed down) to them.
Accountability – who makes decisions and takes responsibility for outcomes.

Communication channels – the way in which messages are passed up, down and across an organisation. It is also vital that the message is spread outside the organisation. For this, UNISON uses cutting-edge communication techniques. At the UNISON Centre for example, there is a media centre, plus television and radio recording facilities.

Job roles within a trade union

Within most large organisations there are roles at different levels within the hierarchy such as directors, managers, team leaders, supervisors and operatives. UNISON is no different. The qualities and skills needed for these roles are different. For example, those at the top of the hierarchy will have to think more strategically and may need greater leadership skills than those lower down. UNISON’s job roles are specific to the aims of the union.

The local organiser reports to the area level. This post recruits and supports members at a local level. Personal qualities needed include:

- problem-solving skills
- communication skills
- ability to act on own initiative
- resource management
- general understanding of issues facing trades unions and employers.

The area organiser reports to the regional level. This post organises work across branches as well as region-wide campaigns and events. Responsibilities include representing members in negotiations and claims and helping the region to deliver its operational plan. Personal qualities required also include skills in research, analysis and developing materials as well as communication and negotiation skills.

“The best part of my job as an area organiser is supporting members and giving them the skills, tools, knowledge and confidence to stand up for themselves and others. I get a real sense of pride when I am supporting branches and members through difficult times.”

The regional organiser reports to the regional manager. This role builds and organisises branch memberships. Key responsibilities involve supporting and mentoring activists, running regional projects and managing the team. Regional organisers require strategic thinking skills. They will also need to be able to manage resources and teams of people.

The regional secretary is the senior official in the region. As regional manager, he or she leads the Regional Management Team and sits on UNISON’s Senior Management Group (SMG). The SMG is chaired by the General Secretary. The role here is one of strategic and national development and communication of policies. This person needs leadership qualities to go with the high level of responsibility. He or she needs high level problem-solving, critical thinking and communication skills. The post holder will typically have worked as a senior manager to develop these skills. All roles include the need for some physical skills (such as lifting or ability to travel) but, in accordance with equality policies, these can all be modified for anyone with a disability. Having a disability is no bar to employment with UNISON.
Careers and training at UNISON

At the local level, a recent addition has been the role of ‘fighting fund organisers’. Faced with huge cuts to public services, UNISON is recruiting over 100 such fighting fund organisers. These people need to have good analytical and presentation skills. They will undertake an induction training programme which prepares them to go into workplaces and recruit members. These fighting fund organisers may come from a range of different backgrounds and are central in taking the union in new directions. Their jobs will include using new methods such as social networking to keep in touch with members. New roles such as this are helping UNISON to change its structure to focus more at the local level. This makes the organisation more decentralised.

UNISON is also building clear career paths for organisers. Local fighting fund organisers will recruit members, mentor stewards and help branches to grow. To step up to area level management means more responsibility. Area officials provide representation for members. They also carry out bargaining with employers. These two activities and experience provide a good launching pad for a regional role. At regional level, jobs involve responsibility for large-scale negotiations, leading projects and managing teams of organisers.

‘There are always new challenges, sometimes outside my comfort zone, but training and support is given for this. It makes me feel good about myself when I have tried something different.’

This career path was designed to provide greater flexibility. It helps the union to direct resources to where they are most needed. When an employer suggests changes that will harm members – such as redundancies or a transfer of services into the private sector – a team of organisers can be on hand to work with the branch, supporting members in their workplace.

Conclusion

UNISON, as the UK’s largest public service union, has a responsibility to support its members in the face of current challenges. These include massive cuts to public services. This means supporting not just members, but also their families and all those who rely on public services.

To meet these aims, UNISON has a clear structure. Within this, there are defined roles and responsibilities at each level. As a person rises through the structure, they are expected to take on more responsibilities. They will also have more authority – the right to make decisions. There is also a clear career path from one level to the next so that organisers can rise through the organisation.

UNISON makes a valuable contribution and difference to the lives of working people, often at the most difficult times of their professional lives. I find it rewarding to work for an organisation whose aims I share and for whom I am prepared to go the extra mile.

UNISON is keen to provide a good working environment, but also to face the challenge of supporting members. Its Investors in People Award shows its commitment to quality.

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1. Describe what a trade union does with reference to UNISON. (2 marks)

2. Explain the difference between what is meant by ‘authority’ and ‘responsibility’ within an organisational structure. (4 marks)

3. Analyse the roles within a typical hierarchical structure, using UNISON as an example. (8 marks)

4. Evaluate why UNISON’s structure is appropriate to the union, giving reasons to support your answer. (8 marks)