

unionlearn

with the TUC



Using the union learning Climbing Frame

Experiences and examples from unions and ULRs

Contents

	Page
Foreword	1
Introduction	2–3
Case study – Colin Turner	4–5
Case study – Darren Dodd	6–7
Case study – Val Marshall	8–9
Case study – Judith Schofield	10–11
Case study – Vicky Nelson	12–13
Case study – Hayley Pickles	14–15
Find out more	16

Foreword

The new union learning Climbing Frame is an exciting and innovative electronic tool to help support learner progression. It not only allows learners to track their achievements, but also enables ULRs to track their members' progress. The Climbing Frame can also be aligned to support employers' development programmes.

It is a one-stop-shop of learning and skills resources, which can be used in a variety of ways:

- Learners can produce individual learning plans.
- Employers can identify training needs and support workplace development.
- Trade unions can disseminate information about trade union education programmes and initiatives.

The Climbing Frame model has been developed with a range of key stakeholders in mind. You will see from reading this publication that in addition to bespoke union Climbing Frames the model can be customised by sector skills councils to meet the skills needs of a particular sector, and provide useful intelligence on sector-specific skills issues. Unions can use the Climbing Frame in their work with SSCs and Skills Academies, for example in supplementing the SSCs Skills Passport.

Unionlearn is at the forefront of developing electronic tools, such as the Climbing Frame, that are designed to meet the needs of trade union members but can also encompass employers' training needs. This is yet another great example of how unions, employers and SSCs can work together to benefit all those involved in union learning in the workplace.

We are looking forward to working with more unions, who have expressed an interest in working with us, to create a bespoke Climbing Frame for their members.



Liz Smith
Director, unionlearn

» Introduction

The unionlearn Climbing Frame is an easy-to-use electronic tool which allows ULRs to support members throughout their learning journey.

Using the Climbing Frame, ULRs can create learning pathways and action plans for individuals which can be reviewed and updated as they progress.

The Climbing Frame also provides up-to-date information and advice for ULRs about a broad range of learning opportunities, and helps them keep records of who they're working with and where they're heading.

But it isn't only designed to help individual ULRs. Unions, too, can use the tool to generate accurate profiles of their own learners, and they can customise the information it contains and adapt it to their own particular needs.


And there are benefits for employers, as well. Companies and organisations can use the Climbing Frame to support workforce development. "From an employer's perspective, the Climbing Frame looks like a useful tool: as an organisation, we've developed a lot of learning resources and the Climbing Frame allows us to bring them all together in a user-friendly format", says Clare Johnson, HR Learning Manager at the Valuation Office Agency. "The Climbing Frame provides for structured interviews between union learning reps and learners, which means that we can be sure that everybody is getting access to all this material, not only the people who are already hooked on learning and development."

» Information through the Learning Themes section

» Action planning through the Learner Management section

» Record keeping and data collection through the Learner Management section





She continues, “And that’s the other major benefit for us – the people with whom ULRs will be using the Climbing Frame will include those we haven’t been able traditionally to engage with the learning process, who may not know how to access information that could help them.”

The Climbing Frame is also helpful for sector skills councils. “I can see great potential in the unionlearn Climbing Frame, especially the way in which it collates information about learners in electronic form,” says Sharon Simpson, Skills Development Manager at Asset Skills.

“This will really help human resources departments, who will be able to use the Climbing Frame to conduct skills audits electronically, instead of being restricted to paper-based files and documents.”

Unionlearn has already developed Climbing Frames with retail union USDAW, civil service union PCS, and professionals’ union Prospect, who all took advantage of its flexibility to create bespoke approaches to suit their members.

This booklet is based on interviews with ULRs involved in all three unions explaining how they’re using the Climbing Frame, how it’s helping them in their ULR role, and how it’s paying off for their members.

How the Climbing Frame works

Learning Themes

The Learning Themes section provides up-to-date information and advice for ULRs about a broad range of learning opportunities. Each theme contains a library section and a ULR notes section where learning reps can store their own records.

Learner Management

The Learner Management section:

- helps ULRs keep ongoing and up-to-date records of who they’re working with, when they’ve met and what actions have been agreed and implemented
- provides unions (and ULRs) with aggregated information illustrating the profile of their learners
- enables ULRs to design learning pathways and action plans for individual learners which can be regularly reviewed and updated.

» Colin Turner

PCS ULR, Department of Work and Pensions, Manchester

If the unionlearn Climbing Frame didn't exist, we'd have to invent something else. That's Colin Turner's conclusion after using the new electronic tool in a PCS pilot project for Child Support Agency and Jobcentre Plus staff in Manchester.

"If you're interviewing a new learner about what they want to do, you'd have to record the interview one way or another, and the Climbing Frame helps you look at someone's past learning, their future learning and where they want to get to – which makes it a really good tool for the job," he says.

The look and feel go down well with learners, he says. "The people I've used it with were intrigued by the style of the Climbing Frame and liked the Blockbuster-style grid," he says.

The step-by-step approach helps jog people's memories. "Because of the way the programme takes them through their past learning, they remember things that have been locked away in their heads," he says.

Being able to visit relevant websites and even print off course details and registration forms speeds up the whole process of getting learners onto courses they're interested in.

"It's very useful to be able to refer to things online during the interview and print off forms learners need to pursue things as well as any other bits of information they want," he says.

The Climbing Frame generates a lot more useful information than a general survey, he points out. "Surveys are good as far as they go but they only pick up tick-boxes: the Climbing Frame helps you take a deeper look at what people have been through, what their preferred learning styles are, what they might want to do – none of that comes out in a survey."

The Climbing Frame also scores over paper-based learner management systems, Colin reckons.

"It's so much more difficult to keep track of scribbled notes, folders and files: because it's electronic and it's such a concise tool, everything you want about each learner is there in the one place."

It also makes it easier for ULRs to track down information using the customised themes and the wealth of online resources.

"There's a lot of stuff on the Climbing Frame that you can refer to and link people into fairly quickly, and get hold of information and even complete documentation that you wouldn't be able to do otherwise," he explains.

The Climbing Frame is now a tried and tested method for helping new learners in the workplace. “If I want to arrange an interview with a new learner to look at their future learning, that’s the tool I would use to proceed,” he says.

“If we didn’t have the Climbing Frame, we’d have to invent something else!”

“The Climbing Frame helps you take a deeper look at what people have been through, what their preferred learning styles are, what they might want to do.”



» Darren Dodd

PCS ULR, Child Support Agency, Manchester



After helping pilot the unionlearn Climbing Frame with colleagues in the Manchester office of the Child Support Agency, PCS ULR Darren Dodd reckons it's set to become a vitally important tool for learning reps all over the country.

"I can see exactly why it was developed and

why it's needed and I think it could easily become an extremely important electronic tool," Darren says.

Darren, who used the Climbing Frame as part of the national PCS pilot project, says it took him a little while to get used to working through the Climbing Frame step

Paper-based administration can be massively reduced when ULRs use the Climbing Frame.

by step, instead of letting a conversation flow naturally with a learner as you would without it.

But following the 'script' definitely has its advantages. "It makes sure you ask all the important questions and don't forget anything," he says.

Using the Climbing Frame also helps convince the learners themselves that you're serious about trying to help them in your role as a learning rep.

"It shows you're not just going to listen and then go away and do nothing – you're using the information they provide to develop an action plan with them," he explains.

Darren used the Climbing Frame to create his own personal learner record, partly to help him get to grips with the software and partly to have something to show learners so they could see what it could do for them.

"When I first started trying to explain it to people, I punched in all my details because it was better to have a profile already there rather than have to go through the whole process with them" he says.

Having instant access to customised sections in the Climbing Frame's learning themes is also very helpful. "One of the sections is 'Learning in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)', and if people have specific questions about how they can tie in their learning with the Department, you can find the answers for them then and there," he explains.

Darren knows from his experience as a workplace rep that it's all too easy to build up large numbers of folders and files to keep track of your union work, and paper-based administration can be massively reduced when ULRs use the Climbing Frame.

"When you've got the Climbing Frame installed on a laptop, when a learner asks you a question, you can just bring up their information straightaway and everything you need is there," he says.

"And it's all set out very neatly so you don't have to go trawling through loads of files and folders on the computer because you know exactly where you need to look to find things."

» Val Marshall

Prospect ULR, Sellafield Ltd, Cumbria

The Climbing Frame is proving to be useful for ULRs, reckons Val Marshall, who helped pilot the electronic tool as part of Prospect's Aimhigher project encouraging Sellafield workers into higher education.

"When we first looked at the Climbing Frame during a training session last year, we were very impressed with all the research that had obviously gone into it, the way the tools are presented and the amount of detail that was in the system," she says.

"It was clearly a very good facility for putting a learner record together and looked like it would be very useful for union learning reps."

After piloting the Climbing Frame using a laptop borrowed from the onsite union learning centre, Val has now had it installed on her own computer at work.

"If anybody wants to come in and have a look, they can, because it's all loaded onto my machine now – that's no problem," she says.

Prospect has customised the Climbing Frame (something any union can do to ensure it's directly relevant to its members) with a theme dedicated to nuclear decommissioning – a crucial concern for members in the industry.

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"I have got a fairly strong education and training background and if people ring up and say they were thinking about such-and-such a course and it's something local, I would tend to know that off the top of my head," Val says.

"But I don't know a lot about nuclear decommissioning – in fact, I don't know anything about nuclear decommissioning! – so if somebody's interested in a course about that, I can look at the Climbing Frame and find out what they need to know."

Based on her own experience, Val reckons the Climbing Frame could prove particularly useful when ULRs are new to the role and don't yet have the sort of flourishing onsite learning centre to which learners have access at Sellafield.

"Because we have our union learning centre onsite, we can signpost learners to courses down there, and if they want to do something that's not available onsite, the centre can

offer them a lot of support and guidance,” she says.

“But if you’re a ULR working on your own, or covering several different workplaces and not

got the support we have, or a new ULR without a background in training, I think the Climbing Frame is going to be a great resource.”



» Judith Schofield

Prospect ULR, Valuation Office Agency (VOA)



For Prospect ULR Judith Schofield, whose members in the Valuation Office Agency are scattered all over the country, the Climbing Frame is just what she's been looking for.

“When we first got together as a group of ULRs, there was no way we could research local availability of college courses across the entirety of the UK because there are

only around half a dozen of us covering the whole country,” she recalls.

“It’s not like Sellafield, where they’ve got an onsite union learning centre and people can come to them – we have to go out and talk to people on our limited resources. So when I first saw a demonstration of the Climbing Frame at a unionlearn conference, I thought it would be a great central resource we could all use.”

Even though her members are qualified as chartered surveyors, and the Agency runs a very effective learning department, they still need the support ULRs – and the Climbing Frame itself – can offer, Judith points out.

“Because they’re qualified, very often they’re left to take responsibility for their own development, but I believe that everyone needs encouragement and motivation to continue learning if they’re not to become ‘institutionalised’,” she argues.

To help pilot the project in the VOA, Prospect customised the Climbing Frame with two tailor-made themes – one covering surveyors, the other Professional Skills for Government (PSG), which the Civil Service is keen to promote.

“Everybody who looks at it is very impressed: it’s marvellous to have all the information in one place – not just general internet information, but lots of links to the resources that are available in the department itself which people aren’t always aware of,” Judith reports.

It is proving useful in a range of different ways, she says. “If people are wanting promotion, but they feel they haven’t got the opportunities, we can suggest different ways of getting on through the Climbing Frame,

“If people are wanting promotion, but they feel they haven’t got the opportunities, we can suggest different ways of getting on through the Climbing Frame”.

accessing information they might not readily be able to get in one place or from their line managers.”

VOA senior management are very interested in what’s going on – they agreed Prospect could second one of its VOA members, Paul Taylor, to run the pilot.

Now ULRs are dividing the country between them and arranging a programme of presentations at line managers’ group meetings to help spread the word about what can be done with the Climbing Frame.

“Before we started using it, we were floundering a bit trying to pull together all the information learners needed, but I believe this is a really good resource which is going to make our job a very great deal easier,” Judith says.

» Vicky Nelson

USDAW ULR, Tesco, West London

The Climbing Frame is nothing if not flexible, as USDAW ULR Vicky Nelson has found using it on her computer in the learning centre at Tesco in Portobello, West London.

“With the Climbing Frame, the ULR usually sits down with a learner and works through an interview which can take around an hour – and that’s difficult if learners don’t get the paid time off,” she explains.

“So what I’ve done is print off the questions that make up each learner’s record and asked the teachers on our courses for English for Speakers of Other Languages to get the students to fill them in as part of a lesson, or handed them round for people to fill in during their lunch-break.”

“It doesn’t take that long to fill it out, so they take it away and come back when they’re finished, and I can input the information myself.”

That means she’s then able to do a shorter, follow-up interview with the learners during a lunch-break. “Once you’ve put on all the information, you can spend 10 or 15 minutes with them during a lunch-break and show them what their options are.”

The online links are particularly useful for ULRs, Vicky says. “If somebody wants to do an immigration law course, for example, I

can go into the system and tell them where it’s being held, how much it will be, when it starts and stuff like that.”

The Climbing Frame also gets a positive reaction when she shows it to learners.

“People can see it’s really helpful once they get the hang of the honeycomb design, and it looks really professional,” she says.

“If somebody wants to do an immigration law course, for example, I can go into the system and tell them where it’s being held, how much it will be, when it starts and stuff like that.”



» Hayley Pickles

USDAW ULR, Tesco, Scarborough

USDAW ULR Hayley Pickles has been using the unionlearn Climbing Frame to help the members she supports in 12 different Tesco stores access information about courses quickly and easily.

“There are just so many benefits with it: usually, if someone says they want to do a course, I have to go away and find out about it, but with the Climbing Frame, you’ve got all that information to hand in one place,” she explains.

“That means you can look things up for somebody while they’re actually sat next to you and print things off for them then and there – and that’s very good, and saves you having to carry more books around!”

The look and feel of the Climbing Frame goes down well with learners, because it gives them a visual image of how they’re progressing.

“People like the Blockbuster-style grid – they like the way it helps them see how they’re moving up,” she says.

She’s used the Climbing Frame with individual learners and also shown small groups what it can do.

“When I took it to work with me one lunchtime, some of the staff sat round watching me use it with one of our members,

and then quite a few of them wanted to put input all their information about courses they’d done and make their own learner records,” Hayley recalls.

“When one of them put in the details of a course they’d done, someone else would remember they’d done the same course and would go back and add it to their learner record – it was almost getting a little competitive! They weren’t afraid to let people know what they’d learnt or not learnt, which is what I thought would be a barrier – they were quite happy to sit there and have a go!”

She’s also using it to plot the progress of USDAW members who lost their jobs when a dairy closed down in Whitby last year. “I’m inputting all their information so we can see how they’re getting on with the courses they’ve been doing and where they’ve moved on,” she explains.

The Climbing Frame also helps ULRs record their own progress, she points out. “You can plot all the courses you go on as a ULR or a shop steward, including all the home-study courses you do, as well as everything else,” she says.

“As ULRs and shop stewards, we’re learning all the time and we need to keep our learning up to date, and the Climbing Frame



lets us have our own learning grid.”

Her own store manager can see the potential for employers, she says. “I showed my store manager the Climbing Frame, and he thought it would be really good for keeping staff training records up to date and for keeping track of staff skills,” she says.

“If an employer could see that someone’s done an accountancy course, when a job comes up they might say ‘Why aren’t we using her? Better than sitting on a till, she could be working in the cash office’. It could help everybody!”

“People like the Blockbuster-style grid – they like the way it helps them see how they’re moving up.”

» Find out more

You can visit the Climbing Frame page on the unionlearn website to find out more information.

www.unionlearn.org.uk/climbingframe

You can also contact unionlearn Climbing Frame Support Officer Louisa Shaw: lshaw@tuc.org.uk



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