
Skills Pledge briefing
June 2007

Skills Pledge: a TUC briefing

Introduction

The Skills Pledge offers unions and employers a real opportunity to demonstrate publicly a joint commitment to support the skills development of the entire workforce to a minimum of a full Level 2 qualification, including Skills for Life. Unions play a pivotal role in engaging and supporting learners in the workplace and the role of union learning representatives has greatly strengthened this role in recent years. The Skills Pledge will prove to be a high profile mechanism for unions and employers to promote joint commitment and action on skills in the workplace.

The Benefits for Employers?

The Skills Pledge offers employers the opportunity to demonstrate publicly to all staff (as well as customers, suppliers, investors and other stakeholders) that they understand the importance of having a fully qualified workforce with equal access to learning and development opportunities. If the commitment on the Pledge is seen as a joint initiative between employers and trade unions, past experience shows that there will be much greater buy-in across individual companies and organisations for the training that is on offer to eligible employees.

There is already a wealth of evidence showing that employers who have worked in partnership with unions on training have reaped significant rewards from such an approach. For example, many employers working closely with unions on the Skills for Life agenda have highlighted the benefits that this has had on their 'bottom line', including improvements in the quality of customer service and reduced sickness and absenteeism rates. It is therefore clearly in employers' interests to engage with trade unions when drawing up plans to make a commitment to the Skills Pledge and also when implementing it in the workplace.

The Benefits for Employees?

Trade unions, in particular through the activities of union learning representatives, have made a major investment in recent years in promoting and supporting the Government's initiative to improve the Skills for Life of millions of employees. Union learning representatives have played a crucial role in engaging employees to make this first step back into learning, especially as

many of these people have been turned off learning by their previous experience of the formal education system. Re-engagement though is just the first step. The longer-term support provided by union learning representatives has been a crucial factor in sustaining individuals to ultimately achieve a Skills for Life qualification.

The Skills Pledge now offers an opportunity to extend this skills offer and to empower many more employees to achieve a Level 2 qualification as well as accreditation in Skills for Life. The lives of thousands of employees have been literally transformed by union support for achievement in Skills for Life and unions are now upping their sights. The TUC and unionlearn have already been consulting with the affiliated unions to consider strategies on how they can support employers to deliver the Skills Pledge and how they can support many more individuals to acquire a Level 2 qualification as a result of this. In addition, union representatives on Sector Skills Councils have been promoting a sectoral approach to planning and delivery of the Pledge.

We agree with the Government's premise that achievement at Level 2 is essential grounding for all employees and that it will support progression to higher-level skills in many more workplaces. As such the TUC and unionlearn are also currently working with unions and employers that are very interested in using the Skills Pledge to develop a wider skills offer (e.g. the TUC/DfES Collective Learning Fund project is currently testing out an approach along these lines in the North West).

Union Support for the Pledge in Individual Workplaces?

As set out above, a joint approach by employers and trade unions on committing to, and delivering, the Skills Pledge will maximise the benefits for the employer and the workforce in individual workplaces. As such, employers in unionised workplaces should consider entering into dialogue with the unions about committing to the Pledge from day one so that it is viewed as a joint commitment. In workplaces with an active network of union learning representatives, it will be important to build on past successes and integrate an agreed approach on the Pledge into existing arrangements.

For example, where these joint approaches on training work best there is often a framework agreed by employers and trade unions. This is usually through the drawing up of a joint learning agreement that sets out clear aims and objectives, including clarification on key issues such as paid time off arrangements needed to enable employees to achieve the stipulated qualification and to enable union learning representatives to provide appropriate support. This approach ensures that all employees have the opportunity to develop the skills they need to gain confidence and to make the most of existing and future opportunities at work. The TUC and unionlearn will shortly be publishing more detailed briefings to

support union involvement in the opportunities that the Skills Pledge opens up for building a greater joint commitment between employers and unions on the skills agenda.

TUC and unionlearn contacts

TUC Iain Murray, Senior Policy Officer (imurray@tuc.org.uk)

unionlearn Judith Swift, Union Development Manager (jswift@tuc.org.uk)